

# Behind the Scenes

with Kurt Hertzog



## Easy Wood Tools

It started innocently enough—about eight years ago. Killing some time while his wife shopped for shoes in the mall, Craig Jackson wandered into the Woodcraft store next door. Not familiar with Woodcraft and never having been in that type of store, Craig was taken with the wide range of woodworking tools and accessories available. A machinist by trade, he was fascinated by the possibilities. As they say, the rest is history.

Having recently been changed to a 2:30 dismissal at work, Craig had some available afternoon time. In addition, a move to a new home provided an outbuilding with the potential for a workshop. Craig bought a mini-lathe and some tools. Woodturning might give him some room for artistic expression that part prints and tolerances on drawings in his work environment never allowed. His first bowl blank was from a palm tree in the backyard that needed removal. As most new turners do, Craig struggled with sharpening. Again, like most turners, the mini-lathe grew to a larger lathe. Craig's new Powermatic (and chain saw and bandsaw and...) led him into bigger and bigger work. He thought he hit a new standard for "hard to turn" when he got access to a 150-year-old walnut tree. Even rotating the use of his three bowl gouges and sharpening often, Craig struggled through that walnut, but was determined to find a better way.

At work, life was pretty simple with regard to sharp cutters. Carbide cutters were replaceable items. Use them, rotate them as needed, and replace them when they ran out of new edges to be used. Craig wanted to do the same with his woodturning tools. He experimented with the machine tool carbide cutters and wasn't happy with the cutting results. The lack of a clean-cut surface troubled him. He found a carbide router bit that, when oriented, seemed to work. He sought out a carbide cutter manufacturer and began the development of a carbide cutter for wood tools that would leave a clean-cut edge. Many geometries, carbide grades, and manufacturing sharpening techniques later, Craig thought he had a workable cutter that he put on a machined shaft to accommodate it.

Early in 2008, Craig took his prototype tool to one of the regional symposiums to seek evaluation by the pros. With feedback from David Ellsworth and Nick Cook, who were kind enough to try it out and offer critique, Craig took their feedback and encouragement and continued his development. Nick Cook's introduction of Craig to Rex

Burningham at Craft Supplies USA (CSUSA) started Craig on the commercial path. Working with Rex, Craig refined the tool into a product that CSUSA took on for their catalog. The initial order of thirty tools was a huge breakthrough for Craig's company, Easy Wood Tools (EWT). Still working his day job, Craig needed to figure out how to make the tools in quantity in order to keep up with the demand.

The original business plan was to have the fabrication of components outsourced to local shops and EWT would assemble, package, and market them. In addition to his day job and working at EWT at night, Craig was now demonstrating his line of tools at various shows in the Craft Supplies booth. It was spreading him far too thin. He had a new job at work, becoming a process improvement engineer and ultimately managing that group. Easy Wood Tools was still being operated out of Craig's shop at home with his wife and children helping with all the tasks required to run a small company. Continued success with CSUSA and now additional requests forced Craig to consider finding a larger place.

When the exclusive with Craft Supplies ran out, other woodturning retailers approached EWT. Woodcraft had an interest in handling the product line. After evaluating the product and deciding to market it, Woodcraft placed their initial order in the fall of 2009. That was the point when Craig needed to act. Not happy with the quality, price, and delivery by some of his subcontractors, he decided to lease a building and bring the component fabrication in-house.

A building in his hometown of Owensboro, Kentucky, was located and leased. Familiar with CNC equipment (Computer Numerical Control), having years of experience using and programming it at work, Craig made the leap to CNC mills and turning centers for his small company. With full-time employees, CNC fabrication equipment and techniques, in-house finishing, and a herculean effort, the Woodcraft stocking order was completed and shipped in the required forty days.

With the success of sales through Craft Supplies, Woodcraft, and others, Craig faced the dilemma most entrepreneurs face. It is a hard choice between a day job with a steady paycheck, security, benefits, and retirement, or the unknown outcome of building your own future in your own company. EWT had grown by 200% in 2009. Craig made the decision to quit his job and devote full

time to building Easy Wood Tools. Now with himself, his wife Donna, and six employees, EWT continued to add new tools to the product line, refine manufacturing processes, fill orders, and expand their reach in the retail market. With the fast growth, managing it became a major task. Employees, operations, banking, advertising, insurance, and all the things that it takes to run and grow a company became more than a full-time job.

By mid-2010, Easy Wood Tools had outgrown their facility. The retailers now included Craft Supplies USA, Woodcraft, Packard Woodworks, and Lee Valley. Keeping up with demand stretched the current facility to the limit. Owensboro didn't have another building that would work for Craig. Being a small town of 55,000 or so, it also had a limited supply of available workers with the needed skill sets. The search for a new facility took Craig to Lexington, Kentucky. With a population of several hundred thousand, there was an available workforce and plenty of manufacturing sites from which to select.

Easy Wood Tools moved from Owensboro to Lexington in December of 2010. The distance was only 150 miles, but with 300% growth in 2010, following their very successful 2009, the move was a huge undertaking. Not only did everything for the business need to be moved, but Craig also needed to move his home and family. The business and family relocation had to occur with minimal interruption to the operations and no interruptions to the order fulfillment. The move was a success and EWT is located in a small industrial park in Lexington. Within eyesight of a major expressway, EWT has room to grow and has all the necessities of a small business right at hand.

The EWT product line has expanded to twenty-three turning tools, faceplates, turning smocks, and clothing, with more in the planning. Proud of the fact that everything that EWT sells is **made in America**, 2011 was another explosive growth year of 200%. The continued promotion of the tools through advertising and the website, along with all the retailers, has proven very successful. Every EWT tool comes with a no-time limit, unconditional money-back guarantee. Craig continues to expand the product offerings with others on the horizon. The tool marketing has now grown to include eight overseas countries. Throughout this growth, Craig continues the process and product improvement to keep customer satisfaction high. He says his goal is not to make the least expensive tools. His goal is to offer the highest quality, easiest to use tools to expand the woodturning population.



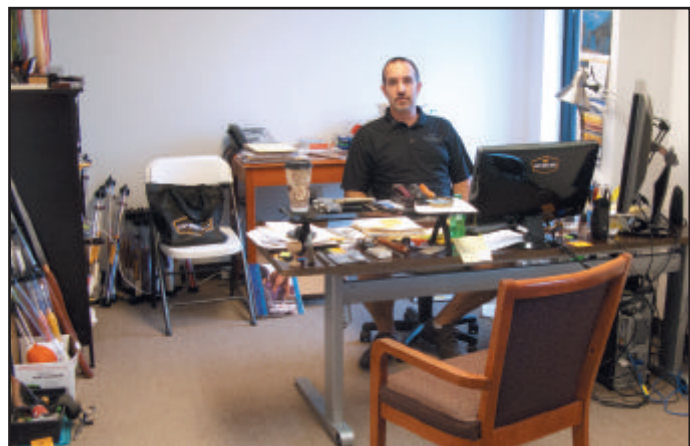
**Fig. 1.** Recently relocated from Owensboro, Kentucky, to Lexington, the new Easy Wood Tools factory is on a quiet back street in an industrial park.



**Fig. 2.** The lobby is tastefully decorated with a display of woodturnings collected by Craig and Donna Jackson.



**Fig. 3.** The lobby also contains the latest in merchandising display ideas where Craig continues to experiment and refine display concepts for his retailers.



**Fig. 4.** Even though it is the president's office, Craig's office is a no-frills, working space with computer design capability, prototypes, promotional literature samples, and the odd golf club.





**Fig. 5.** The first prototype of the EWT system is displayed in Craig's office as a keepsake.



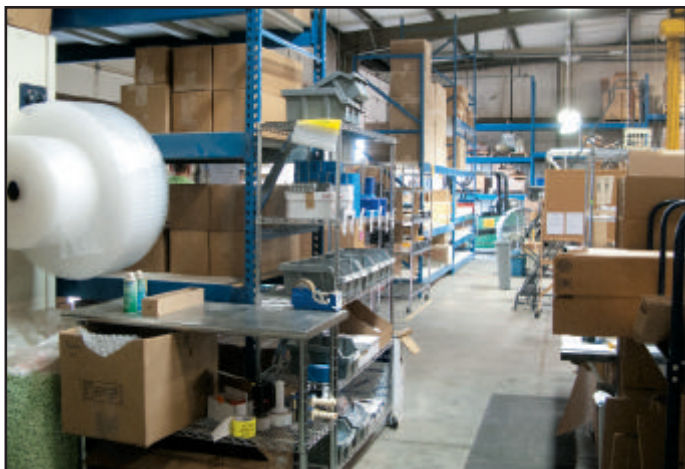
**Fig. 8.** These are raw materials destined to be a signature handle for one of the EWT tools.



**Fig. 6.** Like most factories, there is a small tool room and prototype area for fixturing needs, experimenting, and continuing development of prototypes for new products.



**Fig. 9.** The metalworking and woodworking production equipment is CNC controlled, such as this lathe that is turning one of the easily recognized EWT handles.



**Fig. 7.** The factory is impeccably clean and well organized, as can be expected from someone like Craig, who in a previous life was a process improvement engineer and manager.



**Fig. 10.** Even with automation, there are some things that are best done with skilled hands, such as sanding each of the tool handles prior to application of the finish.



**Fig. 11.** The EWT factory boasts a modern paint facility where all the tool handles receive their finish.



**Fig. 12.** EWT handles are made from a variety of species of woods, domestic and exotic, and receive a stunning, high-gloss protective finish.



**Fig. 13.** Faceplates were a recent addition to the EWT product line. Here is a batch that has come back from black anodizing.

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