



Chronicles

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**IF THINGS HAD WORKED OUT DIFFERENTLY,
BOB STEVENSON MIGHT HAVE BECOME A VETERINARIAN.**

Fortunately for those of us who appreciate period furniture, he became a master craftsman and an influential figure in the Southern California woodworking scene. His passion is Federal furniture.

"I just love the delicacy of it, the fact that it was done at a time period when the country was young and willing to fight off the British. The furniture is

absolutely gorgeous, with eagles, swags, and bellflowers and all that inlay. And I loved the red and gold colors, the satinwood and the mahogany. It just turned me on when I saw it."

Stevenson was born in Swampscott, Massachusetts: "The right part of the country to see great furniture." He spent summers with an uncle who was a carpenter and had Federal pieces in his house. "That's probably where I caught the bug."

His first serious exposure to woodworking came during high school at Essex County Agricultural Institute. "I thought I wanted to be a vet. I studied animal husbandry and dairy farming, but...

the woodshop really turned me on. We built functional objects to use on the farm—wagons and trailers. We also had to build a building and wire it. It was basically a prep school for working on a farm."

Stevenson couldn't afford vet school, so in 1957 he joined the U.S. Navy. He became a physician assistant, earning a couple of degrees and rising to the rank of Chief Warrant Officer.

Stevenson says sometimes he was lucky to "fall into" opportunities. That's exactly what happened while he was in the navy. He was assigned to the Manned Spacecraft Center in Houston, helping to train the Apollo astronauts. The air force base where he was stationed had a "really nice" workshop, so he got back into woodworking there for the first time since high school.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF BOB STEVENSON



Chronicles (continued-2)

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It's a fair bet that Stevenson is the only SAPFM member who can list "NASA Test Subject" and "Aerospace Medical Technician" on a resume. He



worked in altitude chambers and on centrifuges, testing equipment. "They used us more than they used the astronauts. The astronauts were not expendable, and I think we were." At one point he helped Neil Armstrong, after the man who would soon land on the moon ejected from his lunar landing training vehicle and was injured.



One other important thing happened during Stevenson's naval career: he inherited his great-uncle's tool chest. The man was a church builder in upper New York State. "The toolbox is a joiner's chest that was full of wonderful tools, which I still use today."

That tool chest, and what Stevenson calls a "strong creative drive" led him away from medicine and into woodworking when he retired from the navy in 1987.



He enrolled in Palomar College in California, earning a degree in Furniture Making. One of his teachers there was Ian Kirby. Stevenson also taught finishing at the college for several semesters.

About that time he built a small workshop at the back of his house in Chula Vista, California, and started doing restoration work and finishing. "After a couple of years, I decided to just do it instead of teaching it." He jokes, "I had learned just enough to be dangerous."

He called his company Stevenson

Classic Woodworking. "Eventually, I started getting people asking me to build things for them, and one thing led to another."

Again, he "fell into" a couple of great opportunities. "I was asked to restore a collection of (George) Nakashima furniture that had been in a mudslide in L.A. The owner enjoyed what I did for him, and he told Mira Nakashima (George's daughter) about my work, and I've been getting referrals from them for 30 years."

Another great opportunity arose when a Hollywood businessman approached Stevenson to build some pieces that were Federal-inspired, but reflected his own ideas.

"He would give me some ideas about what he wanted the piece to look like; I would draw up a sketch, and eventually we'd massage it into a piece that had a lot of Federal influence." In all, Stevenson built about 15



<https://youtu.be/RfguDrPNecE>

Enjoy this 3-Part Video

San Diego Fine Woodworkers Association (SDFWA) was proud to have had Bob Stevenson present this detailed presentation of his Seymour Tambour Desk build. His presentation was at the September 27, 2017, meeting in San Diego CA.



Chronicles (continued-3)

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pieces for him. He says he was lucky to find that client, because there's not a lot of interest in Federal furniture in California. He has built everything from Craftsman to contemporary over the years.

his role with the "Design in Wood" show in San Diego. For 20 years he was coordinator of the show, which has gone from (basically) a county fair to the largest woodworking exhibition in the country.

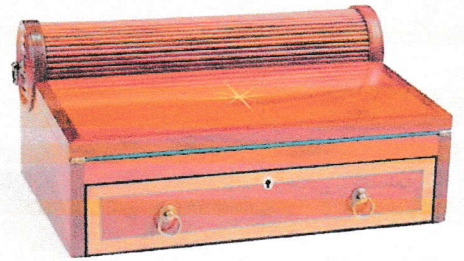
Stevenson retired from the post in 2014, which means he's now free to enter his own pieces in the show competitions. Last year, his reproduction of a tambour desk by John Seymour won First Place for Traditional Furniture and Best of Show. This year, he won First Place for Traditional Furniture for his reproduction of a Townsend Newport Pembroke table with stopped fluted legs and gadrooned carved stretchers, in swietina mahogany.

All of his amazing furniture still comes out of that small shop behind his house. It's a little bit bigger than the original—about 16'x24' now. "I still don't have enough room, but I can't get much bigger where I am. Sometimes I have to move out into the yard when things start getting a little too big for the shop."

He's been busy in a number of other ways as well. After joining SAPFM in 1999, as member number 23, Stevenson helped John McAlister establish the criteria for the Cartouche Award, then became chair of SAPFM's Advisory Board, helping to select the Cartouche winner for many years.

In 2013, he and fellow SAPFM member Brad Ormsby started the Southern California Chapter of SAPFM.

Perhaps his biggest contribution to woodworking in that area, though, is



As is the case with many SAPFM members, he uses power tools as "apprentices" to prepare the wood, but "I love to use hand tools. Love to be able to listen to music while I'm working. I just find it more rewarding to be able to do it all by hand.

"I have a lot of fun building there."
—JB

