

Anniversary Profiles



Ernie Conover with two examples of his work: a Queen Anne tilting table and barley-twist candlestick, 2013.

What motivated you to join the AAW?

I was part of the group that founded the AAW during "Woodturning: Vision and Concept," the 1985 symposium at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts. Turning had enjoyed a large following for years and needed networking. AAW made that possible. I served on the founding board of the AAW as treasurer, and still hold membership number 004. Dave Hout and I founded the North Coast Chapter of the AAW here in the Cleveland/Akron, Ohio area.

When you look at your pieces from 1986, what do you see?

Mostly I see that I needed to sharpen my tools and



In the thirty weeks leading up to AAW's 30th Anniversary Symposium in Atlanta, we will be sharing the stories of members who joined in 1986 and are still members today. We hope you enjoy their memories and insights!

Click [here](#) to read this and other profiles online.

About Ernie Conover

An accomplished woodworker and well-respected teacher, Ernie Conover is also a recognized expert in the woodworking field with nine books, dozens of videos and hundreds of articles to his credit. His work, which has been featured in solo exhibitions, has received numerous awards. Conover lectures widely for clubs, trade show groups and woodworking stores and is frequently called upon as a consultant and expert witness in the woodworking field. When not writing, lecturing or consulting he is active teaching at Conover Workshops, a craft school founded by the Conover family. He lives in Parkman, Ohio with his wife, the spinner and weaver Susan Conover.

develop a better eye for form.

Who or what was your greatest teacher?

I grew up in a metalworking shop so was a metal turner before I was a woodturner. My father had apprenticed as a tool and die maker in 1927 and was a natural teacher. He taught me to speak fluent Bridgeport Mill and engine lathe and bought me a small engine lathe at age 12.

Without a doubt my foremost woodturning teacher was Rude Osolnik. Not only was he a great mentor, he was a great friend. We were at *Vision and Concepts* together and on the founding board of AAW. Together, we organized the first AAW Symposium in Louisville, Kentucky.

I credit Steve Loar (whose wife Kim is a Conover) with teaching me how to sketch. Leo Doyle (another founding board member) taught me to draw sketches on paper first before going to the workshop.

Most of all I credit books, as I came from a family of craftsmen/readers. There was not the networking in those days, so books were the main source of learning and inspiration. If I had an interest in a subject my mother would take me to the library or one of the many great used bookstores in Cleveland.

My library includes original copies of Holtzapffel's five late 19th/early 20th century volumes on woodturning and Lukin's book of 1868, "The Lathe And Its Uses: Or Instruction In The Art Of Turning Wood And Metal". I have facsimiles of Plumier's Treatise of 1749 and of course Moxon's "Art of Joinery." There are also copies of just about any book published since the late 1950s. I think this love of books drove me to write nine books on woodturning and woodworking, as well as the hundreds of articles (and now videos) I have done over the years.

What do you see as the biggest change in the field?

Equipment has vastly improved to be sure. My father and I had gotten into the turning groundswell in the 1980s by introducing the Conover Lathe, which revived the idea of a user supplied wood bed. Our headstock, tailstock, banjo and tool rests were of solid cast iron. The lathe sported a 16" swing and an unlimited between center capacity. The 1½" - 8 TPI, #3 MT spindle was set in Timken® roller bearings. This was a huge improvement over the typical workshop lathe with a 6" center height and a 1" spindle.

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In 1991, Oneway Manufacturing in Stratford, Ontario introduced their groundbreaking 2436 Lathe. In 1996 my mentor, Rudy Osolnik, convinced Powermatic to build the 3520A, which was based on his Oliver 159. In 1995 Barry Schwaiger, John Arne and I further improved this design, creating the Powermatic 3520B. There have been many more great lathes since. We have better, bigger lathes today at a lower cost.



Testing a prototype Powermatic 3520B at the Powermatic Development Facility. Elgin, Illinois, 2005

With all this technology I still find it soothing to go back in time and do some turning on a spring-pole lathe. I generally do so as part of a reenactment Susan and I do at our local county fair.



Ernie modified plans given to him by Roy Underhill for this spring-pole lathe, sizing it to modern stature. The outboard poppet (tailstock) is a solid piece of cherry. His apprentice at the time also made one and they built stools at the county fair. The two lathes working together drew huge crowds.

I think there has also been a shift from furniture parts, architectural components and utilitarian bowls to using the lathe to make art. That being said, if the turning is less than skillful, the art is still ugly in the morning.

What are your favorite projects/pieces?

I have always been a cabinetmaker with a turning problem. Therefore, much of my work is either furniture enhanced by turnings or interior design incorporating architectural turnings. My favorite pieces draw on my machinist background and require very accurate layout, precise turning and exact diameters. This is probably why I enjoy turning boxes so much.

Photo 5 Susan at Great Wheel2.jpg and Great Wheel Flyer 5827.jpg and/or Great Wheel Hub 6830.jpg: My wife Susan is an avid spinner and weaver, and we have done a bit of reenactment at our local historical society. Many years ago I made this great wheel for her from curly cherry. An early 18th century example would have had bearings turned from cow bone, but I put Timken needle bearings in the wheel. The wheel was of such low friction that it had dead spots and would even turn backwards if the spinner took a break, so I had to static balance the wheel by placing lead anchors in the end of the appropriate spokes. I made a hand-dovetailed wooden case in walnut to house the flyer and posts during transport or storage.



In 2006 Ernie made this Sheridan-style bed in curly cherry for himself and his wife, Susan. The matching 8' 3" posts were cut from the same log; they milled out to a full 4" square. In 2006 prices there is \$1,400 worth of wood in the bed; the headboard is one piece and all of the rails are solid. The inlays are crotch satinwood veneer. He sawed the posts in half and joined them in the middle with a steel pin to facilitate transport. The coverlet shown was made by Susan Conover.



Ernie's interpretation of a Shaker rocking chair. Curly maple, French polish.

If you could give your 30-year younger self some advice about being a turner, what would you say?

Learn to sharpen your tools; not only do they need to be sharp, but their shape is equally important. Do not soldier on with inferior tools; it is false economy. Buy high-speed tools from a quality maker, but even with the best tools you will not be a turner until you have 10,000 hours under your belt.

To learn more about Ernie Conover and his work, visit www.conoverworkshops.com

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