

# The Southwest Association of Woodturners Symposium

Guest editor Kurt Hertzog takes a look inside the 2023 SWAT Symposium



PHOTOGRAPH BY KURT HERTZOG

**For those not familiar with the Southwest Association of Woodturners, more commonly known as SWAT, Symposium, I've put together a bit of a look at the event from the historical perspective and a look at the 2023 event. With the demise of the Utah Woodturning Symposium, the other large, long-running woodturning symposium remaining in the US in addition to the AAW Symposium is the SWAT Symposium. Founded in 1992, the symposium enjoyed its 31st event this year. With myriad regional woodturning symposia growing in recent years in addition to the AAW and SWAT events, there is rarely a location and timeframe that doesn't have an event within reasonable distance.**

## The origins of SWAT

SWAT got its start in October 1992. A group of Texas turners created the gathering known as the Texas Turn or Two, originally intended as a regional woodturning event for those unable to attend a national symposium. The first event was held outside of Columbus TX on Columbus Day, drawing 80 attendees to the outdoor venue. Accommodations were the attendees' motor homes, trailers, pop-ups, and tents under some large oak trees. With the inaugural success, the following year was held again near Columbus with John Jordan as the first invited featured demonstrator. Having outgrown that location, the Texas Turn or Two moved to New Braunfels from 1994 to 2000. The 2000 event experienced a serious rainstorm that made the organisers rethink their open-air operations.

There was a move in 2001 to San Angelo for the last Texas Turn or Two. In 2002, the symposium was reorganised as the Southwest Association of Turners. The event moved, with locations in Wichita Falls and Temple alternating years. Outgrowing both cities, the SWAT Symposium settled on Waco TX because of its central location and available facilities. Other than needing to schedule around Baylor University's sports events to ensure sufficient local accommodations, the location has proved to be ideal. The SWAT Symposium has been located at the Waco Convention Center every year since, with plans to remain indefinitely. The city has plans on the books to complete a new convention centre and attached host hotel in the next five years, with the SWAT event to be welcomed there when completed.



**1** The demo rooms at SWAT are well equipped, spacious, with plenty of comfortable seating. With large monitors, mic'd audio, and good lighting, there isn't a bad seat in the house **2** Some of Derek Weidman's unique creations in the instant gallery. Derek was one of the lead demonstrators this year **3** Jerry Bennett had several pieces on display in the gallery. This artistic piece is titled Hot Licks and was one of Jerry's creations from 2018 **4** A portion of the instant gallery. Notice the Beads of Courage table in the foreground. These donations are for children having cancer treatments at the various medical centres **5** An image I took at a past SWAT event. A great example of why the gallery has a 'Look but please don't touch' sign on the display tables **6** SWAT meal times are organised for the vendors to get served, followed by the attendees. With from four to eight serving lines, the wait is minimal.



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**Growth of SWAT**

With 80 attendees at the first event, the symposium had grown to 580 attendees by the 15th SWAT in 2006. The move to Waco, with its location halfway between Dallas and Austin, even further increased attendance. By the time of the 25th anniversary in 2016, the attendance was over 1000 with 78 vendors in the trade show. In 2022, SWAT was the only live woodturning symposium held in the United States. Lockdowns have had a negative effect on nearly all the face-to-face events, with many beginning to recover. This year, the 2023 SWAT Symposium drew 829 attendees but indications are that the event will get back on the growth curve as normal life recovers.

**The Mechanics of SWAT**

The SWAT Symposium, a volunteer organisation, is planned and executed by a collection of 26 Texas AAW chapters. Each of those chapters provides a board member to represent it. That board of directors is the

governance of the seven executive committee members. The executive committee is responsible for the planning of the event. Among those groups, a host of committees and special teams make the next event happen. Each turning room at the symposium is sponsored by one of the 26 chapters. That chapter is responsible for equipping and operating the room.

The 2023 symposium featured 63 woodturning demonstrations by 24 demonstrators, seven lead demonstrators and 17 regional demonstrators. This year's lead demonstrators were Emiliano Achaval (Hawaii), Cindy Drozda (Colorado), Tom Lohman (Minnesota), John Lucas (Tennessee), Walt Wager (Florida), Colwin Way (England), and Derek Weidman (Pennsylvania). In addition to the lead demonstrators, the 17 talented regional demonstrators filled the balance of the roster. As usual, the gallery and vendor areas are open for the attendees and free to the public. In addition to the instant gallery, the SWAT

Symposium takes pride in its support of the Beads of Courage, which has run for the past 11 or 12 years at the symposium. This charity effort collects several hundred turned boxes that are donated to local hospitals at the conclusion of the event's instant gallery. These lidded boxes are for children undergoing cancer treatments to store the beads they receive in remembrance of each treatment. In addition to all of the SWAT events, special interest groups including Women in Turning, World of Woodturners, Turners-to-Go and Beads of Courage will also meet during SWAT.

Along with the galleries, demonstrations, and trade show, the SWAT Symposium has a hands-on turning area for those interested in trying out woodturning. With a one-on-one guidance, newcomers with little or no experience are welcomed into the woodturning world by turning their own pen. Not only will they be guided safely on their initial exposure to woodturning but they will leave with a pen made with their own hands.

**7** With meal delivery and service down to an art, the crowd – whether 800 or 1200 – is served and seated quickly. Vendors, already fed, are ready for shoppers when done **8** The trade show has everything, from wood to finishes to tools to equipment. Most of the booths have live demonstrations of their products **9** Some booths have more elaborate demos. Here, Stu Batty tools has one of his teaching demos with a very professional set-up



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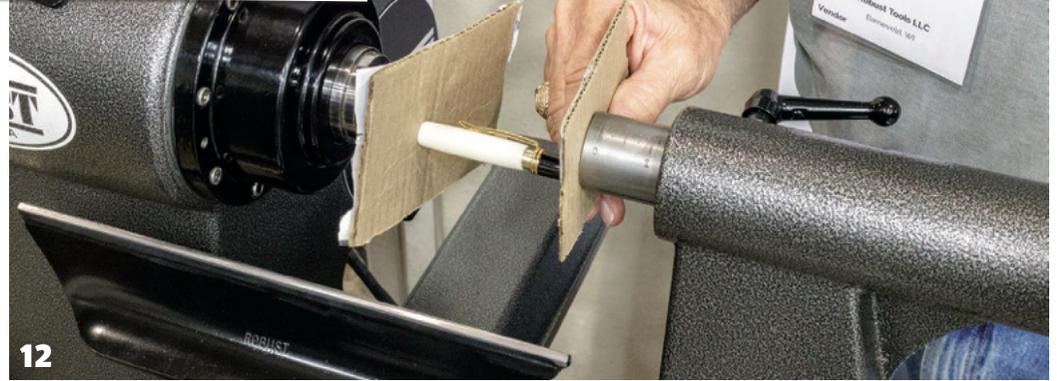
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10 Of course, some of the booths have a bit of a lighter tone. Tim Yoder sets the tone for a lighthearted visit for his live demos 11 A photo from a few years back from one of the SWAT Symposia where I demo'd. A few of my baubles on display in the gallery 12 My friends at the Robust booth lend a hand while I use their fine equipment as pen press to assemble a pen for a customer 13 Always a fun group to be with. From a few years back. Your trade show booth isn't complete unless you pack your banjo. Entertainment for the shoppers!



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## Future plans

The SWAT Symposium is very pleased with its current location. Centrally located enough for the Texas attendees and conveniently located halfway between Dallas/Fort Worth and Austin. The national and international turners have major hubs with all the major carriers for their travel. The ongoing success of the event has made current and future plans to keep the symposium as an annual event rather than considering every other year as some symposia have done. Plans are underway to have the Ornamental Turners International Symposium be part of the SWAT Symposium next year. You can find out more about the Ornamental Turners at <https://ornamentaltourners.org/>. More on this when the plans are settled. Having a great working relationship with the Waco Convention Center is an asset. The new planned convention venue and hotel make its event site even more attractive. Next year's SWAT is already being planned. The dates are Friday through Sunday, August 23-25, 2024. The demonstrators, hotel reservations, and symposium registration will be announced later with the website update planned for January. You can find out more about the SWAT Symposium at <https://www.swaturners.org/>.

## Final thoughts

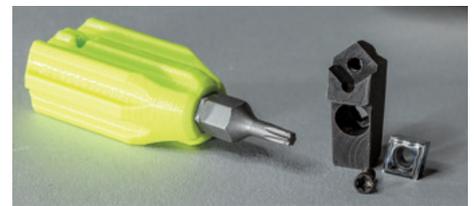
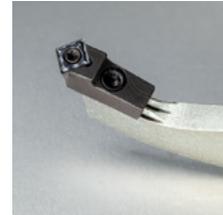
I hope my snapshot tour of the 2023 SWAT Symposia has given you a good look at the Texas event. As with all the symposia, the end is bittersweet. Fun to see the demos, walk (and buy) through the trade show, enjoy meals with new friends and catch up with old friends. When the end comes and things are packed to leave, the weariness is unnoticed as plans are made for next year. The SWAT Symposium is a well-run fun event. If you haven't been there yet, it is well worth getting it on your calendar. Next year promises to be even better with the Ornamental Turners likely to join the SWAT group to hold their symposium concurrently in Waco. As noted, good teachings, good shopping, good dining, and good friends make the SWAT Symposium a must-visit event.

A special thanks to Pam Thompson, the current SWAT president, for her assistance with the historical background information I've used. I certainly appreciate her help.

**14** Not only is the auditorium hall used for the trade show, but vendors are also situated in the hallways to and from the demo areas. Great locations with lots of traffic **15** A bit of a fluke. The area suffered temporary power outage on Saturday causing part of the building to lose some lighting. Emergency power and doors sufficed until resolved **16** Started with an empty hall on Thursday and ended with a soon-to-be-empty hall on Sunday. Amazing how much faster tear-down is than set-up. 'Till next year

**One of the fun parts of any symposium is the trade show. Yes, you can find most of the same things online, but you don't get to examine them up close and personal. The SWAT Symposium had a bumper crop of vendors at the trade show with plenty of new and exciting stuff. I saw two things of particular interest to me – one new and one not so new – but they both piqued my interest.**

The Hunter Korpro assembly. Mike Hunter of [huntertoolsystems.com](http://huntertoolsystems.com) had his array of tools and cutters at his booth. I was interested in the Hunter Korpro for the Oneway Coring System. With several coring rigs for my 12in and 24in swing lathes, I personally struggle with getting and keeping the cutters sharp. Inspired by Glenn Lucas many years ago on the Norwegian Cruise, Mike Hunter has added this concept to his product offerings. My coring is a rare occurrence, particularly with my poor cutter sharpening. Now, with the Korpro, razor-sharp cutter performance is available with no trips to the grinder. The rotatable and then replaceable carbide cutter for coring has been available for a little over three years. You can find more about it at <https://huntertoolsystems.com/product/coring-cartridge/>.



Another item that caught my attention was a relatively new offering from Kallenshaan Woods. The long-time maker of laser cut pen blank kits with over 230 unique offerings has added some new kits. These are a family of pool cue kits along with display stands and a pool ball for decoration. Of course, the pool ball is sized appropriately for the stand and finished pool cue pen. The pool ball supplied with the optional stand is random from 1-15, not

necessarily the eight ball. The currently available kits come in an assortment of five different handle designs, including black diamond, mother of pearl, white diamond, paua abalone, and tulipwood. All are stunning replicas of real pool cues and the tip (soft) doubles as a touch-screen stylus. The stands are in clear or black plexiglass. You can find more about these at <https://www.kallenshaanwoods.com/category/pool-cue-inlay-kits.html>.