



WOOD FORUM

Newsletter of the Sonoma County Woodworkers Association

www.sonomawoodworkers.com

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May 2010

April Meeting: A visit at Design Workshops



Richard Bourdon
President and Owner
Design Workshop

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May Meeting Notice

Who: George Miller

When: May 4th 7:00 pm

Where: Cotati Cottages Meeting House

Contact: Bill Taft - 794-8025

Our meeting for May will take place at the Clubhouse of Cotati Cottages in Cotati. George Miller will be our presenter. George is an retired engineer living in Sonoma. He has a long standing obsession and passion for puzzles and a large collection of puzzles, many of them made out of wood. He also is a creator of puzzles, and is known as a prototyper.

He works with some of the world's most renowned puzzle creators, and creates his own puzzles. George possesses unique machines and some of the technology necessary for making 2D- and 3D-puzzle prototypes. George also creates puzzles in his shop, aptly named the Puzzle Palace, manufacturing hundreds of high quality puzzles each year, including classic puzzle reproductions, new puzzle designs, and ultra-modern puzzle creations. George has promised for his session with us to concentrate on the wooden ones, and to bring many of them for us to look and, who knows?... obsess over.

Directions: From Santa Rosa - Go to the intersection of 101 and 116. Take a right as if you were going to Sebastopol. After about .5 mile or so, you will see sign for Alder Avenue. Take a right and head north a short distance until you reach the Cottages development, and then hang an immediate right. That is Starr Court. Proceed to the end, all the way to the right to the clubhouse is there at the end.

April Program Notes by Chuck Quibell

Seventeen of our members converged on the Oakland home of Design Workshops, a thriving architectural millwork firm specializing in tenant improvement and high end private homes, founded in 1946 in San Francisco by Hellmut Gerson and Robert Bourdon.

The first thing one notices on entering the front door, is the pair of quite old and much-used traditional work benches with an assemblage of old hand tools displayed on top and elsewhere. The significance of these displays became more and more apparent to us as we listened to descriptions of the company and its obvious pride in its historical roots in Old World craftsmanship - brought by the Gerson family from Hamburg, Germany in the 1930's.

We were hosted by present owner and President Richard Bourdon, son of one of the co-founders, who began with the firm while he was still a high school student some thirty-six years ago. It was Rich and Hellmut's nephew, Nick Gerson, who brought the company from its original site on Columbia Circle in San Francisco to its current spacious 51,000 square foot new site that consists of two adjacent buildings (46K and 5K) on Lesser Street just off 880 near the Oakland Coliseum.

Currently there are also members of a third generation from at least one of these two founder families working for Design Workshops. All this is by way of indicating that the firm strongly believes in continuity - in both ownership and management as well as in its highly skilled work force. Randy Robinson, the firm's lead man and our co-host, has been with the Company for over eleven years, and many others among their numerous carpenters and cabinet makers have been there for two or three times that. Virtually all went through the rigorous apprenticeship program

run by the Carpenters Union and strongly supported by Hellmut Gerson from its beginnings.

Company founder Hellmut Gerson came to the US and the Bay Area as a late teenager in the mid-1930's, having apprenticed as a cabinet maker in Hamburg, Germany. Both his father and his uncle were very well established architects in Hamburg where several important buildings of their design, still exist.

We began in the Conference Room, sitting around a massive table which is emblematic of the challenging details and the high quality of work produced by this now 64-year-old company. As various members marveled at the scale and quality of the table, Rich commented people come to us because they 'expect the impossible.' Peruse the website and you'll quickly see why this is not a boast, but an accurate assessment.

Rich then introduced us to his foreman, Randy Robinson, who shepherds each and every project through the facility. He spoke warmly of the history of the firm, telling us of its early line of ultra-modern furniture. Personally, I clearly remember in the 1960's, sitting on stylish wood and metal chairs at matching small tables in the restaurant in the Palace of the Legion of Honor Museum, and being told that they were designed and made by Hellmut's shop.

Rich told us that the business, which grew to become the leader in commercial millwork in the City before moving to Oakland, now is about 50:50 'tenant improvement' (i.e. upgrading commercial spaces and offices with new furniture and interiors) and high-end private residential work, for which Larry Ellison's in Woodside mansion might serve as an indicator. If you are interested in seeing examples, go to the firm's website at <http://www.design-workshops.com> where you will see examples of the fine work they have done over the past decade or so.

Asked how many employees they had, Rich told us that they are a union shop and that just now they were down to a low of 40-45, but that in normal periods these figures are more like 75-100. The work force includes estimators, project managers who oversee from start to finish, cabinet makers, and carpenter-installers, many of whom have been with the firm for several decades. All the fabrication, including all the veneering, is done in house. The veneering is all done in the second building adjacent to the main structure, where it is closely overseen by Randy, who subsequently gave us some eye-popping demonstrations of where and how he selects, cuts -with the aid of a massive guillotine-style slicer and edge-glues the assembled flitches or other selections for a particular job.



Earlier, when asked which adhesives they preferred, Randy had mentioned that they almost exclusively used pre-mixed, pre-catalyzed glues, mostly poly-vinyl-acetate [PVA], which they buy in bulk. As we entered the veneering shop I noticed a blue,

55-gallon drum mounted horizontally on a dolly. The label indicated it was PVA glue - attached directly to the gluing machine with a large hose!

After Rich described the business, and its continuing evolution into greenness including using non-formaldehyde-containing products, and often FSC Certified wood - customer-specified - Rich and Randy took us on three hour plus tour of the whole facility, essentially tracking the route a project takes through the maze of high- and low-tech equipment which has been assembled under these two roofs. The space is filled with work areas where carts are loaded with veneered members and beams awaiting further work and treatment. There are many high-tech saws that make vertical and horizontal cuts. Virtually all are controlled by electronics with digital displays, and several are computer-aided, or CNC items.



Randy Robinson in front of his amazing veneer cutter

For fun, we were treated to a Japanese-made fixed-blade planing device which Rich and Randy had actually brought down from storage



just to show us. With this essentially silent machine - consisting of a super-sharp knife mounted diagonally on the lower table, with high-speed rubber pressure/driving feed rollers on the upper drive unit - Randy quickly made numerous full-length, paper thin shavings from a 2x2x36 piece of now rare Port Orford Cedar. The surface produced on the stock was astoundingly smooth- essentially that of a perfectly

planed board. And virtually all of the highly aromatic shavings were snatched up by your fellow members as mementoes!



Art Hofmann with a nice long shaving!

The last station in the tour was a very well-lit display room full of samples of dozens of different wood species and grain types available to customers. Digital cameras were out in force, as were the appropriate oo's and ah's! There are many more sample panels stored on the cabinets just outside, Rich told us, and sure enough there were dozens more labeled samples of veneers glued to 9' x 18" wide mdf boards.

I can't resist this final comment, which for me graphically illustrates how the millwork industry has shifted from solid wood to veneers over various other cores. When the old, original shop on Columbia Circle with its still in-place bridge crane was being cleared out for future use as offices or condos, or whatever, the last stuff out was the 40-year accumulation of left-over S4S wood, all sorted by species and standing in vertical racks at one end. It was decided that that, and a smallish horizontal pile of a few-dozen sheets of veneers, would not be taken to the new shop and that in the future, such 'left-overs' would NOT be kept! What we saw on Saturday, is that this policy has been strictly maintained, except for the veneers, which are stacked on extra-long pallets - almost to the ceiling - all around three sides of the veneering shop! Each batch is nicely labeled with an 8.5x11 color image of its grain attached, ready for one of the several new fork lifts to access.



Quck Survey results.

This month's question - what are you building RIGHT now or just finished up? Here are the responses I got:

Bill Jasper - double sided island for guest house to separate kitchen from living room

Kalia Kliban - Yesterday I made a nice live-oak salad bowl from a blank that I roughed out in August of '08. Today I'm trying to finish the nest boxes for our new henhouse.

Harry Johnson - I'm Finishing up a "Roll Around" lathe work station for my wife, who likes to turn pens, but is looking forward to moving on to bowls and vases. As I only use the lathe very infrequently it was mounted on a counter top which I would stand on end in the corner. When I needed to turn something the counter top (with lathe) was placed on saw horses and turning would begin. Since my wife started turning pens, it just wasn't practical to have the fixed saw horses taking up a permanent position in my wood shop.

Steve Gies - I'm finally finishing a storage tablesaw outfeed table/router table combo. It is a modified version of a project I saw in Wood magazine several years ago. The project has been in limbo ever since we moved four years ago and other projects put it on the back burner. Can't wait to put the finish on it this weekend!

Chuck Root - Just finishing up a book case for library. Has a base with doors for photo albums and three fluted verticals for shelves, with a box and crown molding at the top. Its been a long project and will be glad to finish it.

Robert Gauthier - I'm building four Genie bottles, approximately, 45" tall x 24" diameter, thirteen 18" tall vases and I just finished a 8'x12'x10' high barn for the chickens.

Bill Hartman - I build a piece of furniture with my students each year for our district Ed Foundation fundraiser. I didn't know what to build this year till I saw a photo of Gustav Stickley's 1903 Poppy Table. But the design was too hard for my students and I really wanted to build it. So I thought I would build two and keep one. But with the upcoming auction deadline, I pounded out one in a week. But the legs looked a bit "old lady-ish" so I started asking my students and art teachers what they thought. So soon I will build the second one with the same top but the legs are totally redesigned but still respectful of the original design. So in the end, as usual, the students have a big influence on my projects.

Kai Herd - I'm not making anything at the moment; instead, I'm looking for space to setup shop and get my machines out of storage.

Les Cizek - I am making a small table for a lovely lady in SF. Satinwood and ebonized mahogany. I am also getting ready for "Pas De Deux", a collaborative show opening next Friday in Mendocino. Woodworkers collaborating with artists of other media. My collaborator is Larry Thomas, former Dean of Academic Affairs, San Francisco Art Institute. In addition, we just hooked up our new bandsaw acquired on Thursday from John Keller.

Steve Thomas - I am making napkin holders (rings but not round) as wedding favors. I need about 75 of them, and I'm getting close, but so is the wedding!

Karl Shumaker - I'm clearing out some space in my shop for some metal working equipment I'm buying. First piece in will be a Bridgeport mill. Along with this is preparations for an addition to the shop to accomodate the needed extra square footage.

Michael Wallace - I am building an cart for my pancake air compressor so I can move it around easily in my shop. The damn thing gets heavy!.

Calendar

June 1 - Karl Schumaker and Greg Zall: two approaches to marquetry at Karl Schumaker's shop in Sebastopol

July 10 - Berkeley Mills, **Saturday**. In Berkeley.

August 3 - Guild-based presentation co-ordinated by Larry Stroud

From the Chairman

Hello again,

Well, Spring has sprung, as they say. The rain seems to be just about gone. While we might see an occasional shower now and then, I think the bulk of the wet stuff is over. The reservoirs are at capacity but we still need to be careful of our water usage.

With the warmer weather, I hope that many of you are in your shops making something. This month's brief survey indicate that many of you are doing just that. I, myself, am trying to become more familiar with my tools and just doing stuff that I need, but are not show quality. My next project, after my current one of a cart for my air compressor, is going to be an adjustable workbench. I have the plans and gone over them many times, so I think I know what I'm going to and how it's going to get done.

Yeah, I know the temps outside say it's 70 (or higher), but thinking down the road, we do need someone to volunteer to hold this year's annual holiday party. Having done so my self, it's a very easy thing to do. Association members provide most of the dishes and we, the association, picks up the tab for the drinks. We just need a place that can hold about 20 or so people (with parking!). Last year, our host was Carl Johnson. Who will be it this year?

Well, the power failed, just as I was wrapping this up, so I take that as a signal that I am done for this issue.

Don't forget, if you haven't paid dues, you **MUST** do it **NOW**.

See you at the next meeting,

Michael

Photo Credit: Rick White, Michael Wallace

WOOD FORUM

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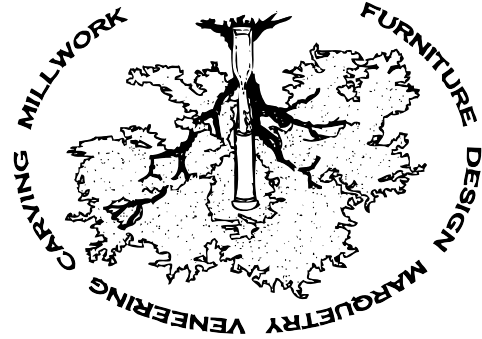
Join Us! The Sonoma County Woodworkers Association is a 31-year old association of over one hundred professional and amateur woodworkers who meet monthly at members' shops to share experiences, ideas, techniques, and mutual enjoyment for creating with wood. Membership entitles you to attend monthly meetings, receive Wood Forum, our monthly newsletter, attend our annual show, and apply for seminars and demonstrations. Annual dues, payable at the beginning of each calendar year, are \$25. New members joining after September 30 may, for \$35, have their membership extend through December 31 of the following year. Please consider joining the SCWA and meeting people who, like yourself, are interested in the art and business of fine woodworking. Send dues to:

PO Box 4176, Santa Rosa, CA 95402 Santa Rosa, CA 95402

Wood Forum is the monthly newsletter of the Sonoma County Woodworkers Association. Please feel free to submit articles, notices, photographs, announcements, and comments for inclusion in the publication. Advertisements are accepted with a per-entry cost of \$5 per column inch. All submissions for the June issue must be received by May 15, 2010. You may submit your entries to the editor listed below.

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Wood Forum 5



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MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Yes, I would like to join the SCWA and meet other people who are interested in the craft, the art, and the business of fine woodworking. Here is my application. I have enclosed a check for the annual dues of \$25 that covers my subscription to Wood Forum and entitles me to attend the monthly meetings.

Send check and completed application to: Sonoma County Woodworkers Association
PO Box 4176, Santa Rosa, CA 95402

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