

PALMER SHARPLESS

Visiting the Johnny Appleseed of Turning

DICK BURROWS

PALMER SHARPLESS MIRRORS HIS shop -- warm and friendly, built-for-work and as authentic as the spindles he reproduced for Independence Hall in Philadelphia.

How can any turner resist the lure of a shop crowded with lathes, tools, chunks of wood, posters and banners from old craft shows, and an encyclopedia of spindle types hanging from the ceiling, along with a world-class menagerie of gizmos, gadgets and gee-gaws, all soft and fuzzy with a healthy coat of vintage sawdust. Not enough to cut through the cool feeling that comes from owning a state-of-the-art lathe, a slow-speed grinder and a dust collector? Well, consider the blackened, metal cylinder that gobbles up the cutoffs and keeps the place warm. Surely Ben Franklin scurried up to this one and meditated for a while before going off to design a real stove.

Master of this quirky universe is Palmer, with his trademark bib overalls, and perpetual good cheer.

He bills his business as "Specializing in hand turned spindles and bowls for the crafts market and for architectural use." A nice way to sum up a lifetime of turning, even though he considered himself mainly a teacher and only a part-time craftsman. He and his wife Joan, a weaver, spinner and basket maker, have five children and Palmer said he turned because he just needed the money.

Most of his professional career was invested in the George School in Newtown, PA, where he taught woodshop, graphic arts, technical theater and drafting. Throughout his career he stressed mastery of skills and hand tools, as he worked patiently and diligently through his own work and enthusiasm to teach every student something about why things are beautiful and valuable. You can get a



Palmer Sharpless shows off one of the classic spindles in his never-to-be-duplicated shop, steps away from his home in Newtown, PA

good idea on his philosophy, then and now, in the article on the next page, which he prepared with the help of one of his students, Jill Biros.

Teaching always attracted him, he said, and he especially liked crafts because they foster a spirit of independent thinking and problem solving, provide an outlet for creative energies and help build the skills and confidence needed to get things done.

He started woodworking when he was in the seventh grade. Some of his teachers over the years included some of the best of the old timers in the state: Jake Brubaker, Paul Eshelmann, Jay Webber and Manny Ereez, who was mentor to Albert LeCoff, now head of the Woodturning Center in Philadelphia.

LeCoff, his brother Alan and Palmer started the kind of symposiums that have become such a part of the vitality of contemporary turning. In 1976 when they were planning the first one to be held at George School, they were afraid nobody would show

up. Turning then was what Palmer called "a closet occupation" — every turner worked alone, thinking he or she was the only turner around.

Once the turners got together, the renaissance which would transform turning from a curiosity to a vibrant art form was off and running, with more symposiums, more classes and other activities. When the AAW was formed in 1986, Palmer was on the first board of directors and worked to help organize local chapters in the country. LeCoff was the one that coined the phrase "Johnny Appleseed of Turning" for his teaching and efforts to help other turners.

Palmer retired from the George School in 1984, but he is a consultant to the school, still turns and sells turning and still teaches. His approach to teaching is almost magical. On the day we visited his old school, he was quickly off with the students, talking about their projects, getting them to think, encouraging them.

He always finds something posi-

In Defense of Plain Woodturning by Palmer M. Sharpless

We are seeing increasingly creative, challenging — even tricky — examples of our favorite pastime, woodturning. New tools are being designed to "do the impossible" (with no previous experience). Glues, sandpapers, chemicals and finishes never even imagined a few years ago are showing up in every issue of popular wood working magazines. As a seasoned turner



Palmer's 3-ring circus, fun to turn and to use.

teaching new students, I feel it's important not to let the gadgetry and inventions overshadow the basic joy of plain woodturning.

I am becoming more and more convinced that the real thrill of turning still comes from being in control of bringing out the beauty of the wonderful wood we have available right in our neighborhood. In Bucks County alone, we grow walnut, oak, ash, maple, and many fruitwoods. For the more exotic tastes, we have trees like scholarwood, yew, persimmon, mulberry, box elder, and osage orange. Producing useful and decorative pieces from this wonderful array of wood is the core of my work. As a functional turner, I am able to share the natural beauty and warmth of wood with my customers and collectors.

Chainsaw in hand, a cool breeze at my back, and permission to make lots of noise is good for the spirit and body. (An hour at the gym doesn't even compare to an hour with the saw and a big hardwood trunk.) A bowl given to the tree's owner is often all the cost, and I am rewarded with a pickup truck full of challenges.

Although I seldom turn down a gift of some exotic

wood, I find the real prizes come from the gnarly, strained growth of trees that have shaded lawns and graced hedge rows. The story of their lives — as told through knots, bug holes, and grain pattern — brings color, design strength and character to my plain wooden bowls. Even the refuse of turning has its benefits; barrels of shavings mulch my fruit trees

and soften my woods trail. My vegetable garden has clean, neat paths from which to tend weeds and beans alike.

We turners have much to be thankful for. One of the most rewarding experiences is sharing our knowledge and experience with new turners, both young and old. Teaching the basics of spindle and faceplate turning has brought me much pleasure as I watch students discover their own abilities. Armed with a little knowledge, they venture into their own shops and return to show me plates, legs, bowls, rattles, and yes, even honey dippers.

My students don't need special tools, exotic woods, costly chucks, or a \$5,000 lathe to discover the joys of creative experiences in woodturning. Those things may eventually come along, but meanwhile let's enjoy all that is plain: local wood, clean curves, and flying chips!

Editors note: Palmer wrote this little article with an assist from Jill Biros, one of his students. It has been published in some AAW chapter newsletters, and we asked Palmer and Jill if we could run it in the Journal

tive to say and delights in watching people learn. "I offer them things to consider — in slides, books and in their own lives. I don't want them to make my stool, for example; I want them to make their stool, I never use the word design. I tell them not to make anything without considering appearance and decoration, as well as function.

"I'm not into doing complicated or difficult things. You can always figure a way to do it. I've just reached the point in my life where I can figure easier ways to do it."

The teaching never stops.

"When customers come in, I'm teaching them before they get out of the shop. There's a friendship and attitude that develops in woodturning,"

Dick Burrows is editor of *American Woodturner*.

Thanks to Jill Biros for Palmer's defense of plain turning and to Phil Pratt for providing images from his video on Palmer in the AAW Masters of Woodturning series, which will be released at the St. Paul symposium and can be ordered from the AAW office.