



SAPFM Chronicles

WOODWORKING, RESTORATION, TEACHING, BLOGGING

JOHN BORLEY, *Toronto, Ontario, Canada*

An antique restoration and furniture repair service located in scenic southwest Wisconsin

Mill Creek Woodworking sits “high on a ridge top” in Richland County, southwest Wisconsin. It’s where Tom McMahon repairs, restores, and builds furniture. Talk to him, and you’ll realize quickly it’s not just his job.

When McMahon was in college, a professor told him, “You’ll know what it is you want to do because you won’t be able to stop.” McMahon says, “Basically, that’s what this has become for me. I can’t quit. I think about it almost continuously.”

McMahon, a member of SAPFM’s Rock River chapter, works out of a 3,600-square-foot shop. It’s fully equipped for both wood- and metal-working. The list of services he offers is truly impressive.

Damaged carving on an heirloom chair? McMahon can replace it.

Need a finish restored or some French polishing? No problem.

Re-silver a mirror or repair a musical instrument? You got it.

McMahon says he took shop class all through high school. He got his first commission when he was about 18. “I got hired by a plant store that wanted a

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giant, carved Tiki-god water fountain.” After that, “I never got away from it, all my life. No matter what else I was doing, I was always woodworking in some way or another.”

Then he found himself married and going to college, and there wasn’t a lot of money. “At that time, there were lots of farm auctions. Farmers were going out of business, and you could buy old furniture pretty cheap. And I started buying old furniture and fixing it up and I’ve been doing it ever since.” McMahon figures he restored hundreds

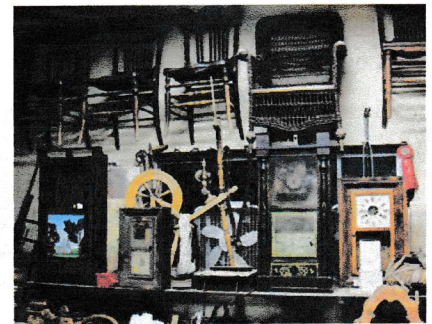
of antiques for himself before doing it for anyone else.

Later, when he and his wife bought a farm, he built a workshop and started building furniture. “I was making furniture full time, and I wasn’t making enough money. So I thought maybe if I just threw an ad in the paper to do repair work, I could get some money, and the repair work snowballed. I wound up with a three-

, four-year backlog.”

McMahon says he doesn’t get a lot of “super fancy” furniture. “I can count on, two weeks before Thanksgiving, I will get 20-30 phone calls that somebody has a dining room chair that needs to be fixed for Thanksgiving dinner. Same thing before Christmas.

But every once in a while somebody walks through the door with something and you say ‘Oh my



God, do you know what that is?’ ”

“One of my big beliefs is that you can learn way more about building furniture by restoring old furniture than you can by doing anything else. I’ve seen every possible failure you can have with a chair, a drawer, or a cabinet door. I think everybody ought to fix furniture if they’re into building furniture.”

At one point, while he was teaching school, McMahon also had a business on the side, repairing musical instruments for several music stores. Where did he learn that skill? “If you wanted to know how to fix saxophones, there was an authoritative book on how to fix saxophones... All you had to do was find the right book and you could do it. At least, I could.”



PHOTOS PROVIDED BY TOM MCMAHON



SAPFM Chronicles (continued-2)

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He says “that kind of stuff is cumulative. The skills transfer. The ability to do the hand work. If you can carve braces on the back of a violin or guitar, you can carve a ball-and-claw foot.”

In college, McMahon switched his major from Architecture to Art after being inspired by an art teacher. “I made a conscious decision to take the first two or three courses in every area in the art department. So I took jewelry, sculpture, drawing, print-making, weaving, bronze casting.”

Later, when he became a high school and college teacher himself, “I always took one or two classes every semester

you want to do and it happens. The tool becomes an extension of your body; you can feel the wood through your tool. You just make stuff... If you’ve experienced it, you know what I’m talking about; if not, you’ll think I’m nuts.”

(After re-reading his post, McMahon wrote, “I’ve decided I sound like a pompous ass.” Others might disagree!)

McMahon also says, “I feel there’s an

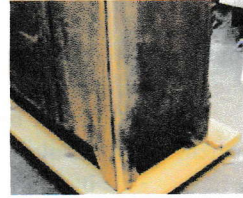
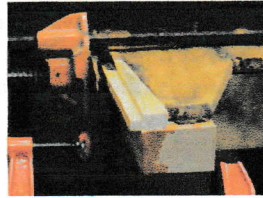
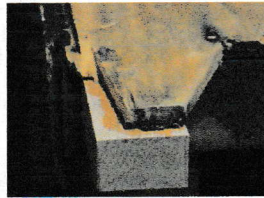
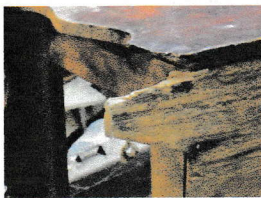
“For some people, and I’m one...the process of woodworking becomes more important than the final product...”

obligation to pass on some of this stuff.” So he teaches, both at the local arts council, and at Rock River SAPFM meetings. Chapter leader David Good-



sumed by something you could make money at.” But then he adds, “I have a lucky life.”

And from McMahon’s blog, these final thoughts: “For some people, and I’m one...the process of woodworking becomes more important than the final product. It doesn’t matter what you make or even if you ever finish it. It’s not about the stuff, it’s about the process. It’s a journey. As long as you’re moving, it’s good.” —JB



Tom’s website: <http://www.millcreekwoodworking.com/>

Tom’s blog: <http://millcrek.wordpress.com/>

in the evening.” Along the way, he earned Bachelor of Fine Arts, Master of Arts, and Master of Fine Arts degrees.

It’s worth checking out McMahon’s blog, an interesting mix of technical advice and philosophy. Consider some of his thoughts from a posting entitled “You Can’t Buy Skill”: “There is no way around developing the skill needed to use, set up, and maintain a tool; you can’t buy it.

“Each new skill you learn adds to your previous skills and transfers to others... There is something that happens after you have used hand tools for a long, long time... At a certain point you are no longer conscious of the tool you are using; all you think about is what

ing says McMahon “enjoys giving presentations and does not mind sharing and helping others.” He’s given presentations on everything from carving and hammer veneering with hot hide glue to matching colors by mixing pigments. “I don’t see myself as an expert, but I do know how to do some stuff, and somebody else ought to learn how to do it.”

McMahon still loves to build furniture. “I’m always building something. I can’t go for weeks at a time just fixing stuff.” Right now he’s working on a couple of blanket chests with drawers and carving. While he builds pieces to sell, he says his daughters often get them first.

He jokingly says, “I wish I was con-

