

Gilmanton Woodworker Takes Pride In His Work

By TROY L. MERRICK
Staff Writer

He builds and restores furniture to endure the test of time.

Bill Norell of Gilmanton has been working with wood since high school and now toils in a small shop at his home on Smith Meetinghouse Road, restoring antiques and other pieces and constructing items from scratch.

Norell has been working with wood since high school and now toils in a small shop at his home on Smith Meetinghouse Road, restoring antiques and other pieces and constructing items from scratch.

And he takes the time to do it right. Wood, Norell will tell you, is his life.

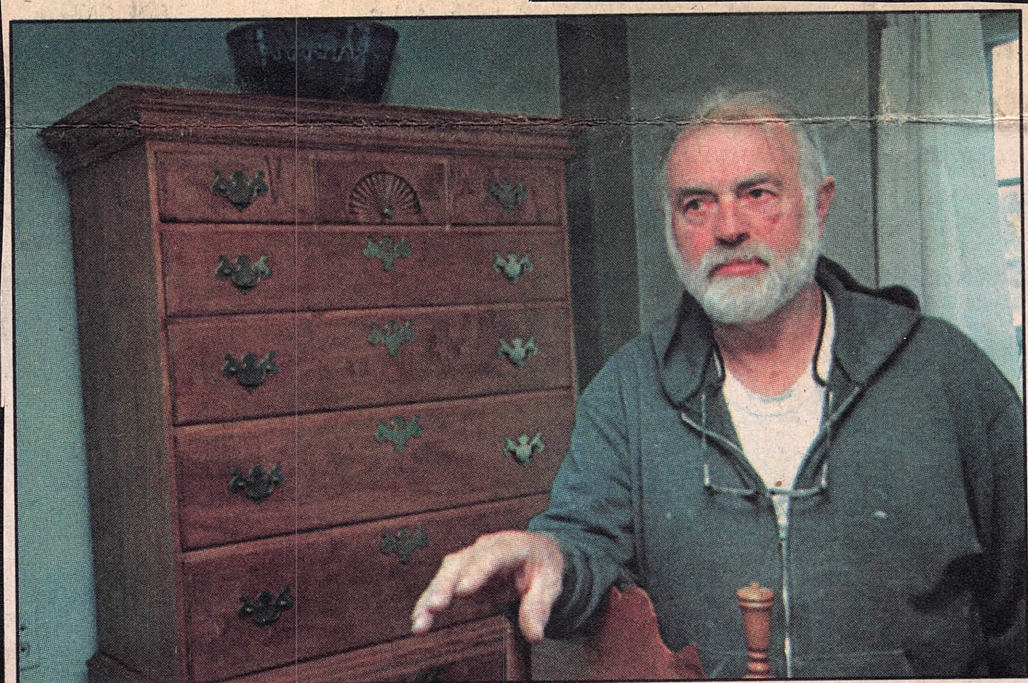
"They say measure twice, cut once. I'll measure four times, cut once," he said while describing the long hours — here and there over five years — and various steps in building the attractive highboy that dominates a corner in his dining room. "If you don't do it right, you're all done. You only get one cut.

"You need to think and look at the wood, think about what you want. One guy said, 'I ought to pay you a retainer for what you're always thinking about.'"

Many pieces are held together primarily with dovetailed ends. The highboy involved *many* of them, to say the least.

"You count all those dovetails. To tell you the truth, I was getting sick of it," he said of

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 22, 1998



the work involved in making them.

He recalls one of his first products, a serving tray with a ship's anchor inlaid into the middle.

The inventory has since grown immensely.

"Instead of watching stupid football games on the weekend, here's what I do," he says, pointing with pride to the highboy and the dining room set in the middle of the room. Other items fill his three-room house, which, as far as he can figure, dates to 1830.

And Norell cannot tell a lie; he chopped down the cherry tree, the one on his property that had been damaged by January's ice storm. From it came the head chair at the table.

Doing It the Old Fashioned Way

He offers a firm, almost painful handshake from years of working primarily with hand tools, which was all woodworkers and furniture makers had before the Industrial Revolution. One of his pet peeves, he said, is the misconception some have regarding what constitutes an antique.

He said that there are many furniture makers reproducing antiques, and so well that many antique dealers are duped.

"Is it too perfect?" he said. "Remember, all (woodworkers then) had were hand tools, a lot of hand lathes."

Observing the turned pieces in the chair, he said that the turning element is his favorite part of woodworking. Often, however, some parts, like legs, are worth making if there will be a large number of them, but not worth the time if he's only creating one.

"Sometimes it's not worth the time to make the jig," he said.

A total of six projects in various stages of completion dot the woodshop, including a reproduction of a horse-drawn milk wagon for a customer to replace one that had rotted significantly, a bureau, a slant-top desk he is repairing and a the surface of a Queen Anne table damaged by a small fire.

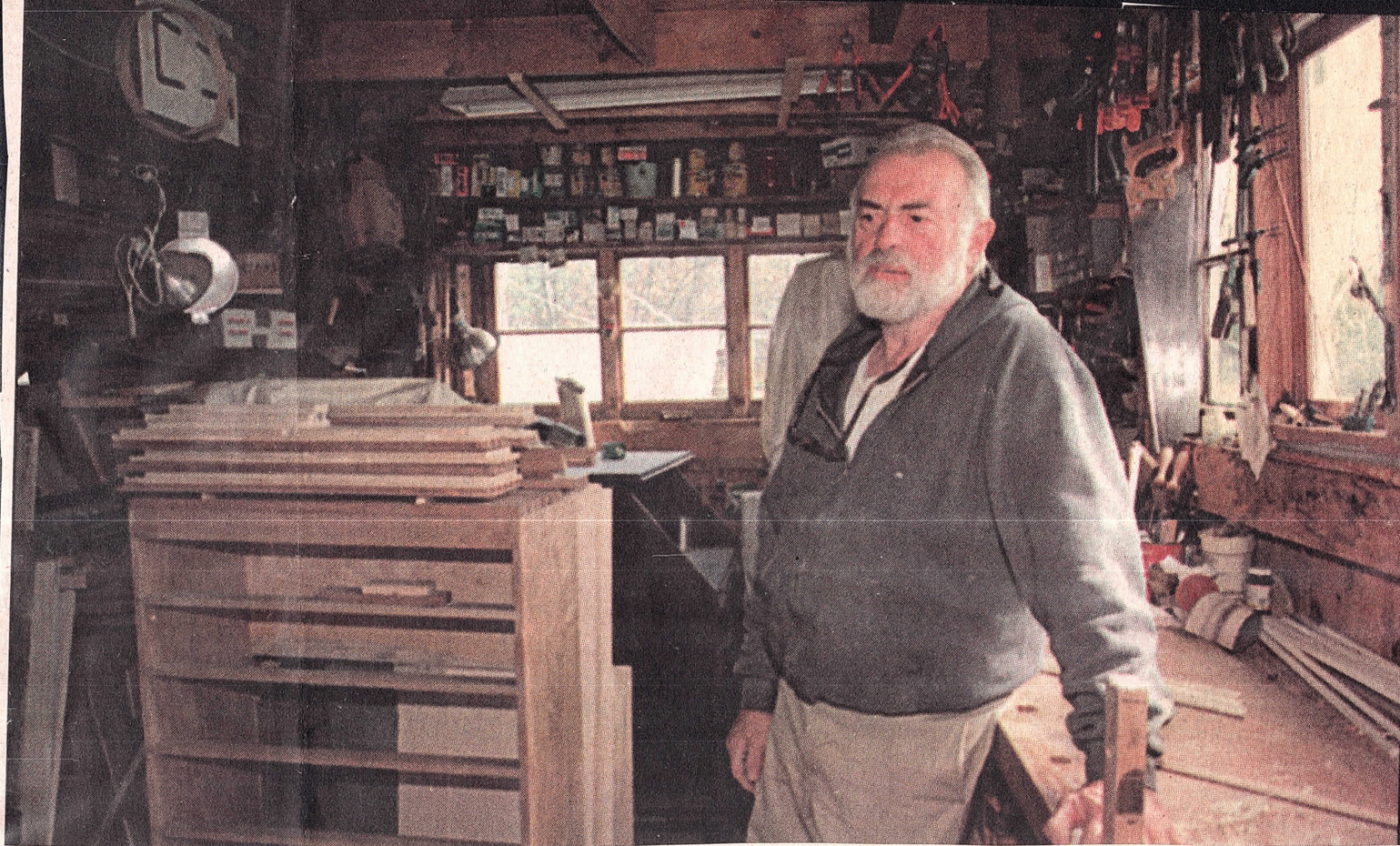
The carriages he works on in tandem with Bill Lavoie, also of Gilmanton, who handles the finish detail and painting of the masterpieces.

He recently took an order from a couple in Washington who wanted a fancy toybox for their daughter.

Business is all word of mouth. He doesn't advertise and he isn't part of any woodworkers guild. He works alone.

And for the most part, he learned from reading books on the trade and watching the work of others. Asked if he has passed his deep knowledge of the craft on to an apprentice or two, he said that too many want to invest the time, and that there is too strong a reliance on machines today.

"There are so few people willing to learn, I mean from the bottom. How to sand a piece of wood properly. Everything has to be machines. They do save a lot of work,



■ NORELL,

From Page 17

though," he said.

Time Is Not of the Essence

Notwithstanding the tool, Norell doesn't hurry a project for any reason. For anyone.

"You come in and tell me you need something now, I won't talk to you," he said. "That's not how I work. The toybox, for example, though, if (the couple) said they needed it by Christmas, I would say I would do my best.

"But someone comes in and demands they want this, and they want it done now, I say 'I can't help you.'"

He said that when he started out, he took on a wider scope of projects. Now, he can afford to be somewhat more selective.

"To make a living, I have to take in a variety of things," he said.

The request to build, reproduce or repair a piece involves some exchange of information.

If a customer requests a chest of drawers, for example, Norell will have a few questions: How tall, how wide, how many drawers? Dark or light wood? Where will it be placed in the home? Heat, moisture and time all can be a detriment to furniture, whether ornamental or utilitarian.

"Some people don't really understand," he said, recalling a grandfather clock he restored some time ago. "You put something over a hot air register and the glue dries out and it just collapses. It's amazing the way some people will abuse a piece."

In order to tackle a reproduction, he needs to see it. What wood is used in the original?

"I may not be able to get the wood to

match it," he said. "Until I see how it's constructed, I just can't tell."

Sometimes, all he requires is the concept of what the customer wants.

"If they even have a sketch, all I need is the idea and I'll work from that," he said.

He has a customer in Washington to whom he plans to ship a table leg to ensure that's the design the client wants. He keeps multitudes of moldings around for customers to select, and he knows which is appropriate for a particular piece.

"This one doesn't look right at all, there are no (correct) edges to it," he said, looking over one example up against the bureau he's working on. "It'd be like putting a fancy tie on an old, ugly T-shirt."

He receives much of his work from antique dealers around the area. He himself worked for a Tilton shop that burned down many years ago.

Some projects he works on because of the value it holds for its owner.

"Some people bring in things that hold sentimental value, and the cost doesn't mean anything to them," he said. "But sometimes if (an item's) retail value is \$200 and I charge you \$200 and you paid \$50 for it to begin with, well, that's economics."

With the variety of furniture, each from a different period, each day tends to be a little different from the next.

"It could be something from the 1700s in the morning and something from this century in the afternoon. I could be building a new piece in the morning, and while the glue's drying I'll be on another," he said.

He's also constructed frames for couches, worked on homes, and built an entire set of kitchen cabinets for a Gilford customer.

"Some of these things I've had as a dream in my head for 20 years," he said. "All it takes is an idea."