

TIDEWATER TURNERS OF VIRGINIA

Portrait of an Active Chapter

David Heim

AW chapters come in all sizes, from a few dozen members to a few hundred. Some have their own meeting space, while others use donated space. There are even virtual chapters that meet in cyberspace. All the chapters share one vital function: They serve as the centers of knowledge—the best places to go to begin learning woodturning or to learn more about the craft.

My chapter's monthly meetings alternate show-and-tell demonstrations with learn-to-turn sessions, where members gather to practice a specific technique. Other chapters have much more elaborate programs. A case in point is the Tidewater Turners of Virginia, founded in Virginia Beach in 1987. Its ambitious program of tutorials, teaching, and demonstrations reflects the ongoing influence of Myron W. Curtis, the club's 95-year-old cofounder and mentor-in-chief (*see sidebar*).

One special tool

Connie Shiera, the club's secretary, says Tidewater Turners has about 110 members, with sixty to eighty attending the monthly meetings. Most members proudly point to a strong personal connection with Myron. He introduced many of them to turning and brought them into the chapter. Several members go to his shop one or two days a week for storytelling sessions and some time at the lathe. (Myron, a Navy veteran, has an inexhaustible store of what he calls sea stories, packed with references to naval aircraft—from seaplanes to his travels around



Founded in 1987, Tidewater Turners stages eight to ten demonstrations every year at area arts festivals and craft shows. This was their booth at this year's Spring Craft Festival, in March.

Photo: Courtesy of Tidewater Turners

the world as flight chief on Super Constellation planes.)

Nearly every single club member has made his or her own version of Myron's signature tool: A ¼" (6mm) drop-nose scraper. Myron began using that kind of tool in the late 1960s, when he was teaching at a Virginia Beach high school. He

needed new tools for his five classes of woodshop students because they had ground the old ones down to stumps. Regrinding cutters from a metalworking lathe was far cheaper than buying new tools. (The drop nose lets a turner work the tool deep into a cut, Myron explains. It also helps make the scraper stable on the toolrest.) Today, the drop-nose scraper is central to the chapter's work with new members, as board member Terry Richards explains. "Every new member is offered a full day of one-on-one mentoring. We always start by having them make a drop-nose scraper. Then they make something with that tool. At the end of the day they go home with two things in their own two hands that they have made."

In late April, the club's officers organized a surprise birthday picnic and party for Myron. While Jerry

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**— RAYMOND KALLMAN,
TIDEWATER TURNERS
BOARD CHAIR**

Jorgensen, a club member, spirited Myron away on a bogus errand, a crew set up tents and laid out a spread of twenty salads, a dozen desserts, and a large gas grill to cook hamburgers and hot dogs. When Myron and Jerry drove in, some two dozen club members lined the driveway, raising their drop-nose scrapers in salute.

Finding new blood

The club has a strong presence in the area. Board chair Raymond Kallman says, “We do eight to ten public demonstrations a year, with one or two that coincide with the members’ show.” This annual exhibition and sale is held in September at a city-owned gallery. The club also stages demonstrations at the Newport News Festival of Folklife, the Great Dismal Swamp Art Festival, the Virginia Beach Spring Craft Market, and other big area festivals. “We usually set up six to eight lathes and turn,” says Kallman. “Spin tops are always a good way to attract kids. We must have turned thousands of tops by now.”

Board member Terry Richards adds, “You can almost guarantee that you’ll get two or three new members after every demonstration.” These events help draw the attention of women and youngsters, as well as retired men. Women now make up about ten percent of the membership, Kallman says, adding that he would like to see the percentage increase.

Programs for youngsters

In 2010, with Myron’s encouragement, the club conducted a youth turning program the participants named “Sprouting Spindleers.” The six kids in the program made a tool from scratch, grinding a masonry nail into a diamond-point tool. They also got a taste for production turning by completing an order from a local business. The money they earned paid for

the set of shopmade tools that each kid received from club members who supported the program.

Again with Myron’s encouragement, the club began a new youth program in 2015. Seven members work with Melissa Schappell, a visual arts teacher (and club member) at a local high school. Two boys and three girls have participated in a four-session course taught by club volunteers. They began by making a drop-nose scraper (of course), then turning a bud vase, a pen, and an object of their choice. They expect to conduct more sessions through the year. The club established student memberships,

which allowed the kids to be covered under the club’s insurance.

In an email to me, Schappell explained how she came to teach woodturning, with some encouragement from Myron: “I became a member of the Tidewater Turners in the spring of 2015 after seeing them at a demonstration. Ironically, I had just gotten an old Powermatic lathe installed in my classroom after it was removed from another high school. I hadn’t used a lathe before but saw a need for it. One thing led to another, and I was in talks with Ray Kallman about the meetings and club. I kept hearing the name Myron, especially ▶



To honor Myron Curtis, the club’s cofounder, at his surprise 95th birthday party, club members saluted him with the drop-nose scrapers they had made.

Photo: David Heim



After the 21-tool salute, club members and their spouses enjoyed a large potluck picnic spread.

Photo: David Heim



Turning demonstrations never fail to attract children as well as adults. These boys were watching at the Great Dismal Swamp Art Festival, held in October 2015.

Photo: Courtesy of Tidewater Turners

Myron W. Curtis, Mentor

Myron loves woodturning, teaching, and his wife, but not necessarily in that order. Sue Barton Harris, his wife of thirty-seven years, clearly comes first. When Myron mentions her, he uses words like “blessed” and “lucky” to describe their relationship. He sounds like the ordinary guy who still can’t believe he married the homecoming queen.

Early on, Myron learned to trust Sue’s judgment and her eye. An art teacher who taught in the Norfolk, Virginia, schools, she designed the Asian-inspired house they built in the early 1980s in a wooded, secluded area adjoining a wildlife refuge. She also designed many of the balusters, bedposts, columns, and other products Myron has made in his years of production work.

Myron began woodturning as a teenager. In 1937, he built his first lathe, a contraption welded together from sections of water pipe. He still has it, hanging over one of the windows in his shop. Before he became a full-time woodturner, he spent twenty-one years in the Navy as an aviation machinist’s mate, followed by eighteen years of teaching mechanical drawing and woodturning in the Virginia Beach schools.

Myron’s broad shoulders and large hands reflect a lifetime of physical activity. A hearing aid rests behind his right ear. Despite his advanced age, he moves with the steadiness and assurance of someone much younger, whether at the lathe or at the stove cooking hash browns, bacon, and scrambled eggs.

He resembles the actor Spencer Tracy, and he punctuates his endless stream of sea stories with an impish smile. “The thing about a sea story,” he confides, “is that it needs to have been possible.”

At the lathe, however, he replaces the smile with an intense, focused stare and a serious set to his jaw. On the day I spoke with him, he was shaping a long, thick piece of hickory to make a new handle for a peavey. About a dozen tools sat in a pile of shavings on a counter behind the lathe. True to form, though, Myron did most of his work with a ½" (12mm) round-nose scraper that he made himself.

Myron has been a demonstrator at eight AAW Symposia and has taught and studied at the Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. He calls teaching his purpose in life. (“The other purpose in life is the wife,” he says.) When asked who has had the greatest influence on his work, he mentions Del Stubbs as well as “everybody I’ve met so far.” He says, “You learn by watching the students and by the questions they ask.” His wife adds, “Myron is always happy when he can have a class succeed in learning to turn.”

He helped found the Tidewater Turners in 1987 and has been the club’s sage, mentor, and all-around guiding presence ever since. When asked what he wants to be remembered for, it’s the teaching over the turning: “Working with Tidewater Turners and for working with all the students I’ve had,” Myron says.

after making my drop-nose scraper. He heard about what we were doing here and came to my shop with some of the other guys to help come up with curriculum ideas. This past Tuesday, he came in during one of our sessions to show his support and offer more advice.”

Myron’s influence

According to the members I spoke with, Myron has a steady, gentle presence in the club and with individual members. Raymond Kallman says, “Myron will never criticize your work, but he will critique it constructively, to make you understand that there is a better way to do something.” Myron showed Kallman how to turn bracelets, which he says are now a big seller for him.

Pete Summers, who turns canes from the tropical woods used to make shipping crates, met Myron in 2012, not long after he took up woodturning. “I bought one steady rest, and another and another,” he says. “I didn’t really like any of them. Then Myron showed me how to use your free hand to steady the work. I thought I’d burn the calluses off my fingers, but Myron had me try it. Now I don’t use any of the steadies I bought.”

Life after Myron

When I asked several club officers what life would be like without Myron, their eyes widened and their faces froze in expressions of mild panic. Tidewater Turners without Myron Curtis is something they clearly don’t want to consider. Said one, “I think the club would still be around, but we’d slow down a lot.” ■

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(Left) Myron and his wife, Sue Barton Harris, at the surprise birthday party for him in late April.

(Top) Myron is all business when at the main lathe in his shop. Here, he’s turning a hickory handle for a peavey.

(Bottom) A round-nose scraper is Myron’s tool of choice. He has spent more than eighty years at the lathe, most recently as a production turner.

Photos: David Heim