



Chronicles

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DAN SCHWANK—LANCASTER COUNTY, PENNSYLVANIA



Dan Schwank, of Lancaster County, PA, has created a company called Red Rose Reproductions.

<http://redrosereproductions.com>

Dan Schwank is a tool-and-die maker by trade. He does a lot of aerospace work. He's made parts for the Curiosity Mars Rover. In other words, he knows a lot about precision work.

But Schwank says that's actually a mixed blessing when it comes to his other interests: making tools and period furniture.

"Being a toolmaker is kind of detrimental when you build period furniture, because my tendency is to work too close," he says. "Period furniture is not about super-high precision. I've learned you've really got to relax when you make furniture. You can't fuss about every little detail, because you'll never get anywhere. But when it comes to making tools, it helps there, because there you have to be pretty precise."

His father-in-law had a workshop, and he offered to help him build a corner cupboard as a wedding present. That was the start of a journey that led first to furniture design and construction, then hand tools and toolmaking.

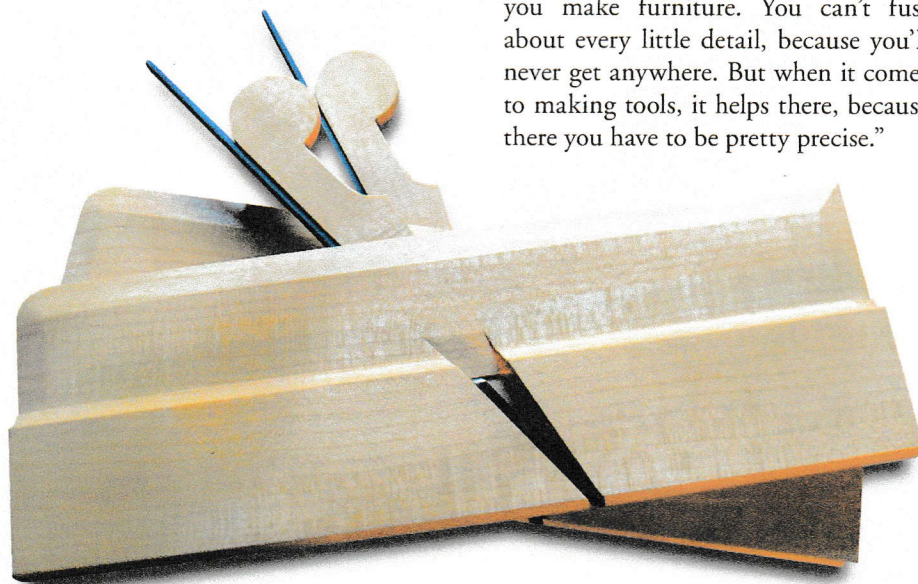
Schwank took a number of classes on 18th-Century furniture styles, which he really admires. "I like the styles and the proportions. They really had it right."

The real turning point was a class at the Olde Mill Cabinet Shoppe in York, Pennsylvania. It was a two-year class on building a secretary desk, run by the late Gene Landon. "That was a major eye-opener to me in what you could do with hand tools."

He started making furniture under the name "Daniel Schwank, Furniture Maker." But as he moved more into hand-tool work, he hit "a roadblock when it came to making moldings." There weren't a lot of sources for new planes then, and he "wasn't really excited about going down the used-tool route," so he decided to learn how to make planes himself.

He took classes with plane maker Tod Herrli. He studied a DVD by plane maker Larry Williams. Then he started making his own. "I made them for myself. I didn't have any intention of selling them."

His first products for sale were spill planes. These were used in the 18th Century to create a shaving with a tight curl that could be used to transfer a flame from, say, a fireplace to a candle. His first was made to show to



Two years ago, Schwank decided to start making molding planes for woodworkers. Or, as he puts it, "bringing resurrected tools to the market." He called his company Red Rose Reproductions.

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(His shop is located in Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, and Lancaster is known as the "Red Rose City.")

His first exposure to woodworking came in 1994, when he got married.

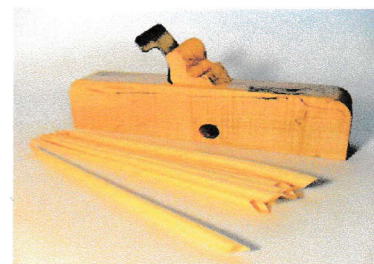


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Chronicles (continued-2)

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Dan's Olde Mill Cabinet Shoppe project from a two-year class on building a secretary desk, run by the late Gene Landon.

some fourth-grade students on a “colonial day” field trip. Kids and adults were fascinated by it, and orders soon followed.

Production was a mix of high- and low-tech at first. He made the blades on a CNC milling machine at work. But the heat treating and tempering were done at home, with the kitchen oven pressed into service.

A lot has changed since then. These days, he farms out the blade making to coworkers who have their own metal-working machinery. He still heat-treats some blades but sends others out to be done. His business is almost 100% tools now, with the focus on side-escapement molding planes. These are planes, such as hollows and rounds and side beads, where the shaving ejects from the side. He also makes panel-raising planes.

To make a plane, Schwank starts with a blank, or billet, of quarter-sawn

American beech. (Finding this wood in thick stock has been a challenge, but he has now found a sawmill willing to produce it to his specifications.)

He says, “It’s a fairly involved process to get the wedge to fit properly, so it’s tight, and there are no gaps where the shavings will catch. I grind the iron to match the sole as close as I can, then I heat-treat it. Then I do a finer grind, to get it as close as I humanly can to match the sole. I do use some power-sharpening tools, but it’s really a lot of hand work. You could not make a run of planes and make all your blades exactly the same. You have to profile the bottom of the plane into shape, and then you grind the iron to match that shape.” He adds, “It’s not for everybody. It’s a different skill set.”

He and his wife bought his father-in-law’s property, so Schwank now works out of the shop where he was first introduced to woodworking. It’s a free-standing building of about 500 square feet. He calls it “modest but well-equipped.” There’s the usual assortment of power tools, but work benches for hand-tool work take up about half the space. He says,

“By nature I work pretty efficiently; I understand the production process (from) working in a machine shop.”

I asked what advice he has for other SAPFM members who might want to start their own businesses. He says first, “Learn the business side before you get into it. You’ve got to have a good set of books. You’ve got to know where

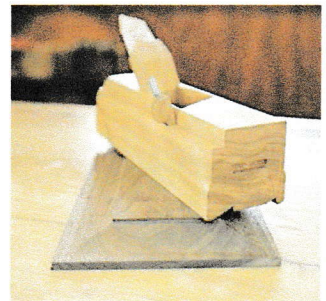
your money’s coming from and where it’s going.”

Second, figure out your marketing. For example, he’s found that results from using Instagram have been “just phenomenal.” He also does a lot of Lie-Nielsen hand-tool events.

If he can find the time, Schwank says he would enjoy teaching some classes. He’s done a couple of presentations at Chesapeake Chapter events. Chapter leader Mark Maleski says he’s “proving to be an effective instructor in period techniques.”

But that will have to wait. Schwank says “I’m really at the point right now where I am maxed out, what I can do with the business and still work full time. My objective is very much to

get to a point where I can do this full time. I don’t feel like the time is quite here yet, but I’m definitely moving in that direction.”—JB



Panel raising plane

