



Chronicles

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ROB ZIOBRO—RESTORING MACHINERY, AND HIS LIFE



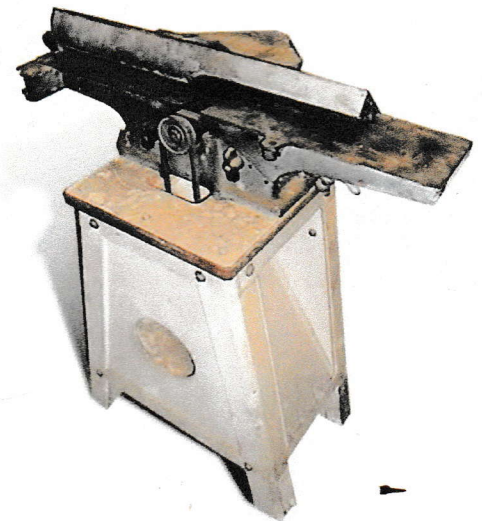
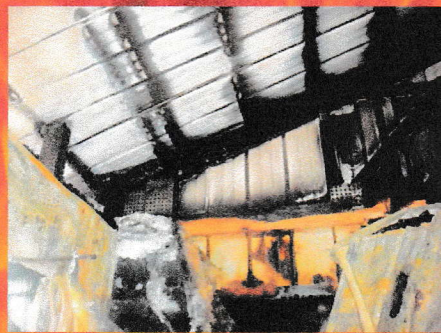
Rob Ziobro is from Princeton, Kentucky

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For many period furniture makers, finding a rare plane or an antique set of chisels at a garage sale makes their day. But the tools Rob Ziobro likes can weigh a ton or more, and sometimes he buys a whole factory to get them. His specialty is old woodworking machinery, especially Delta. “These old Delta machines, especially the ones with the Art Deco cast bases, they’re as good as gold in the bank,” he says.

Ziobro is an SAPFM member from Princeton, Kentucky. He has degrees in Wood Product Engineering and Manufacturing Engineering. Since 2004, he’s been running his own company, Princeton Machine and Mill Works.

Like many SAPFM members, he caught the woodworking bug early. His grandfather gave him some woodworking machines in 1973 when he was just 10 years old. “I spent the next couple



1948 Delta 6" Jointer—Bought off grandfather in 1981. Was on a combo setup with a 10" tablesaw, hence the unisaw switch plate. Went through my fire of 2009. I made the base in 1987.

of years taking them all apart, cleaning them up, repainting and restoring them, and it just caught. I’ve been doing it ever since.”

By the age of 14 he was making Shaker furniture. In 1981, when his grandfather retired, Ziobro bought out his shop. A few years later, his collection of old machines started to grow. “My wife and I got married in 1987, and there was a whole factory closing in Poplar Bluff, Missouri, and we bought it, and that sort of snowballed.”

A chair factory in Missouri flooded; they bought the entire place. When furniture factories closed in Missouri and Kentucky, he arrived with his checkbook. Everything was going well, until 2009, when disaster struck. “I had a shop, and every piece in it was completely restored; it was like a working museum. Then a fire happened.”



Chronicles (continued-2)

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Wysong & Miles Co. drill press— has been converted to air feed, used for 1 operation, bought the machine cheap enough to dedicate in such a way, \$75 in 2004.

There had been a terrible ice storm. Power was out. Ziobro was refueling a generator when it caught fire. His main workshop was destroyed.

“All the machinery was gone. And I was in the fire. I had 65 skin-graft surgeries. Forty percent of my body got burned up. So while I was lying in critical care, my machines were getting rained on and snowed on. In 2009 I had to learn to walk again.”

That ice storm also wiped out thousands of walnut, red oak, and white pine trees that Ziobro had planted on his own tree farm. “Took out about 90 percent of them,” he says. “But I’ve got all the downed wood. Everything I make has got wood from my farm.”

At the time of the storm, Ziobro had been doing mostly building restorations. After the fire, he decided to focus on restoring and selling machinery. “And I found out in a hurry you could actually make more money. [Now] I’ll go to auction sites, and I might buy 20-30 machines at once, bring them home, and sell three-fourths of them to pay for the other ones I keep.”

The ones he keeps are mostly those old Deltas, in their many versions. (As he explains it, SCMI acquired Rockwell, Rockwell bought Delta, and Delta acquired Crescent and Walker-Turner.) “Anything of that lineage I don’t sell anymore.”

As for the ones he sells, Ziobro believes an old machine is more than just a collector’s item.

“It’s better built, in my opinion, than what’s available today because the castings are curvaceous and thick; you can put modern paint, modern low-voltage controls, and belts on an old machine and have a better machine

than what’s available out there.” Selling also allows him to meet “a good set of people” from across the country who come to buy his machines.



Delta Manufacturing Co. 1970 jig or scrollsaw.

Ziobro makes no apologies for using machines when he builds furniture. He points to a Louis XV-style end table that his grandfather designed. “The side panels have a drapery-swag Italian

Ziobro makes no apologies for using machines when he builds furniture.

motif on it. There’s a lot of end grain to break, so I make a template, I brad nail it, and I go around it with a (pin) router. Yes, it’s all machine cut, but then when you come back and relief carve it, you remove 100% of where the veining bit was. So you remove what to me would be a couple of hours of labor in a carving.” And that time saved makes the job profitable.

Trouble is, there’s not much demand for that kind of furniture where he is. “I’d rather be making furniture,” says Ziobro, “but I’ve got to go where the market is.”

So for now, he’s selling machines





Chronicles (continued-3)

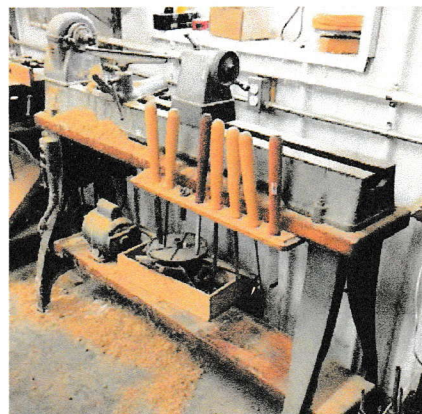
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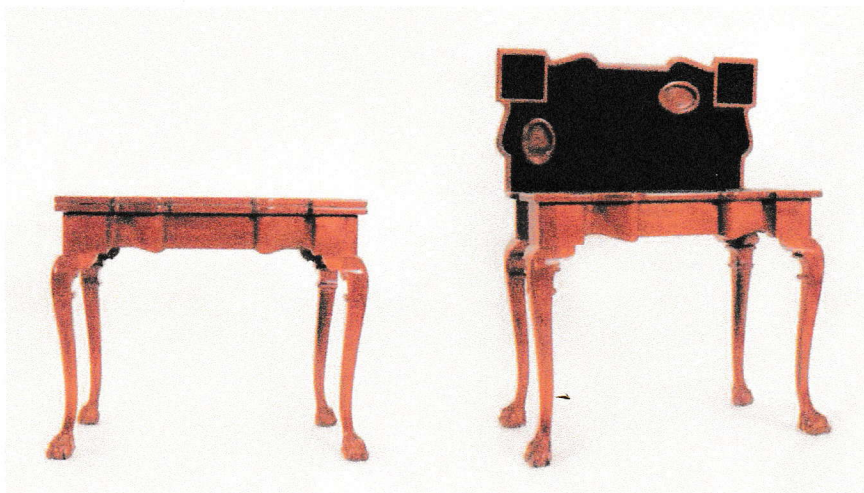
So there's no reproduction furniture coming out of his shop right now. But Ziobro says, "My goal is to stop doing such big projects and get into small furniture again. I'd like very much to do nothing but period furniture again. I just don't know if that market is there any more. If not, I'll just keep doing machinery and millwork. But I'd sure like to find an outlet for somebody out there who wants a Philadelphia- or Townsend- or Newport-type reproduction."

Meanwhile, the market is certainly there for vintage woodworking machines. Ziobro says, "I can put it on

Craigslist and sell it throughout the country almost immediately. If I post something and it doesn't sell in a week, I've got my price too high." —JB

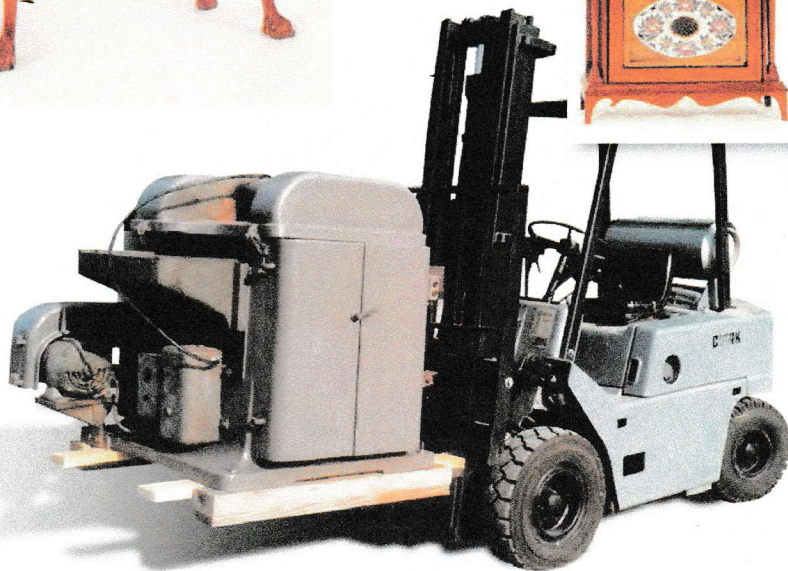


Very early cast leg cone pulls lathe



and doing building restorations and high-end architectural millwork. One project was to restore a former J.C. Penney store that he and his wife bought. He did all the work, including 29 dressing rooms and 37,000 feet of trim. The building now houses his wife's business, Ziobro Formals.

He's now busy building a new home, in what he calls "Federal Period, colonial-looking" style. While it will be high-tech in many ways, including backup power and water supplies in case any more ice storms come along, it will still look "like it was built in 1780."



<http://vintagemachinery.org/members/detail.aspx?id=4165>

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