

The American Woodshop



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1996

{ meet Scott Phillips }

EVERYBODY SCOTT PHILLIPS!

BY SARAH BRADY

The infectious enthusiasm and solid know-how of this third-generation woodworker won a loyal following for his PBS show, “The American Woodshop.” As the program returns to the air this fall, the talented and energetic host teams up with *Woodcraft Magazine* to bring you some of his all-time favorite projects.

The 2,900-square-foot shop is littered with dozens of projects, most of them complete. This is where Scott Phillips has been shooting the new 14th season of “The American Woodshop,” the how-to show which returns to PBS this fall. About 3,000 board feet of wood in various species are leaned and stacked willy-nilly at one end of the room. Tall cabinets are neatly crammed with modern and antique tools, both large and small. There’s a big turned bowl filled with wooden puzzles, some disassembled, hundreds of parts in all.

It’s funny how, with all this stuff around, nothing has gathered very much dust. That’s not just his formidable dust collection system – it’s Scott himself. Lively and welcoming, he challenges his visitors to name a tool – any tool – and he’ll lay his hands on it in seconds. He darts everywhere, his average frame hefting large pieces of wood, benchtops and furniture with superhuman ease.

A small delegation of *Woodcraft Magazine* staffers visited Scott at his Piqua, Ohio, home and workshop

to catch a glimpse of what the new season of “The American Woodshop” has in store. Over the next year, we’ll bring you six projects that Scott created for the 30-minute show. They all incorporate what he calls “skill-building” techniques; his goal is for those who build the projects to end up with something even more lasting and meaningful than a piece of furniture.

“What I’m all about is sharing ideas with people,” Scott says. “I like to share my skills so people are empowered; so their projects are safer, easier, faster.”

The projects

This issue of *Woodcraft Magazine* includes the first project, a decorative kitchen box based on an antique salt box (page 14). It's a perfect piece for learning to accurately dimension lumber, Scott says. "As you put these pieces together, they have to be planed to a uniform thickness, and they have to be square-cut ... if not, when you put it together, the drawer won't work and the lid won't shut."

Scott says the salt box replica is a great way to learn to S4S (surface on four sides) lumber. With no fancy



THE MINIATURE HIGHBOY JEWELRY CHEST will flex your bandsaw muscles, as it requires precise compound cutting. Scott says his viewers have often requested plans for this piece, and are astonished they are able to create such a beautiful gift on the bandsaw. The carved embellishments are also a fun challenge for an intermediate woodworker.

joinery, it's a skill builder: a step on the way to larger box projects, such as a blanket chest or the dry sink which is also a part of the new season (and based on an antique as well).

If you've watched much of "The American Woodshop," you know Scott



SCOTT RELAXES in a keyed-slab cross-brace chair in the yard between his shop and wood storage barn. His hectic shooting and building schedule leave little time for reflection, but woodworking keeps him sharp and creative.

often finds inspiration in older forms and antiques. Part of this is pure practicality. "Antique [prices] are sky high, and it's getting hard to find what you want," he says. "Why not make your own interpretation?"

One of the most ambitious projects featured in the new season is a highboy based on an 18-century Chippendale design. It's somewhat simplified – after all, its construction must be covered in less than half an hour – but still a great challenge for the average woodworker.

Woodcraft Magazine will publish Scott's miniature (1/6 scale) version of this highboy, a jewelry box. It's a fun project that requires challenging compound cuts on the bandsaw.

"Hands down, this is the project that most people ask me about," says Scott, who's made seven of them as gifts. "This really shows you the possibilities of what a bandsaw can do with a piece of wood."

And what it can do with a scrap pile – the blank for the mini highboy

is glued up from smaller pieces, requiring careful attention to grain direction. Detail carving is another skill to build with this unique project; it's also an art lesson of sorts, a study of the form of an iconically early American piece of furniture.

Beating the curve

Scott's reverence for the past drives him to find and research pieces dating to the pioneers and earlier.

One example is the One-Hour Chair, a cross-brace outdoor piece which folds and locks neatly for winter storage. According to his research, the cross-brace form possibly dates to before Christ and is African in origin, Scott said. The original, made of two keyed slabs, is sometimes called a king's chair. But it has been found to have been used by women during childbirth, and is therefore more appropriately called a birthing chair.

Scott's modern version of the chair still finds its strength and structure in the cross-brace, but uses



THE ONE-HOUR CHAIR requires precise cutting of curved parts, but its time-to-satisfaction ratio is unbeatable.



SCOTT'S ENVIABLE STASH OF LUMBER includes dozens of species of wood – about 30,000 board feet altogether. He stores it in this old barn.

“You can absolutely own any piece of furniture you want by making it yourself.”

galvanized pneumatic nails and multiple slats. The skill builder here is getting the four white oak braces to cross each other properly, which requires accurate cutting of their curves on the bandsaw. “If the curve is wrong, the pieces won’t lock together,” Scott says.

Though in a different way, working with curves is also an important skill developed through building the 1910 Mission coat tree. It’s simply designed, with nine wood components and nine pieces of hardware in all. But its rectilinear form challenges the builder to confront the strength of white oak – the traditional choice for Mission furniture.

“The entire project is spring-loaded.

Each trapezoidal spacer increases in size, and the base is cut at an angle. It will really challenge a person’s dexterity.” It tested Scott’s ingenuity as well; he found duct tape helpful as a clamping aid, a tip he’ll share in the upcoming project article.

Scott’s version also includes a turned apple (of apple wood) captured in the upper section. He’s dubbed the project his “apple tree” and says it’s one of the most useful pieces of furniture he’s ever owned.

Table talk

There are two eminently useful table projects of Scott’s also slated for the



THIS FOLDING TABLE is useful in the home or the workshop.

upcoming year in *Woodcraft Magazine*. One is a small trestle table which would be perfect for a breakfast nook or even for shop use; the other is a folding shop table based on the principle of the TV tray but actually dating to pioneer times.

The trestle table is a manageable size and can be considered modular; use it alone or build more than one for placing side-by-side to form a larger surface. It also knocks down with the removal of only four screws. The main skill to acquire through this project is the cutting and fitting of mortise-and-tenon joints. "You have to learn how to cut this joint sometime in your woodworking career," Scott says. A through-tusk pins the mortise in place, and it's made from a 3/4" dowel rod cut at an angle on the bandsaw; Scott will show you how.

As for the folding table, Scott uses a couple in his shop to keep tools at his fingertips but off the workbench. Its height is 24", somewhere between that of a coffee table and workbench. The builder must master counterboring and countersinking screws for the table to function correctly. Accurate measurement and layout of parts are two other skills to be gained from

this project.

Scott says the design for this table was inspired by a piece he saw at a heritage festival in his hometown, a recreation of an 1812 pioneer rendezvous. "This is a trade table. They



SCOTT HAS BEEN ON THE AIR with PBS for 15 years, 13 of them as the host of "The American Woodshop." The show resumes this fall with its 14th season. As hosts of "The American Homeshop," he and his wife Suzy built their dream home while viewers across the nation watched.

would open this up and lay out their barter items, then fold it up and put it back in the wagon," he says.

Modern-day homesteaders

"The American Woodshop" ceased production two years ago when PBS asked Scott to try filming a new show, "The American HomeShop." This show followed him and his wife, Suzy, as they built their dream house together. Scott says this is "the single most daunting thing a couple could do," but they worked together well and pulled it off with audiences watching every step.

One of Scott's lifetime goals was to build his house with his own hands, which he found required

meticulous time management and 70-hour workweeks. But now, Scott has returned to his workshop. "Basically, I loved doing the furniture show 10 times more than the homebuilding," he says. "The American Woodshop" is shot in his own shop in Piqua, not a studio, which gives the show a large measure of realism. Scott designs his pieces and builds everything himself, except for the help of an occasional woodworker guest on his show. Sometimes Suzy, a scroll saw, intarsia and finishing whiz, also appears.

"A day of shooting requires you to be absolutely on your game. You have to work safely and describe all your activities as you go," Scott says.

A typical half-hour segment takes three days to shoot, but larger projects can take longer. A full-size highboy he recently built for a show took five days to shoot.

"The biggest limiting factor to woodworking is time," Scott says. Many people ask whether he favors hand or power tools and he replies that both are essential. "Ultimately without power tools, we wouldn't have time to build the furniture that we do," he says.

The new season's projects are pieces that will enhance any home, Scott says, including the ambitious full-size highboy. "The neat thing about woodworking is, it's limitless. You can absolutely own any piece of furniture you want by making it yourself."

Taking stock

Making furniture is what Scott Phillips does. He tears through 3,000 board feet of lumber every year, and he has a stockpile of 10 times that much. Like his father, he is a woodworker educated in forestry and uses mostly air-dried wood that he picks by hand. "I like to

THE WOODSHOP where Scott creates his projects and shoots his television show is in Piqua, Ohio. The site includes a field with young walnut trees he planted. "In 100 years, someone can come in and make a selective cut," he says. "It won't be me, but I use wood, and I'm replacing it." Scott has planted thousands of trees; like his father, he holds a degree in forestry.



use boards with fabulous grain, but that means hand-selecting. I only take one out of 50 boards. Sometimes I need flat-sawn, sometimes radial, sometimes quartersawn."

An 1840s barn behind Scott's shop houses much of his treasured stock. He saved it from demolition by hiring a local high school student to help him bring it up to code. He couldn't bear to pass up the 4,000 square feet of storage space for his wood – or the barn's hand-cut chestnut beams.

About 12,000 board feet of his wood stash is walnut, his favorite species, which he gets from a local lumber supplier. Though he buys wood "anywhere and everywhere," much comes from local farmers and sawmills. He always hunts for highly figured boards and interesting grain patterns to enhance his furniture. "I let the wood grain be my palette."

Finding the right species, even the



SCOTT TURNED THIS SMALL PIECRUST-TOP TABLE and carved its ball-and-claw feet. Through his show and writing, he aims to make complex-seeming projects attainable to ordinary woodworkers.

THIS STYLIZED GIRAFFE is a band-sawn puzzle box.



right board, for a given project is a talent Scott has developed over time, but not without the help of some of the country's best woodworkers, friends such as noted period furniture maker George Reid. "We all find people in America who are willing to share ideas," he says. "That's how you grow and evolve as a woodworker."

Scott is a third-generation woodworker. "It all goes back to my father's shop," he says. "It was the busiest place in the neighborhood. It was the place where dreams happened. We could build a skateboard, a boat, a tree house, a go-kart. We all learned good skills early on in life."

Now Scott himself is the fatherly figure who teaches thousands of viewers safer, faster, easier ways to build the furniture of their dreams. He thinks the new season contains his best work yet, projects meant to enhance the home and build woodworking skills all at once. He is thrilled to share his knowledge with viewers – it's his calling.

"The world is so fast-paced, so nuts, so crazy – we have to find time to express ourselves creatively. That's what woodworking does for me." 🌲

Sarah Brady

Sarah Brady is a graduate student at Ohio University and a contributing editor to *Woodcraft Magazine*. In her free time, she enjoys hiking, cooking and reading. She lives in Athens, Ohio, with her fiancé, Matthew, and their dog and two cats.



CHRISTOPHER BELL

"We're Back!"
American Woodshop
with Scott Phillips
Season 14



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You can Build it!"*
– Walt Disney

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