

Behind the Scenes

with Kurt Hertzog



Conover Workshops

When you think of those who teach woodturning, there are several names that just come to mind—the turners who have been in the woodturning arena for many years as teachers, writers, demonstrators, video producers, and usually the early pioneers. A name that probably every woodturner would put into that category is Ernie Conover. Easily recognized by nearly every turner and by many of the woodworkers as well, he is widely known in both areas.

Ernie has been a woodworker and woodturner since childhood. He worked during the summers in his dad's business, learning metal turning, woodturning, pattern making, and more. His college and military service years did take a bit away from his turning and woodworking, but his return to civilian life in 1971 led him to Parkman, Ohio, where he purchased the house and barn that he still calls home. After a few years in the automobile business and with the encouragement of Rich Leichtung, Ernie began the Conover Woodcraft Company (no relationship to the Woodcraft Supply LLC company) in 1975. Ernie's company made tools that he had designed for Michael Dunbar, Brookstone, Woodcraft, and other manufacturers and resellers. During those years of designing threading and woodworking tools, Ernie, his father, and another designer created the Conover lathe. Many may remember the Conover lathe for the wooden lathe bed that could be built by the end user at any length needed.

The next step was the school, which got its start in 1982 at nearby Hiram College. Michael Dunbar had been urging Ernie to begin teaching. He thought it would be a great idea if people buying his tools could learn about those tools and their proper use, and develop a mastery of them. In the early days, the classes only ran during the summertime and were available for six weeks each year. The classes continued at Hiram College until 1990. In 1990, Ernie sold the Conover Woodcraft Company to a company in Cleveland, Ohio, and converted the barn from his manufacturing company to a year-round woodworking school. Now known as Conover Workshops, classes have continued from 1990 until today. Ernie is careful to call the facility a workshop rather than a studio. He is a woodturner and woodworker in his mind, not an artist; hence, it is a workshop.

The Conover Workshops in Parkman, Ohio, usually runs five to six classes a year featuring both woodworking and woodturning classes. Each class is limited to eight students maximum in order to ensure plenty of individual attention.

In addition to the five or six regularly scheduled classes, there are ten to fifteen private class sessions. These are held for individual students, up to three maximum, on their own chosen topic. These multiday classes can be skill or project focused, and the students have the run of the entire facility. A typical turning class might be a weekend class on turning fundamentals that runs two days. The following weeklong class might be a split between spindles and faceplate work. That class might be followed by a two-day class the next weekend with a specialty class on bowls. Students might attend any one of the three classes, a mix of either a weekend class along with the weeklong, or all three.

The workshop is equipped with hand tools and full capabilities for turning, cabinet work, or any combination of woodworking and woodturning. The classes are small and personal with much interaction. They run from 8:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., and the class even sits together each day for the provided lunch.

Though Ernie continues to teach at the Conover Workshops, he also has continued and expanded his writing efforts, because he thinks it allows him to teach a larger audience. Since his first book, *The Tool Catalog*, co-written with R. J. DeCristoforo in 1978, Ernie has continued to write books for Taunton Press and now Fox Chapel. In addition to the books, he has written articles for *American Woodworker*, *Mother Earth News*, *Yankee*, *Town and Country*, and others. Ernie currently writes a regular column for *Woodworkers Journal*, which includes a five- to seven-minute video clip accompaniment. From his days at the founding of the AAW at Arrowmont (serving as treasurer and was member number 4) to his expert witness work on trademark infringement, Ernie has been a major player in both the woodworking and woodturning arenas. He is the first to be a demonstrator at both the Woodworkers Showcase and Totally Turning Symposium. Ernie will be one of the featured demonstrators this year at the 10th Anniversary Totally Turning Symposium on March 23 and 24, 2013.

If you are looking for an in-depth, hands-on learning experience with a lot of personal attention, you certainly should consider the offerings at Conover Workshops. Whether you are interested in mastering the use of a hand plane or the skew chisel, I think you'll find an offering there that will suit your needs. For more information, visit www.conoverworkshops.com.



Fig. 1. The classes at Conover Workshops are held in Ernie's barn in Parkman, Ohio. Beginning in 1982 and locating at the current site in 1990, both woodturning and woodworking are offered.



Fig. 2. Working with wood since childhood, Ernie thinks that woodturning is a subset of woodworking. Woodworking, woodturning, and "combination" courses are offered at Conover Workshops.

Fig. 3. Turning fundamentals, woodworking fundamentals, advanced courses, and private instruction are available. Project-focused classes let the student learn the process and go home with his or her creation.



Fig. 4. This is one of the Conover lathes from the 80s. It featured floor castings, headstock, and tailstock components that the end user would purchase to make their own wooden bed lathe. It's a very flexible design from size and final configuration.



Fig. 5. From the Conover, through the various other brands, to the large Powermatic, a host of lathes are available for the student. Whether the student is focused on turning fundamentals or creating furniture parts, the equipment and tools are available in the workshop.



Fig. 6. My visit to Conover Workshops for photographs was between classes and also while Ernie was shooting illustrations for his latest book. Here, you can see part of the woodworking classroom bench facilities and some of the lighting equipment.

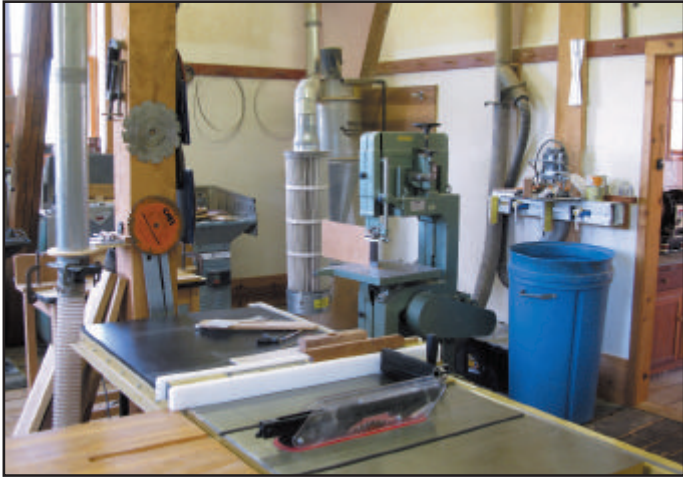


Fig. 7. Two stories of the barn are used for classes. Several areas are set up for the different-focused classes. Everything needed is onsite and readily available.



Fig. 10. A lifelong photography buff, Ernie shoots virtually all his own pictures. Here he shoots some photos for the sharpening section of his new book on woodturning.



Fig. 8. Conover Workshops has everything needed for the various classes. From classics to the most modern, all is in excellent adjustment and operational.



Fig. 11. The barn at Conover Workshops is a joy to explore. There are interesting examples of work, antique tools and mechanisms, and nostalgia from the barn's many years of existence and various functions.



Fig. 9. A prolific author of books, magazine articles, and videos, Ernie is setting up for some photos for his latest book, *The Frugal Woodturner*.



Fig. 12. Hand tools are another of Ernie's passions, fitting right in with his assessment that he is a cabinetmaker who turns, rather than a woodturner. Both woodworkers and woodturners will feel at home here.