

Mark Baker talks to Pennsylvanian
turner Frederick Hill PhD

From biology to woodturning



I am a retired university professor with a PhD in the Biological Sciences. I worked at Bloomsburg University in Pennsylvania teaching a variety of courses in vertebrate studies. I've been retired since 2003 and presently live in the Endless Mountains of Pennsylvania, just above the small village of Camptown – made famous by Stephen Foster's song *Camptown Races*.

I have a very successful woodworking business in which I make many items for quilters and also produce useful household items, bowls, etc. and lots of wood art (www.FrederickCHill.com). I also teach woodturning.

My wife, Val, is an exceptional award-winning longarm quilter. She makes competition quilts, teaches quilting, quilts for others and sells longarm quilting machines. We enjoy a 33-acre farm property which allows us to raise most

of the food we eat, including producing maple syrup that we sell.

A fact I'm very proud of is that we produce nearly 100% of our electricity from 44 solar panels on our property. I get most of the wood I use in my business from my property and replant dozens of trees for every one that I harvest. We also bicycle hundreds of miles annually in interesting places on our tandem bicycle. No, we don't sing *Daisy, Daisy* while we ride.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU BEEN TURNING AND WHAT ATTRACTED YOU TO IT?

I've been turning for well over 40 years. I always enjoyed working with wood and when I bought my first lathe (a General 260) I was hooked. I loved the fact that you could make a finished piece on the lathe, basically from junk wood.

HOW DID YOU GET STARTED?

My dad had a Delta lathe in his basement and I'd butcher wood on it when I was younger. I never realized that the lathe would one day rule my life.

I started turning by making several small bowls, some of which I still have. By the way, I strongly encourage all involved in turning to keep your first pieces in a safe place so you can go back later and see how crude they were and how much you have improved with time and practice.

WHAT HAVE BEEN YOUR BIGGEST CHALLENGES?

Recently my biggest challenge is that I have a major visual deficiency created by a surgical mistake by an ophthalmologist who worked on my eyes after I had detached retinas. Because of this I have a very difficult time with small details.

I've learned to overcome most of this with practice, patience and intense lighting.

WHAT IS THE MOST MEMORABLE PIECE YOU'VE MADE?

I have several. However, my favourite is A Forest From The Trees. It was a challenge to make because of the thin 1.5mm spindles and then to organise them into a meaningful arrangement.

ODDEST EXPERIENCE IN WOODTURNING

Several years ago I was turning a large, thin bowl. I heard 'the sound' that you don't want to hear when a piece is turning and a second later the piece literally exploded. I always stand out of the path of such an accident so all the pieces missed me. The only thing was that I couldn't find ANY of the bowl in my shop. It had disappeared. A month or so later I found a piece of it embedded in a wall about 15ft away and 8ft from the ground. It had hit a stud in the wall or would have gone through to the outer metal skin of my building. I left the piece in the

wall and wrote a message under it as a reminder so that event is not forgotten. The other pieces began to show up in odd places over time. Not sure if I really learned from that one since I already 'knew' the lesson. However, it did ingrain in me to be eternally vigilant and work as safely as possible.

MOST MEMORABLE EXPERIENCE?

I've had many of them but they all revolve around helping my students on the lathe. It is very gratifying for me to teach someone a technique and for them to say: 'Wow, I can do that.'

WHO ARE THE PEOPLE WHO HAVE INFLUENCED YOU THE MOST THROUGHOUT YOUR WOODTURNING CAREER?

I took a three-day class from David Ellsworth several years ago and, after that, started my woodturning business. He is an inspiration. I've attended many demonstrations with Ray Key and learned from his precision and patience. There are also dozens of other woodturners who

I've talked with or listened to who have added immeasurably to my skills.

WHAT'S THE BEST BIT OF WOODTURNING ADVICE YOU'VE EVER RECEIVED?

I read somewhere that you become good at your craft when you have made thousands of mistakes. I've come close to that so I must be getting good!

WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST DIFFERENCES IN TURNING NOW TO WHEN YOU FIRST STARTED?

When I first started the work that was being done by most was rather crude by today's standards. There were true artists in the field at the time but nothing like today. Today's woodturners are making so many items that are unbelievable.

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO SHARE ONE THING WITH YOUR FELLOW TURNERS WHAT WOULD THAT BE?

Make 10,000 mistakes (and learn from them). If you aren't making mistakes you aren't doing anything.



Ash Elegance in Blue and Red



A Forest From The Trees



Brushed Ironwood



Cro-Magnon and Sphere

CONTACT

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