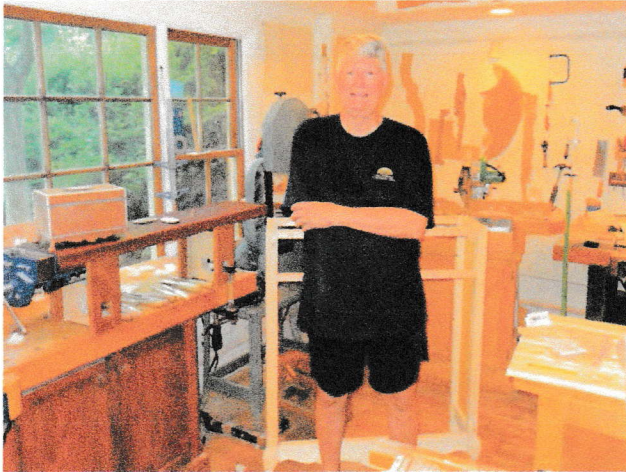




## KEN CARPENTER—PERIOD FURNITURE MAKER

*He says his approach to woodworking is “not entirely different from people with two hands.”*

**“I’ve never looked at myself as trying to be the best handicapped woodworker I could be. I just look at myself as being the best woodworker I can be.”**



Ken Carpenter, Georgia



That’s Ken Carpenter, talking about his approach to woodworking after the accident that almost ended his life.

A week after graduating from high school, he was working in a furniture factory, feeding lumber into a huge machine called a double-end trim saw.

“It’s Friday afternoon. I was anticipating hot date with girlfriend, now wife, and just lost focus, I guess.” Suddenly, his right hand got caught between some wood and the conveyor

belt. In an instant, he was dragged into one of the giant, spinning blades. It sliced through his arm at the elbow. “Luckily... that allowed me to get out of the machine, because my nose was about 3-4 inches away from one of those sawblades.”

A surgeon managed to save the elbow, which makes his prosthetic arm much more “user-friendly.” But the accident made him change his career plans. “I always wanted to become a dentist or an orthodontist. I said, ‘I don’t think there are many one-armed dentists.’” So he became a lawyer instead, a profession he still prac-

tices in Decatur, Georgia, at age 66. Other than that, “I just didn’t want it to interfere with my life, and it hasn’t.”

Carpenter went on to college, played intramural basketball, married his girlfriend, and decided to learn how to make furniture. A couple of months after his accident, he went back to the factory, picked up some random parts and built himself a table, which he still uses to this day. It was the first of many pieces he would build.

I asked him to describe how he approaches a project, such as the Philadelphia tilt-top piecrust table he completed about three years ago. He says his approach is “not entirely different from people with two hands.”

The biggest difference is that he works with only one hand. Carpenter removes his prosthetic arm when woodworking. While the fingers are very life-like, he finds they’re not very good at holding down wood.

“That means, when I’m planing a board, I lean much closer to the wood, instead of having my arms extended. I put the handle in my left hand, then I put my elbow on the front of the plane.” He uses an auxiliary work bench on his regular



PHOTOS COURTESY OF KEN CARPENTER



# SAPFM Chronicles

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## KEN CARPENTER—PERIOD FURNITURE MAKER

bench, which raises the work piece and allows him to “really bear down on it.” He uses “clamps, vises, and all sorts of things” to secure the wood.

Carving is a challenge. “Sometimes I have difficulty providing the power to drive the chisel and have control over it so you don’t overcut. One thing I do is take the handle of the chisel and put it up against my chest and use that as the power to drive it and use my left hand to control it. That works pretty well.” (*Carpenter credits Allan Breed for giving him the idea for that during a Peach State Chapter workshop.*)

He says “You’d be surprised how easy it is to control even big routers with one hand,” even his big 3.5 horsepower router. He says, “A lot of times I’ll be thinking about how I’m going to do

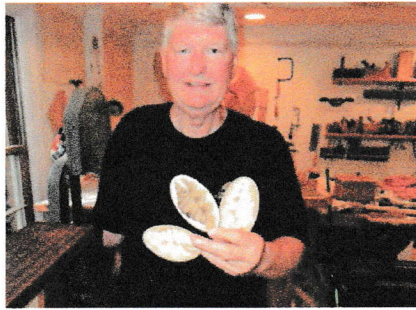
**“Carving is a challenge. Sometimes I have difficulty providing the power to drive the chisel...”**



something and it comes to me in the middle of the night, so I get up and make notes.”

His shop is a 16x18-foot space in the basement of his house in Stone Mountain, Georgia. Some woodworkers would grumble about the small size. But Carpenter says, “The best thing that happened to me woodworking-wise was to confine myself to a small space because it makes me organize a little bit better.”

He has the usual assortment of machines but tries to do as much as possible with hand tools. “I treat my power saws



as my apprentice. The apprentice would saw the boards and I would do the carving and the finishing.” His advice is “buy the best hand tools you can afford.”

He has three rules for anything he builds. “It has to be a good enough design that people will want to use it for a hundred years. It has to be built well enough to last a hundred years. And it has to have a current use; somebody needs it.”

Carpenter started using tools in his father’s workshop, though he didn’t build any furniture there. His inspiration for learning that skill will be familiar to many SAPFM members. “When my wife and I got married we had no furniture and no money.” So he ordered some kits from a company, to learn how things go together. He also took some courses in Atlanta, where Phil Lowe was one of his early teachers.

He is one of SAPFM’s earliest members and credits it with “really changing my life as far as woodworking as concerned.” The Peach State Chapter has “so many talented woodworkers. They are just so giving of themselves, generous with their time, and patient with me. I learn something from them every time I’m around.”

Carpenter also says, “I’ve been lucky in that my wife has never cut me one inch of slack. She expects me to do everything and more than people with two hands.” He laughs and adds, “As you can imagine, my wife isn’t totally thrilled with me working on a table saw in my

shop almost daily. The deal with her is, she was happy to nurse me back to health when I lost one appendage. But if I lose another, I’m supposed to bleed out, and she’ll mourn my loss.”

When you talk to Ken Carpenter, you may start out talking about furniture, but you’ll quickly realize that what you’re really talking about is philosophy and life. Or “Life Problem-Solving 101,” as he put it in a Rotary Club presentation about period furniture making.

“I never look at something like, ‘I don’t think I can do that.’ I look at it as, ‘How am I going to do it?’ I never, in my mind, think I can’t do anything. Sometimes I run into things I can’t do, but I don’t start out thinking that. Very seldom do I run into a problem I can’t solve.”

He says, “I have never thought of myself as being handicapped in any way.”

—JB

