

Patience for perfection

Story and photos by Jeff Moreland

Jim Dixon is a patient man, and far more patient than most people might be when deciding to start a new business.

With a lifetime of experience as a wildlife sculptor, Dixon also harbored an interest in fine furniture. He always knew some day he would like to operate a shop where he would reproduce the masterpieces of American furniture, but knew it would take time to prepare a shop to do the job well, and the way he knew it needed to be done.

"I'm a wildlife sculptor by trade. That's what I used to do, but I've always been interested in traditional furniture," he said. "I made a living out of the carving, but decided to shift gears out of the carving and get into the furniture. At that point, I decided to save up for this particular time when I could put the company together."

The company Dixon referred to is Traditional Enterprises, owned and operated by him and his wife, Ginger, in Hurlock.

He knew it would take an investment of capital and time to be at the level he wanted his business to be, and Dixon was willing to wait until he was completely prepared. That wait, as it turned out, would be nine years.

"I'm patient," he said simply. Patient indeed.

Reproducing fine furniture is not uncommon, according to Dixon, but having the will and determination to do it with the respect and craftsmanship he feels is necessary is another thing.

"It's quite common for people to reproduce traditional furniture, but there aren't a lot of people out there who are willing to push the envelope and put the painstaking detail into it," he said.

When he starts a project, Dixon and his team, which he described as "10 or 12 of us," hand-select each board and evaluate its quality for the project. It may sound a bit excessive, but when reproducing perfection,

See PATIENCE, page 10



These three table legs, above, represent the three stages of reproduction of classic furniture, according to Jim Dixon, owner of Traditional Enterprises. The left leg shows a master, from which the resin cast in the center was created. The leg on the right is the final product to become part of the finished work, which is a reproduction of a Chippendale table from 1760. The original table recently sold at auction for \$8.416 million.

At left, John Dadds, a carver with Traditional Enterprises, works on the details of a project. Dadds joined the company to utilize his art skills in detailing pieces for the company.

Photos by Jeff Moreland





Matt Dixon works with the software used by the company to help in the creation of a traditional piece of furniture. Matt moved to Maryland from Florida to work with his brother at Traditional Enterprises. Jim said the software normally takes around a year to master, but added that Matt is well ahead of that pace.

Photo by Jeff Moreland

PATIENCE

Continued from page 8

there is no such thing as excessive. A project the team is currently working on is a reproduction of a vintage Chipendale scalloped-top tea table. The original was created by John Goddard of Newport, Rhode Island in 1760, and recently sold at an auction through Sotheby's, a famous auction house, for \$8.416 million. The table was purchased by Albert Sack, of whom Dixon said, "He's like E.F. Hutton. When he talks, people listen."

The table was referred to by the Keno brothers, who are experts in the field of traditional furniture, as "The Holy Grail of American furniture."

Dixon said there are only six originals of this form of table. The table being done by Traditional Enterprises, LLC is taking the best details from each of the 6 originals, combining them to create an extraordinary original table "emulating the masters of the past"

So how does he get such detail and quality? It's a mix of skill, determination and technology.

Traditional Enterprise employs people with backgrounds in art, woodworking, tooling and other fields, and Dixon said he feels he has put together a great team.

"It's more like a family. We are all co-workers. It's not an employee-employer relationship," he explained.

In addition to the close-knit atmosphere, technology plays a role as well. In an age when computers are everywhere, the woodworking industry is no different. Dixon said his company uses the same software as Walt Disney, Boeing and NASA to capture every detail of the original masterpiece and create the details down to perfection.

"The woodworking industry will not even consider this type of software because it's so pricey," Dixon said. "But the results you can get out of this software, being able to show the client what it's going to look like right there, you just can't achieve that from a drawing."

The extra effort Dixon put into the venture has already

See PATIENCE, page 12

proven to be worthwhile. With less than a year under its belt, Traditional Enterprises is already doing business around the world, and only recently placed its first ad.

"We're doing a project for a client in the United Kingdom and making miniature furniture for them," he said. "They want the anatomy right on, and they are going after the best of the best pieces."

His business is primarily furniture, but Dixon has recently worked for computer giant Microsoft and other large companies. Still, that is not the most unique project by far.

"We made the Channel 9 Guy," he said.

A television station in Washington state, yes, you guessed it, Channel 9, contacted Traditional Enterprises to create a pair of five-foot replicas of their tiny foam Channel 9 Guy hand-outs.

"We made them out of an exterior product because they were going to be used outside," he said.

So how does a small company do so much business with little advertising? Dixon said it's just word of mouth.

"Our vendors are talking, our insurance people are talking, and the word is getting around about how unique our company is and how much attention we pay to detail. We are very diversified," he said. He added

that the company averages about three new projects coming in the door each week.

Dixon is interested in creating custom furniture, but his company also provides services. Since he commonly has a need for specially made parts for his machinery, such as custom knives for the shapers, routers and other tools in the shop, he decided to invest the money to be able to produce those tools himself rather than depend on someone else to make them. In turn, he decided it would be a good idea to put that machinery to even more use and produce parts for other companies as well. He purchased a profile grinder and solved both issues.

"A lot of companies have to wait three weeks or more to get a profile router bit made. A lot of times for us, when we're in a situation where we need the router bit in a hurry, we don't have the luxury of waiting three weeks," Dixon said. "Our company not only creates fine furniture and unique products, but products and services for other businesses as well." Some of Traditional Enterprises' services include custom woodworking and finishing, architectural mill work, turnings, duplicarvings and with the profile grinder, they are able to create and sharpen custom profile knives.

Dixon said having his own grinder in the shop allows him to turn around an order for a customer in less than a day, opposed to that three to six-week wait.

All finishing is done in a special



Jim Dixon, owner of Traditional Enterprises, looks over the details of his company's reproduction of a porringer table. This type of table was used for serving food such as soups in bowls, according to Dixon. The corners of the table are rounded to the shape and size to hold a bowl.

Photo by Jeff Moreland

modernized room with a custom-built spray booth. All of Traditional Enterprises services are performed in an environmentally controlled facility with heating and A/C throughout. With their state-of-the-art CAD/CAM software they can do 2D and 3D CAD drawings and more for other businesses. With the state-of-the-art machinery, such as the custom-built CNC router and craftsmen with over 100 years of combined experience, Dixon said "if you can dream it, we can make it".

With his dream up and running, yet nowhere near complete, Dixon said he is appreciative of those who have supported him. He said his father-in-law and mother-in-law have both been there for them as they have opened the doors of Traditional Enterprises, as well as government officials in Hurlock and Dorchester County.

"The council members have come to us not only as a group, but individually, and said if there's anything they can do for us, let them know," Dixon said. "Also, the mayor is excited, too. We are excited to be part of the community here in Hurlock and look forward to continuing to grow and be a major asset to others."



Jim Dixon and his co-workers at Traditional Enterprises pose with some of their work. From left are, John Dadds, Carl Ewing, Mark Stockley, Matt Dixon, Jim Dixon, Monty Holliday and Mike Martin.

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On the Web:

www.traditionaleenterprises.com