



Times

Building a Dream from Wood

Tidewater

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By Helen Chappell

“Were finally ready for you! My friend Ginger Dixon announced on the phone. When can you come up and see us?”

For years, I'd been following the progress of Jim and Ginger Dixon's dream---their own business, making museum-quality 18th-century style furniture and furnishings. Traditional Enterprises was the subject Ginger and I always discussed when she was my hygienist. As a lover of antiques and an admirer of cabinetmakers, I enjoyed hearing about each step of the Dixons' long-held dream. When Ginger left my dentist's office to work full time in the business, I knew I would miss her, but I also understood that opening their own workshop meant everything to them. And, of course, a good column for me.

Traditional Enterprises, LLC is tucked away in the Hurlock Industrial Park. From the moment you come up the walkway, you know this isn't just another manufacturer. The front of the building is beautifully landscaped, setting the scene for your entrance into the showroom, where a bounty of richly crafted furnishings greets you.

The elegant lines of a grandfather case clock, the smooth roll of a Massachusetts-style bowfront chest of drawers, a beautifully crafted tilt top table, a shell carved highboy, a claw and ball-footed tea table, and lovingly finished tea chests all make me feel as if I've stepped back into the workshop of a cabinetmaker of an earlier time. The gleaming depths of finished mahogany and tiger maple catch the light from a Chippendale mirror. All have a harmony of line and light that captivates me immediately.

In my day, girls took Home Ec, and boys took Shop and ne'er the twain would meet, or else I might have become a furniture maker myself. It's an art I truly admire. Not just the precision of joining, the working with woods, but the carving. The scallop shell decoration, a rising phoenix, the fantastic elegance of an open claw and ball foot fascinate me, as do the people who can make these beautiful things.

Ginger emerges from her busy office and greets me warmly, then introduces me to her husband Jim, and his brother Matt Dixon and we start the tour. In their busy office, a wall is lined with books on antiques and furniture making, a collection I immediately covet.

“We also use the internet, visit museums and private collections, and of course, Antiques Roadshow is one of our favorite programs,” Jim says. An award winning waterfowl carver since high school, the transition to furniture came easily for him.

“Nearly a decade ago, while working for a furniture company where his carving talents and skills were not being used, Jim decided that he wanted to start his own business creating the ultimate 18th century heirloom reproduction collection. He also wanted to create a business where people would enjoy working in a family-like atmosphere with the comforts of home,”

Ginger explains as we settle in the office for a moment. “We have the whole building environmentally controlled. Even in the workshops where most other companies do not, we try to keep the temperatures comfortable. We have heated floors and A/C in every room.”

“As we all know, starting a new business takes a lot of time and money and planning, but with the support of our families, we decided that the time had come,” Jim says, settling himself in his chair. “The first thing we had to do was decide what we really wanted to do and with what tools we would want to use.”

“Over the years, our plan grew from a small shop of 2-3 people with minimal technology to about a dozen full- and part-time people in a much larger building with some of the most advanced software and machinery available to help us affordably create the finest line of furniture and accessories that has fine hand crafting and quality finishing. After seeing the poor quality of some of the furniture available today, we want people to be able to buy quality, well-made furniture and accessories that are made 100% in the USA.”

“After deciding on the size of the building, we had to find a location and the Hurlock Industrial Park in Hurlock, Maryland, in Dorchester County, was the winner. The town of Hurlock and the Mayor and Council members have all been very helpful.”

I admire a ladder-like device, which is part of a strawberry tower, commissioned by another company. Imagine such an elegant planter in your own garden, loaded down with ripe red strawberries and their deep green foliage.

Ginger picks up the thread. “After purchasing the 4-acre property, it took another year to get it ready, the building up and all the machines ready to go. We have spent the past year developing our line of furniture as well as learning several software programs.”

“We have not advertised until recently, but by word of mouth people and businesses have found us and now we are doing even more than our original plan included. We are now making custom items - mantels, murals, yard ornaments - and turning and cutting out parts for other companies as well as finishing cabinets and more.”

“We have a profile knife grinder and our full-time machinist, Mike Martin can create knives and sharpen knives for shapers and routers in one day for us and other companies instead of 3-4 week wait we used to have with other companies. We also have lathes and a carving machine that can help create wonderfully carved parts like our ball and claw legs on our tea table.”

“Our full time carver, John Dadds, then takes the roughly carved parts and hones them into great works of art.”

“One of our mottoes is 'If you can dream it, we can make it.' With any idea, drawing or photo we can custom create anything out of wood, even plastic. We love a challenge and our whole team works hard to pay close attention to detail; nothing is too small to overlook when it comes to finishing any project.”

“Lynn Holliday, my best friend, helps us with the research required so that we can know everything there is to know about styles and techniques, so that we can authentically recreate the masterpieces of the craftsmen of the past. Some of the wood that we use, we have been collecting for the past ten years, just waiting for the right piece of furniture to use it.”

Next door is the computer room. Yes, the computer room. Here, using the same software employed by NASA and Disney, I watch brother Matt Dixon, one of the designers, demonstrate how each piece is designed and refined on screen, before being sent to the machines in the shop. With a few clicks of the mouse, Matt shows me all three dimensions of a chest of drawers on the screen. The image appears in 2- and 3-D, from every angle. Space age technology brings the 18th century into your home. Since I can barely download my own email without three guides and a roadmap, I'm fascinated.

And I'll bet John Goddard, John Townsend and Thomas Chippendale, those master cabinetmakers of yore, would have embraced this technology if it had been available to them. Imagine working out all your design and construction issues on a computer before you touch a single piece of wood.

From the computer room, its on to the light, clean workshop, where enormous machines are told by the computer what to do. Ginger points out a loom like piece, one of the machines run by assistant shop manager, Monty Holliday, that can carve out two dozen claw and ball legs or other parts at once.

The CNC(Computerized Numerical Control) Router and other machines help cut out parts, but the final building and finishing is done by hand. “We have been very fortunate to find a great group of people to work with us, so many that have a good eye for detail. Take for instance, Mike Martin and Carl Ewing, who cut and assembles many of the pieces. With their good eyes for detail, they help maintain quality control and assure that every detail is precisely correct before any project goes to the customer”.

Carver John Dadds removes his particle mask long enough to show me how he takes the roughly carved tea table leg and refines it into the elegant, finished claw and ball foot I admire so much.

Jim proudly shows a carved 74” by 30” solid mahogany mural for the Talbot County Law Library featuring the scales and balances symbolizing justice, and a beautifully wrought mantel custom-ordered for a client, simply and elegantly decorated with a vine motif. In a few hours, it will be installed in the home of a very happy client.

The mantel has been completed in the finishing room, where state-of-the-art technology is used to apply paints and varnishes to the finished pieces, by shop manager, Marc Stockley. Again, the space is light and immaculately clean.

I pause to admire a faux tortoise shell finished tea chest, and covetousness creeps into my black little heart.

“We now have several tables, desks, chests, jewelry boxes and tea caddies, as well as a corner cabinet and mirrors, a highboy and clocks, all made in a variety of hand-selected woods with several options of finishes and hardware,” Ginger says. “On average, it takes us six to eight weeks to complete the more elaborate pieces.”

“We welcome special orders from businesses and private collectors, from furniture to mantels and from murals to bookcases and plaques. Again we love a challenge,” Jim adds. “We want to create the ultimate heirloom, museum-quality furniture and accessories, as well as to network with other businesses, such as interior designers and woodworking companies, and pool all our resources and talents to offer clients the best made in the USA products and services.”

I am fascinated by the way Jim and his team have combined the beauty of another time with the technology of the 21st century. And I'm pleased that Traditional Enterprises is doing well, with both individual and corporate clientèle, as well as special orders. It's always a good thing to see good people succeeding at a dream.

But for me, the crowning success of this shop is the soul that goes into the work. It takes a special eye and a great love of design to be able to accomplish these wonderful works of art. Without that, these would all just be sticks of furniture or pieces of wood.

Jim attributes the fulfillment of his dream to the family atmosphere. In addition to Matt, another brother Chris, will soon join the team, and both his and Ginger's parents add support, encouragement and work. Both Ginger and Jim also value their work family.

“For any creative endeavor you have to be willing to put in some effort,” Jim says of making his dream come true, “developing an idea or laying the groundwork for ideas to come.” He admits, “We have many motto's and words of inspiration. We believe in the power of positive thinking and that with God all things are possible!!”

For more information, you can reach Traditional Enterprises, LLC at 410-943-1005, or visit their Web site at www.traditionalenterprises.com.