

Behind the Scenes

with Kurt Hertzog



Geoffrey Noden Woodworking

Like many businesses in the woodturning arena, Geoffrey Noden Woodworking could be missed in the blink of an eye. Other similar small companies in this industry are often a one-to-a-few person business with a specialty product or two that fill a special need. Located not far from the state capital district in Trenton, New Jersey, the company in this deceptively small building makes quite a number of two products that fill a woodworking niche.

THE ROOTS

Geoffrey Noden wound up at this place in time through a very circuitous route. His love of making things as a child led him to model rocketry and then into the woodshop in high school. Rather than study halls, he spent all his "spare" time in the woodshop "making things." It didn't matter what, as long as it was something different than the others before him had made. A semester at James Madison University told him that he wasn't cut out for the college path. Because of the artistic leanings of a grandmother and the woodshop enjoyment of his high school days, Geoffrey applied to the John Makepeace School for Craftsman in Wood in Dorset, England. Crushed when he wasn't accepted, the recommendation of the school instructors was to apprentice with someone. In the era of the first issue of *Fine Woodworking* magazine, he found an apprentice position in Pennsylvania where he didn't make any money and actually had to pay to work there as an apprentice. Making furniture as an apprentice gave him sufficient skills to ultimately leave and set up his own shop. With a bit more time on his own, Geoffrey had the confidence to make another attempt at entry into the John Makepeace School. The school was a two-year program with only nine students accepted each year. Applying again was another long shot; however, with his recently gained skills, that long shot paid off and Geoffrey became the first American ever accepted into the school.

GROWTH

Geoffrey's two years at the Makepeace School passed quickly, learning tool skills, design, materials, specialties from visiting instructors, project management, and more. After graduation, he returned to the United States to work at his old master's shop, but this time he was training the other apprentices. After a year and a half, he was back to his hometown of Trenton to set up his own shop making

custom furniture. From the onset of that endeavor in 1987, he ran a reasonably successful small shop making custom furniture on demand. His ability to design something a bit different made his work appeal to the more craftsman-appreciative customer. In about 1993, the Adjust-A-Bench was invented. The handwork needed in doing woodworking at all different heights stressed Geoffrey's back, so he invented an easily adjustable bench as a solution. As fill-in work, he began to tour with the American Woodworker shows as one of the "red carpet" demonstrators. This was a natural for selling the Adjust-A-Bench. The audience for his demos would see and inquire about his adjustable bench. After a while, he began to bring an Adjust-A-Bench for all the other red carpet demonstrators and would usually sell them all by the end of the show.

COURSE CHANGES

The show changed hands over the years and this brought many operational changes. By 1999, Geoffrey departed the show circuit. In 2003, he made a concerted effort to put the Adjust-A-Bench into production. Focusing on industrializing the components and making it a Heathkit for woodworkers, it would allow the end user to create whatever size bench was needed with quality, industrial-grade components. The leg and caster sets, along with butcher-block tops, quality Jorgensen vises, and other options, were available. The end user configured the width and length and level of sophistication to suit his or her needs and budget. Around the same 1993 time frame, a set of chairs with a complicated inlay caused Geoffrey some problems. Having struggled with that set of original chairs, he set out to make the task easier. Being the inventive type, he created the initial series of prototypes for what would ultimately become the Inlay Razor tool to cut the needed pieces. That inlay cutting tool idea lay fallow for more than ten years as his energy was focused on the Adjust-A-Bench, custom furniture, and also his foray back into the trade show circuit. By the time the AAW Symposium was held in Hartford, Connecticut, the Noden Inlay Razor had been commercialized and was ready for prime time; it made its debut there. There will be a product review on the latest Inlay Razor in an upcoming issue.

TODAY

Currently, Geoffrey and his wife, Suzette, go to about

twelve shows a year, demonstrating and selling the Adjust-A-Bench and the Noden Inlay Razor. Since the inception of both products, about 2000 benches and 400 razors have been sold. Both products are patented and have been industrialized. Geoffrey does the design, manufacturing engineering, and the bulk of the manufacturing and shipping. Suzette does the marketing, website, business aspects, and the computer work—a great division of efforts and use of expertise. The end result is a small family-owned business filling a niche with quality products that you'd believe were created and manufactured by companies that are much larger in size. Nothing about either product is anything but top shelf in design and manufacture, and is proof that small companies can and do indeed thrive. Of course, custom-designed and custom-built furniture is still available. Geoffrey's take on furniture shies away from replica or reproduction. His philosophy is "Why do something the same way they did it two hundred years ago? We have new tools, techniques, materials, and design aids. They've been there and done that. What is to be gained by repeating it? If someone wants carbon copies, they might be better off shopping at the big-box stores. If I am going to take the time and effort to do something like that, why not put my own spin on it?"

Currently, the Adjust-A-Bench and the Inlay Razor are available through the websites at www.geoffrey-noden.com and www.inlayrazor.com. You can also get these products at any of the woodworking and woodturning shows that the Nodens take part in. They usually have a booth at shows that are within driving distance of their New Jersey home. What is coming next from Geoffrey Noden Woodworking? Would you believe a solution to an outdoor garden watering problem? Geoffrey's answer to a problem that Suzette continually experiences in her garden at home might be their next product. Don't underestimate the creativity of the folks at Geoffrey Noden Woodworking and many other small companies.



Fig. 1. Easily missed as you drive down the street, Geoffrey Noden Woodworking is in a small building in an industrial complex not far from the state capital district in Trenton, New Jersey.



Fig. 2. The moment that you enter the building, there is little doubt as to the business they are in. It is a fully functional shop, so you are literally in the "showroom."



Fig. 3. The furniture designer and maker is Geoffrey Noden. Geoffrey and his wife, Suzette, are the entire staff of this small company.



Fig. 4. Here is an early version of the Adjust-A-Bench. None of the prototypes of Geoffrey's designs go to waste. They are all functional and an ongoing use for them is found in the shop.



Fig. 5. The Adjust-A-Bench has its own assembly room with all the base and optional materials staged for order fulfillment. The product is fully industrialized and the components are all manufactured in nearby facilities.

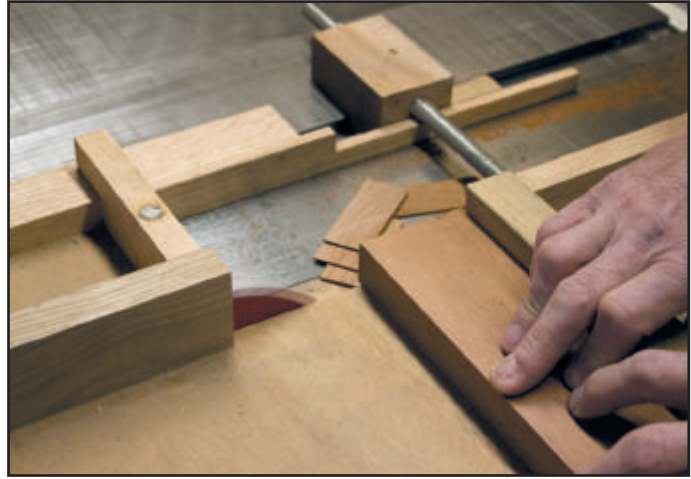


Fig. 8. The Inlay Razor works only with end-grain materials. Geoffrey has homebuilt sleds that allow him to cut very thin pieces safely.



Fig. 6. This is the chair inlay that drove Geoffrey to invent the Inlay Razor. After completing a set of these chairs by hand, he swore he'd never endure that again and created the Inlay Razor.

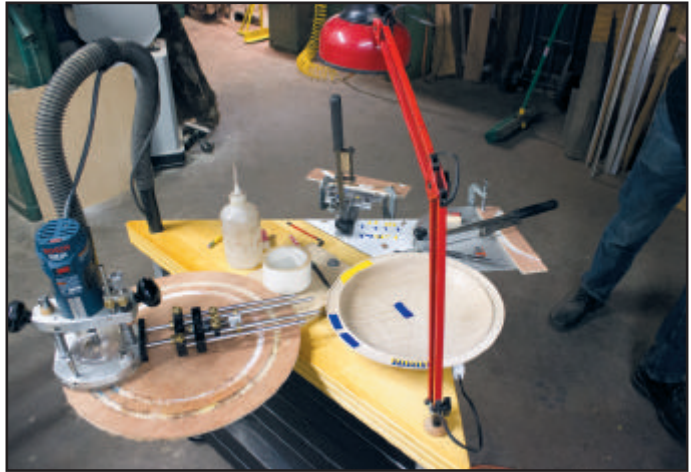


Fig. 9. There are other aspects of using the Inlay Razor. These include species selection, coloring and dyeing as needed, and controlling the curvature of the stock, as well as cutter creation for specialized designs.



Fig. 7. Relatively new to the faceplate facet of the turning business, Geoffrey spent most of his years turning the spindle parts of his furniture. Table and chair spindle parts are far different than bowls and platters.

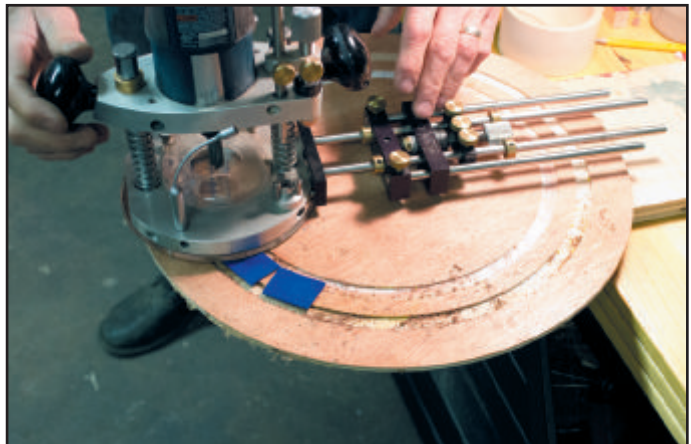


Fig. 10. Geoffrey cuts the radius needed for the design that he is currently working on. A router with a precise radius control is extremely helpful when making the desired tight tolerance fits.



Fig. 11. The Inlay Razor is shown in action with Geoffrey cutting pieces for his current design. Much of the fun is the conceiving of unique designs along with the cutter creation and individual piece cutting.



Fig. 14. Woodworking and woodturning applications for the Noden Razor abound. The application of the process is limited only by your imagination.



Fig. 12. Not a currently marketed product (but still a very clever idea), his workstation allows for plenty of material storage in rotating drawers in the chair and under the worktable surface.



Fig. 13. A platter rim design and creation is underway. The painstaking and precision work will pay off with the final fit and finish.



Kurt Hertzog

A professional woodturner, demonstrator, and teacher, Kurt Hertzog enjoys the continuum of woodturning, from making his own turning tools to photographing his finished turnings.

Kurt is a regular feature columnist for both *Woodturning Design* and *Woodturning* magazines, one of the five Council Members of the Pen Makers Guild, and a member of the Board of Directors of the American Association of Woodturners.

Kurt's work has been featured in the American Association of Woodturners "Rounding The Corners" Exhibit, and he has been published in *Woodturning Design*, *American Woodturner*, *Woodturning*, *Pen World*, and *Stylus* magazines. You can see his work on his website at www.kurthertzog.com.

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