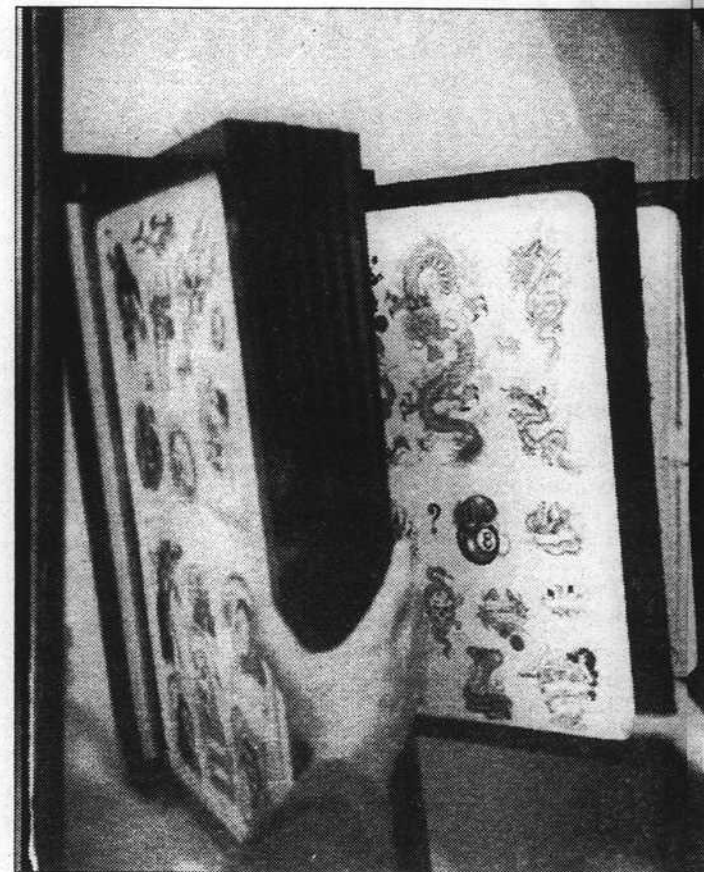


Ralph Spangler stands outside the new home of Ralph's Hungry Eye Tattoo, 112 S. Ninth St. He's been giving tattoos in Lincoln for 20 years.



A Hungry Eye patron tries to pick a design.

Tattoo business owner creates designs just for the love of it

By Ted Taylor
Senior Reporter

Despite an intimidating first impression, Ralph Spangler could be described as a gentle giant.

The giant part is easy to see. My guess is that he tips the scales at more than 200 pounds. He has a red beard that would give the members of ZZ Top a run for their money, and he's got more than 30 tattoos.

Gentle? Not so much. The man makes a living temporarily hurting people by putting permanent designs on various parts of the body.

But have a seat in his downtown tattoo parlor and the gentle part comes out as you find out he means no harm with his needles and ink.

He's just a big, fuzzy, chess-playing teddy bear — with a soft-spoken voice to match.

Better known as plain ol' Ralph, the owner of Ralph's Hungry Eye Tattoo has been giving tattoos to people in downtown Lincoln for more than 20 years, and he's loved every minute of it.

But by averaging only five tattoos a day, starting at \$25, Ralph admits that he's not rich.

"We do make a pretty good living at it though, as a matter of fact," he said.

And it also doesn't take much time to see that the burly man doesn't do his job for the money.

"I just love doing tattoos," he said.

"But he reiterated the parlor's motto: 'No drunks, drugs or assholes' — a doctrine followed by most tattoo parlors around the country."

The fact that Ralph is not rich, however, led him to move his studio around the corner to 112 S. Ninth St. — a move that cut his rent in half to \$275 a month.

The old location at 905 O St. was also the home of the Shoestring Art Gallery, a small studio for area artists to display their work.

But Ralph says the new home, still messy from the move two months ago, works just fine.

The two-story parlor is much smaller, but still features three gum-ball machines, cable TV, a eucalyptus plant and pages and pages of tattoo ideas, but as Ralph says, "the possibilities are endless."

"About a third of the people come in with their own designs," he said.

Ralph doesn't hold the fort down alone.

Rod Creamer, a tattooist for 10 years, has been assisting the city's body art legend for the last two.

"I've worked with other tattooists," Creamer said. "But Ralph's been the best. He's the oldest in the state."

He agreed that Ralph was a very intimidating figure to look at, "but once you get to know him, you realize he's just a good guy."

Creamer, who has 11 tattoos of his own, was quick to show off a photo album with hundreds of tattoos he has given over the years.

But he reiterated the parlor's motto: "No drunks, drugs or assholes" — a doctrine followed by most tattoo parlors around the country.

Ralph's Hungry Eye won't give tattoos to people who are obviously intoxicated or using drugs.

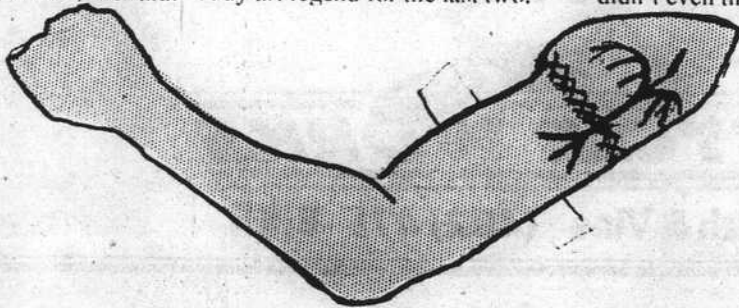
"They bleed too much," he said. "But we've had people try to convince us that they weren't drunk."

Creamer also agreed that the money was pretty good — and said he had days when he took home almost \$1,000. "But usually it's more like \$100 or so," he said.

And despite recent fears that tattoos are a quick and easy way to catch the HIV virus, business keeps on booming.

"People are showing more concern," Ralph said. "But we just tell them that we use new needles each time and completely sterilize our equipment."

"We wear rubber gloves now too," he said. "Whereas 20 years ago, we didn't even think about that."



Photos
Matt A...



In less than 10 minutes, Ralph finished...