

Bob Chapman's Woodworking Tales - May 2020



I suppose my earliest interest in wood carpentry stems from my father building our family home in Portland in the early 1950s. He did it almost single handedly using only hand tools while working full time. However, building our home took so much out of him that I rarely saw him pick up even a hammer the rest of his life. I inherited one physical item from my father, his hammer, which I cherish using. (Dad's best crafting was done as foreman of the pipe specialties shop for American Pipe, later Ameron, in Portland. They built all kinds of unique pipe headers, penstocks...even an oil drilling rig launched to the Columbia River, headed for the Gulf of Mexico.)

My first "hands on" training occurred in an 8th grade woodshop class. I built a big desk out of plywood, which served me well through high school and until departing to OSU. I still remember the great sense of accomplishment, and how that desk encouraged me to study. But I had no tools and did no further woodworking until Meredith and I were married and bought our first house in Corvallis in the late 60s. Even then, mostly all I did was rough carpentry of things like fences, a deck, shelving, etc. About that time, I did manage to lose half my thumb rip sawing a board with a radial arm saw. I guess that was a lesson well learned, as 50 years later I am fortunate to have the other nine digits intact.

But the "occupational hazards" (travel, many moves, long hours, etc.) as a CH2M HILL engineer basically precluded my doing any serious woodworking until I started my retirement glide path in 2005. That is when we moved to Vancouver, WA, and purchased a home next door to Meredith's folks. This home has an extended third bay in the garage, which was ideal for creating a home shop. Finally, I had the time, space, and funds for new toys! Equally important, I lived right next to Dad Newell, who was a great mentor to me in woodworking, among many other ways as well.

To properly tell this tale, I need to rewind the clock back to 1960, when I took a high school class in mechanical drawing from an industrial arts teacher by the name of Bob (Dad) Newell. Later that year, I met his daughter, which is the best

thing that ever happened in my life. We lost Dad Newell in 2011. He was a man with amazing dedication, skills, patience and talents. He had a distinguished career as an educator, ultimately retiring after teaching high school and junior college electronics courses in Silicon Valley. In parallel, he served during WWII and the Korean War, retiring as a Lt. Colonel with the Air Force Reserves. But most relevant to this tale, he was an artisan woodcrafter. I have included an example of his work in a later section. Over the years, whenever we got together, we usually ended up in his shop, or in mine, building something together. And a good number of the tools in my shop were either inherited or gifted from him.

I am not close to the wood artisan that Dad Newell was. And I have not tried making fine furniture. I lean towards (a) making hardwood chests, boxes, cutting boards, etc., as gifts; (b) home-improvement projects that make life more enjoyable; and (c) crafting items for charitable fundraising or other community benefit. Organizations that have been outlets for camaraderie and skill building with other woodworkers have included my Rotary Club's Hammer and Nail avenue of service, volunteering at a nonprofit charity Friends of the Carpenter, and crafting items with Meredith for her Assistance League of Southwest Washington benefit auctions.

Examples of things I have enjoyed crafting are shared below.



Children's "giraffe" bookcase ready for the next Assistance League benefit auction.

Toy box/treasure chest. Friction hinges were expensive but worked great.

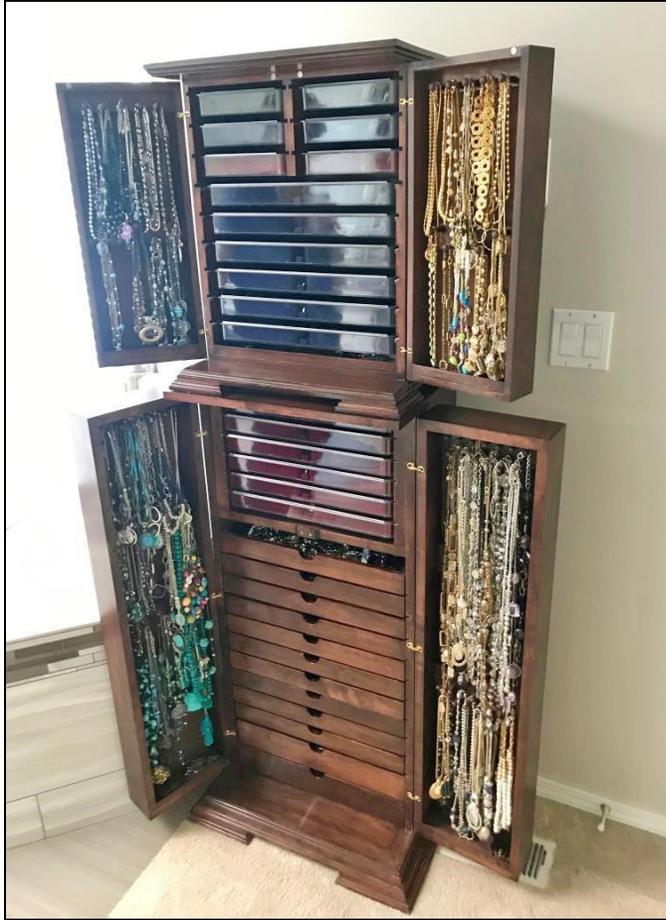




This light-weight serving tray was made using walnut and maple, which seems to be my “go to” favorite because of the contrasting colors.

Walnut jewelry box crafted for our daughter’s best friend since grade school in Redding, on the occasion of her 50th birthday. Kristen helped with the design and installing the drawer linings.





Jewelry chest constructed out of maple for daughter Kristen. It now stands about 6 feet tall. The top portion was built as an add-on about 3 years after the original chest. This was a collaborative effort, with her having a lot of input on the design, doing all the staining and finish work, and installing the liners.

Shadow box displaying a gorgeous emperor's jacket we purchased on a river cruise on the Yangtze. Constructed from Beech wood, the frame was covered on a table saw, followed by sanding "forever" to get a smooth finish. The top of the frame is removable so the jacket can be reversed to display the equally beautiful back. I experimented using black automotive lacquer and rubbing compounds to simulate a traditional Chinese rubbed-lacquer finish. It worked out fairly well!





A really fun project was creating this sewing/crafting/gift wrapping cabinet that sits in Meredith's study. Adjacent are matching file drawers and bookcases.

A Rotary Club project was creation of 10 Little Free Libraries, which are scattered around Clark County, and are extremely popular in their neighborhoods. I created the kits, and then various members took on the task of assembling and uniquely decorating their library.

Critical here in the Northwest is a waterproof design. The core construction is MDO plywood, like is used for highway signs. What was neat was that a member who owns a sign company used her computerized CNC machine to cut most of the large parts from 4' x 8' sheets.





A recent, unique woodworking opportunity was to fabricate a filter media display case. This was presented to a long-time CH2M HILL/Jacobs client nearing completion of a new WTP filter complex. The case will eventually be filled with 8 feet of coal and sand as an educational display in the filter gallery.



Here is one end of my shop bay. I have more tools than space, so an ongoing project has been to build bases on heavy-duty castors for most of the power tools.

Tools at the other end of the bay are centered around a hefty table saw. This is about as picked up and cleaned up as the shop gets, as there is most often some project underway.





Earlier, I mentioned being mentored by my father-in-law, Dad Newell. He was truly an artisan woodcrafter.

Pictured here is his signature piece - a rocking baby cradle crafted from individual maple splines. Each spline consisted of three segments spliced together, finally tapered and sanded to a solid surface on each end. The splines initially created a 360-degree orb, with the opening eventually cut out and banded. Assembly included brass screws and glue. It took Dad Newell several years to complete.

Having this hobby available has been a real blessing for me during the Pandemic, that is for sure. I just have to sneak out to the lumber yard and hardware store once in a while.