

PAT EDWARDS

A 19TH CENTURY CABINETMAKER
IN SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA



By Terrie Noll



W. Patrick Edwards' Workshop
3815 Utah St, San Diego

workroom as the pastoral sounds of a string quartet waft on the air to mingle with the essence of an electric glue-pot - Pat's major power tool.

"I'm kind of a lunatic. I do things by hand," Pat grins, taking in your first glimpse around a room that confirms his mania. Everywhere are shelves of wooden planes. Three wooden tool chests sit shoulder to shoulder on the floor. A corner bends rows of carving tools inside itself. Frame-saws hang ready on the wall.

I'd come to discover the method to Pat's madness, and to find out how it was that whenever you asked any woodworker in San Diego if they knew someone who made money at woodworking, you got the same answer: Pat Edwards.



A small corner of Patrick's shelves period tool collection



Showroom, with antiques for sale, and restored pieces ready for pick up

The storefront window of Patrick Edwards' Restorations shop mirror the curbside palms whose reflections mask the showroom beyond the dusty jumble of period furniture in various states of repair. A step indoors from the side street of a suburban San Diego business district takes you through the looking glass to wade into the mahogany mayhem. As you enter, a bell tinkles in the unshoplike quiet; at first you're not sure if anyone is there. Up a few steps past a doorway in the back is the hint of a workbench. You follow your nose to the

On the day I visited, Pat was repairing the bellows of an old pump-organ. Except for hosting me, he would have been taking advantage of the dry Santa Ana weather conditions to catch up on a backlog of pieces awaiting French polish, shoved into a tiny alcove of the office. Nearby, a pair of small back-rooms housed a collection of upholstery fabric, cotton, boxes of horsehair, and sewing machines. Everywhere was furniture awaiting his attention.

“Truthfully, I started out as a upholsterer twenty-two years ago, and as you upholster you have to do wood repair, and that got me into woodworking,” Pat revealed, as he escorted me around shoving aside furniture. “There was this old-timer from New York doing upholstery, and I used to watch him and think: ‘This guy has hands like mine, eighty-five years old with huge hands and he’s doing upholstery; I can do this.’ So I started stitching the horse-hair and doing traditional upholstery. Pretty soon I got into the finishing, and pretty soon I got into the woodwork. Now it’s almost two-thirds cabinet work and one-third upholstery and it’s the perfect one man show, I do the caning and the rush seats and the carving and the veneering and turning and cabinet work, and there’s not and reason to take it anywhere else. That’s what makes me successful.”



Hand tying springs

“Successful repairing has allowed me commissions,” he continued. “Commissions are nice, but I’d go out if business if that’s all I had to do. I find that don’t make the money per hour that I make on repairs. You can work on a repair fifteen minutes and make fifty bucks if you know what you’re doing. Four of those an hour and boom - you’re done! You don’t have to work. The rest of the day is spec pieces or tooling up for something.”



Patrick Edward with Jay Bernard building a Van de Graff generator electron particule accelarator

From particle physics to a passion for marquetry - Pat started his business in the late sixties while studying for the degree in particle physics that hangs up on his shop wall. As a newlywed student he begun to pick up quality antiques at junk shops and fix them up for his household, when he realized that there was money to be made. “There was a lot of antique dealers and they all need work done, and nobody was prepared to do it. I realized the repair part was all labor, which was all profit.” Then the woodworking business started ‘sucking’ him away from physics.

After teaching physics briefly, Pat decided to cut to his mid-life crisis - in his early twenties. “I had the choice to alienate myself and go off into this ivory

tower and do my research and not communicate with another person. My psyche was not set for that. Now I'm involved in the biggest woodworking group in the country (he heads the 700-member San Diego Fine Woodworkers Association) and I get twenty customers a day coming into the shop." Because of the traffic, he reserves the concentrated work of his sixty-hour week for after-hours, including his passion for marquetry.



Marquetry Donkey
Roubo volume IV

"I started doing veneer repair almost immediately in the early seventies. Nobody wanted to touch it because they didn't know animal glue existed. I experimented with veneering curves and laying veneers with hammers and did a little bit of marquetry repair." To hold the veneers for cutting marquetry replacement parts. Pat devised a tool patterned after one shown in a 1765 encyclopedia of the trades often referred to simply as a Diderot - its French author's name. Then he met the curator of the Getty Museum near Los Angeles.

An antique 'donkey' - The curator had a private collection of antique French woodworking tools, including one that stood in his garage covered by a sheet.

When Pat peeked underneath, his attention was quickly diverted elsewhere by his host. Curiosity aroused, on his next visit Pat brought his own diversion - his Bianchi racing bicycle - which the curator was soon pedaling down the road while Pat was snapping pictures of the mystery tool. "Those pictures hung around and I cogitated," says Pat, "and about three years later a 4ft. by 14ft. marquetry tabletop commission came in the door."

Although at the time there were no published references showing the tool that Pat had taken pictures of, he deduced it was a marquetry device called a donkey (chavelet in French) used for cutting veneers. The difference between



Edwards demonstrating the marquetry chevalet

the donkey and the device shown in Diderot's encyclopedia was that the donkey had a carriage-arm, holding a deep-jawed fret-saw, which could slide back and forth and pivot up and down on a rod attached to its closed end. A spring-loaded, foot-operated vise jaw in front of the operator made holding the veneer packet convenient and gave exceptional control for a precise, 90° cut. Pat accepted the table top commission on the condition that he be given time to build a donkey to use on it.

Why Pat didn't do what most woodworkers would have done - buy one of the electric scroll saws on the market - might be explained by his attitude toward power tools. "I never was comfortable with them," he admits. "All through school I avoided the trade. I never took woodshop. I was into math and physics, and that's how I avoided dealing with power-saws. When I fell out of physics and into a skill like woodworking, I didn't approach it like a trade school would suggest: safety first, eye goggles, power tools, stand behind the line, carbide tips. That was just as strange as dado planes, fillisters, rebates, and plows. Both worlds were strange, but since I was driven by antiques, I went into the lexicon of the antique world and started figuring out what all these tools were."

For Pat, a native of Southern California, which is not known to be rich in the history of antique tools, his studies included yearly buying trips back east to collect tools and outfit himself with a generic, pre-industrial cabinet shop. For the other components a famous historian steered him toward some very important price books written in the 1820's in various furniture centers of the time: New York, Cincinnati, Philadelphia, and Pittsburgh. These books were guides intended for journeymen cabinetmakers working in union shops and were analogous to the guides that auto mechanics use today to estimate shop time for different jobs.



The new workshop library installed in 2010

"So assuming these guys knew what they were talking about and these are the tools they were working with," Pat recounts. "I worked backward and figured out how to do the job using tools from their time frame. The thing I realized is that these tools were far superior to modern day power tools for limited production - up to about a dozen operations. I found that it was much easier and quicker to use a dedicated hand tool."

A self-apprentice system - Another aspect of a bygone era that Pat resurrected for his training was the apprentice system. Pat says: "I knew early on that I was going to be self educated. There was nobody around that I could approach as a master, so I studied what it took to be a master and set out to educate myself along those lines.

I was an apprentice to myself. That meant for the first ten years I had to sweep the floor and take any job that was given to me.”



Patrick Edwards' Master Workbench

Realizing that as he progressed through his self-imposed system he would eventually become a master, Pat decided that a smart apprentice would begin to gather the wood for the time that he was expected to produce his graduation exercise: a masters bench. While on a trip to Pennsylvania, Pat found a grove of beech trees and begged the owner for a free tree. “I explained to the owner that I was on a ‘mission from God’ - like the Blues Brothers.” Pat laughs.

On a rainy day, armed with only a small hatchet and a crosscut panel-saw, Pat managed to extract a single 30ft. section of beech, roll it with logs and levers to the dirt road, and hire a tractor to drag it to the truck he had left a few miles closer to civilization. His luck was holding, he breezed into a good-natured local sawmill at the day's end and twenty dollars later left with material ready to be stickered outside his California shop for the next twelve years.

The yearly trips back east included visits to every historic home, to conservation programs, museums, and curators. “I found out that most museum curators didn't have the freedom to do to their collection what I was able to do to the stuff that came through my shop because the museum had too many rules. They couldn't even pull out a screw without filling out forms. I found out that I had more freedom to learn from my business than the guys who were in the business.”

Pat maintains a strict conversationalist philosophy, however, with both museums and collectors as clients.

“They want to invest in something and have that investment protected. If you have a Rolls Royce, you don't go and have a Chevy engine put in. So that's what I do: I put in authentic parts.” This means doing nothing to the antique that is not appropriate to its period. “No synthetic glues before 1890, no lacquer before 1920, no round nails before 1880.”

Pat's recitation is quite thorough.



Traditional Animal Glue Pot

But duplicating authenticity is a real temptation since Pat has the skill to make it look right.

He tells the story of being offered five times his California earnings to stay in Connecticut and make fakes. “It was a morals test,” says Pat, who decided to keep himself honest in California and make deep brands in any copies he made.



Patrick posing with one of his re-creation

Pat claims it took him nearly ten years of duplicating parts before he realized that if he could make parts he could do the whole thing: “Even then I never allowed myself the acceptance of creativity as far as making something from scratch. I’m a craftsman; I master my skills, the tools, and materials, and therefore I can copy what exists. I’m not a designer. I revere antique design so much, why fix it?” But flexibly, as superintendent of San Diego Fine Woodworkers Association’s yearly show, he stages the largest juried contemporary woodworking show in California - a show that rewards \$6000 in cash prizes, and which under his five-year guidance has helped to increase the association’s membership from 200 to 700. This, he claims: “... has given me prospective. I appreciate quality work and innovative design as much as the next guy, but I don’t appreciate machine techniques.”

He softened up his image when he bought a Makita planer to produce the flooring for his house. He now runs his lumber through it to take off the fur, but still faces and joints by hand. He lasted twenty years before buying a band saw to make veneers, but justifies this tool as a mill. “In the pre-industrial age, a guy would have had it done at a steam - or water - powered local mill, or with a pit saw.” Ruining the fact of no local mill, he says; “I do have a pit-saw and a way to elevate the log, but it still takes two people and I’m getting old. When you’re nineteen, it’s romantic. When you’re forty-three, it’s not so romantic.”

Narrowing the focus - Pat gave up teaching visual identification of American antiques at various colleges - which he did four nights a week for fourteen years while running his business during the day - as well as his eight-year, every third weekend stint as curator of the Banning Museum (a Greek Revival home near Los Angeles). What appears to be a sign of slowing down is just a narrowing of focus to his special interest: marquetry.

His acceptance as one of the three marquetry students invited for five months of study at L’Ecole Boulle, a prestigious French trade school in Paris, had him practicing his French vocabulary on me throughout my visit. He plans now to make yearly trips to Paris “... to see if I have any talent.” Since his sons are grown, Pat says, “If they offer me a job, I’ll go. People in Paris appreciate these skills. In America, they just ask you what you’re talking about.”

Pat Edwards completed his master's bench a few years ago. A massive 4ft. by 8ft. combination of bench styles, it sports a German-style bench on one side - with dogs and a shoulder vise for joinery and face jointing - separated by a tool well from a Roubo-style set-up on the other side - with a leg vise, bench jack and holdfasts designed for edge joining. As one might expect, Pat used 2in. wooden screws in his vises, not just because of tradition but for speed of operation. "Two turns per inch." he demonstrates with certainty

"When I got the bench done, the whole character of my customer relationship changed." Says Pat. "People started walking in and I could name my price - literally. They'd say 'Do you do marquetry?' and I'd just point at the donkey. And they'd say 'Are you a cabinetmaker?' and I'd just point to the bench. So the fundamental concept that they had in the pre-industrial age that you judge the worker by his tools is still valid today."

So, it seems, is the idea of giving a master his due.