



# Turning professionally

Kurt Hertzog talks to professional turner Willie Simmons

**Many of us take up woodturning as a hobby and, for some, it forever remains a hobby and may or may not involve selling to subsidise expenses. However, it's rare that a serious hobbyist hasn't thought about doing it as their main job. This issue, we'll do a Behind the Scenes on a professional woodturner – Willie Simmons who is located in the small town of Fincastle, VA.**

Willie Simmons' first experience with the wood lathe was in his dad's woodshop. His father was a professional woodworker who made mainly furniture such as corner cabinets. As such, his need for the wood lathe was almost non-existent. He did get a Sears tubular style lathe and, before it even got installed, eight-year-old Willie managed to get his hand jammed in it. Smarting from this early experience, Willie didn't touch a lathe for nearly 20 years after that.

At 25, Willie began working for his father in the cabinet shop – his main task was refinishing. As the demand for refinishing chairs grew – with many needing repair–

Willie's dad pointed him to the lathe. His total training consisted of: 'Make a new rung that looks like the other rung.' So Willie did spindle turning for the first 10 years he worked there. During that time, he became a woodshop teacher at one of the local school districts, but continued to work for his dad and ultimately left teaching after seven years.

He found he could do as well refinishing chairs as he could teaching with far more satisfaction.

After leaving teaching, Willie became a magistrate for the Commonwealth of Virginia. Living in the county seat of Botetourt County with a historic courthouse, his shop is within sight of his work for Virginia. It took special permission from the state for Willie to continue his business as a woodturner and still be a magistrate. Having received the OK, Willie began and continues his two full-time careers.

With the move from teaching to magistrate, Willie and his dad separated the businesses and, though they

shared the building, each had their own enterprises. Willie eventually stopped the refinishing portion and went completely into spindle turning. Having repaired chairs for years, including making replacement parts, Willie began making chairs and stools. Upon his father's retirement, Willie made furniture while continuing his turning work, but he ultimately gave up the furniture work because it was too heavy for a one-man shop.

## CRAFT SHOWS

Willie has been doing craft shows for more than 30 years, first with his father and then on his own. Back in the early '90s, Willie's product line for the shows included stools, cutting boards, bottle stoppers and pens. Over the years, he and his wife, Brenda, have done as many as 15 shows a year to as few as five. They try to keep their show commitments to the immediate region with a drive time of less than a day. While he is capable of very sophisticated turnings, Willie finds that

PHOTOGRAPHS BY KURT HERTZOG



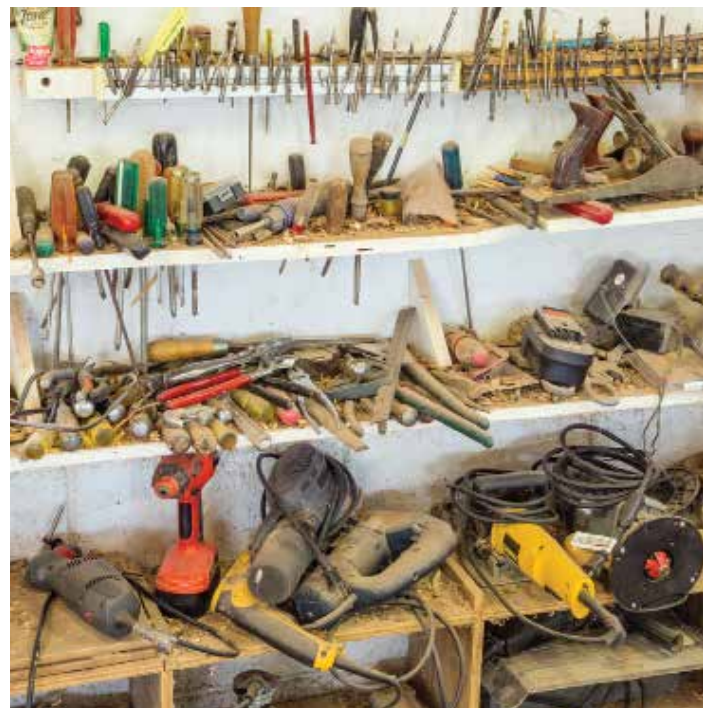
This simple, faded sign on the roof of a building along the highway is the only way you'd know there was a woodturning shop in Fincastle



Willie Simmons has been at the same location for 30 years



With a large part of Willie's turned items feeding the craft shows he does, colour ply is popular so it is the material of choice for now



As a no-nonsense production shop, tools are at hand and are workhorses. What's needed is there without any extras or fancy tools



the simple items sell best at craft shows. As a production turner, he creates items that are at a price point where they are a simple impulse buy and are small enough that they aren't burdensome to carry. The peppermills, seam rippers, cutting boards, ikebana, and the like move well and make the shows profitable.

Willie does a considerable amount of architectural turning as well. He will take jobs turning several hundred spindles for a porch or stairwell restoration as well as custom lamps and everything in between. Often his work is contract work for high-end merchants offering custom walking sticks, designer home furnishings, or restoration projects. Currently, the architectural turnings are becoming a larger part of his business. The past mix of 80% of his business being the show circuit is changing to a 50/50 mix as the architectural opportunities present themselves.

### SECURITY

With his magistrate's job providing the security of health care and a retirement, Willie can work at his turning career as he sees fit. He loves turning and takes on the challenges of projects with the joy of learning. He's learned what works for him in the show circuit. Being selective on which shows he does and catering to the price point and size of the attendees of those shows lets him do as few as five shows a year and still be successful. He does sell at the shop and via his website – both make up a small part of the business, but certainly help.

Willie has been active in the local American Association of Woodturners chapters for many years and has served as officer in those he belongs to and is a frequent demonstrator as well. Willie was a demonstrator at the AAW Symposium in Tampa and at the Totally Turning Symposium in Saratoga Springs, NY in March, 2015. ●

**You can find out more about Willie Simmons and see his work at [www.wpswoodturning.com](http://www.wpswoodturning.com)**



Stools, foot stools and other woven items are an outgrowth of Willie's days doing chair repair. These are inventory for coming shows



Stools and 'non-art' bowls are good sellers during craft shows and are at price points to tempt the buyer without agonising and small enough to carry



Contract work is a part of Willie's business. Here, high-end walking sticks dry after finishing