

Larry Williams

Arkansas Democrat-Gazette, Thursday, September 21, 2006

EUREKA SPRINGS — Larry Williams makes his living re-creating the past.

He makes traditional-style hand woodworking planes — like those used more than a century ago to create houses such as those found in this historic village of Victorian era structures.

Earlier this year, Williams was designated the 2006 Arkansas Living Treasure by the Arkansas Arts Council and the Department of Arkansas Heritage. This is the fifth year for the groups to recognize someone working in traditional crafts.

Nominated by the Eureka Springs mayor's office, he was one of 24 people nominated from across the state. He was honored at a reception in Eureka Springs earlier this year.

A living treasure is an Arkansan who is outstanding in the creation of a traditional craft, who has elevated the work to the status of art and who actively pursues and advances the art form, according to the arts council.

Joy Pennington, executive director of the Arkansas Arts Council, says Williams stood out for many reasons. "I think it was the combination of the quality of Larry's work and the fact that he's done research internationally," she says. "His work is exquisite."

It's important that he teaches nationally, trying to preserve the craft by passing it on to others, she says. He has also written articles on what he does for various publications, including Woodwork magazine.

Making these planes has residual effects.

"Not only is his work a traditional craft, but it's used to preserve houses. It's used to make historic moldings," she says.

His passion for the craft started more than 30 years ago.

Williams, 57, was born in Denver and went to schools in nearby Lakewood, Colo. In the early 1970 s, he attended Metropolitan State College in Denver, pursuing a journalism degree while selling cameras. The college also had an industrial arts program, which he noticed one day when walking past the building. He was intrigued by the equipment and took a few classes.

The craft captured him.

"Just to be able to create something with my hands," he says. "It was something I could pick up and put my hands on instead of the more nebulous stuff."

When living in Colorado in 1975, he and his wife, Glenna Booth, bought a house built in 1890. He started doing work on it and got interested in traditional style hand tools.

In 1980, they sold their house in Denver, looking for a place not as crowded where he'd have access to hardwoods. When selling cameras, he'd talked to people across the country and always asked them questions about where they lived. The couple first looked at Springfield, Mo., near where his in-laws lived. Then, he found Arkansas.

In Eureka Springs, he went to work as a restoration carpenter and cabinetmaker. He designed a corner cabinet for Victorian era houses, but there wasn't a demand for them.

The Williamses bought another old home, an old boarding house. The 1906, three-story Queen Anne has bay windows that extend the three-story height. He rebuilt wrap-around porches for each level and just recently painted the house blue, a big change from the previous rust color.

“It’s the only three-story bay window in town,” he says.

His wife works in economic development for the city, and their daughter, Catherine, works at a Russellville bookstore.

For about 16 years, Williams worked in construction on new and historic houses. He started out as an employee for Bud Clark and Son.

“The son is now my partner,” he says.

He and Bill Clark started their own business, Clark and Williams, which focuses on fine custom cabinetry and high-end finish carpentry. They recently added a third partner, Don Mc-Connell, an author, wooden plane expert and antique tool enthusiast.

Williams and Clark subcontracted for one job in Fayetteville, replacing more than 256 windows and 17 exterior doors.

“We did a lot of high-end, nice work,” he says.

In doing that work, they started using hand tools.

“For one-of-a-kind work, they’re more efficient,” he says.

It also means not having to haul heavy machines to job sites.

In Rogers, Williams had to reproduce a staircase hand rail that would have taken more time and money if done with modern machinery.

“I think we made it with hand tools in an hour,” he says, and at a lower cost.

On many jobs, they mix power tools with the traditional style hand tools.

He says it’s satisfying to take a piece of wood and duplicate what he thinks are the finest hand planes ever made. He prefers using them over modern, motorized tools.

“It’s quiet, it’s easy and it’s safe,” he says.

With the high-end jobs, he says, it was most important to consider the comfort of the housekeepers. The shavings created by the planes don’t make near the mess that’s caused by sanding wood. And, the hand tools aren’t as noisy as power tools.

“Just by keeping people’s housekeepers happy, we were able to get a lot of repeat work and referrals,” he says. Their affection for working with hand tools — and trouble finding antique ones — prompted them to start making their own. They got into making woodworking planes for their own use, not to sell them to others. But that’s what happened.

Williams broke his arm in 2000, leaving him unable to do carpentry work. So, most days, he spends his time making planes and hollows and rounds.

“This is what I’d rather do anyway,” he says. “It’s more like playing than working.”

Williams gets up around dawn and grabs a cup of coffee on the way to his shop. Then, he walks his two dogs and eats breakfast before returning for a day’s work. He usually works seven days a week.

Then, he sits at a bench that he also made and listens to National Public Radio. Pieces of wood fit between wooden pegs on the bench, and a hand crank on the end adjusts the space between pegs.

“You can’t work with hand planes without a good bench,” he says.

Planes are used to slice a sliver of wood from the surface, with a smoothing effect similar to sanding.

“You can control your depth of cut with how it’s set,” he says.

He demonstrates by tapping the top and end of the wood plane with a rubber mallet, using inertia to slightly move the steel blade inside.

“It’ll get down to where it’s like lace coming off of it,” he says as he slides the tool across the surface. A wide, thin curl of wood falls to the floor.

Other planes are called hollows and rounds, for the concave and convex edge of the blade and the wood piece that holds each blade. The blade matches the profile of the edge of the wood.

“I can reproduce just about any molding that was made,” he says.

With their planes, they’ve reintroduced traditional bed angles that were once available for planes. Williams flips through a book — *A Guide to the Makers of American Wooden Planes* — and finds Clark and Williams among the thousands listed. They’re the only contemporary makers included.

“Everybody else in this is dead,” he says. “I think we’re the only people really trying to produce traditional planes commercially.”

He compares his plane to a much heavier metal one of the same size, holding them in each hand.

“These are light and agile and wonderful,” he says of his creation.

At the request of antique tool dealers, Clark and Williams date their creations so they’ll be easier to track as the years pass. They made their 10th date stamp in December.

“These tools are really hard to find, or can be hard to find,” he says.

He’s two years behind in orders for plane sets. It takes him about a week to make one set of planes, which has 18 pieces.

“They sell faster than I can make them,” he says.

He designed and made a float, or coarse file, that he used to make the planes and other hand tools.

They use 18th-century planes as models for the tools they create. Hand planes were fully evolved by the late part of that century, but they were labor intensive to use. Then, the industrial revolution got rid of them.

Sandusky Tool Co. was the last to make them, closing in 1929.

At Colonial Williamsburg, the town that served as the capital of Virginia during colonial times, tourists can see traditional crafts such as gunmaking, silversmithing and woodworking demonstrated. Many original buildings there have been preserved and many others reconstructed, all paid for by the late philanthropist, John D. Rockefeller Jr. They also use planing tools created by Clark and Williams.

“They’re the mecca for 18th century crafts,” Williams says.

Mack Headley, a master cabinet maker for the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation, says his job is to practice 18th-century cabinet making. That means making replicas of specific antiques made in Virginia.

“To do our job, we need to get reproductions of 18th-century style tools,” Headley says.

Using antique tools isn’t an option because those will deteriorate with wear, and they themselves are artifacts. The cabinet shop was using 19th century tools before learning about Williams’ tools about five years ago.

“He has really tried to match 18th-century styling tools and molding profiles,” Headley says.

Headley uses the tools in making reproductions of 18th century furniture, for a desk, bookcase and details on a harpsichord. He used them for the heavy cornice work across the top of a replica of Martha Washington’s tall post bed.

The old-style tools are “more versatile than machines tend to be,” Headley says. Machines “don’t allow you the options and independent decisions that make objects unique. The tools Larry makes are designed to give you that flexibility.”

Williams sometimes travels around the country to teach plane-making classes and workshops, and he speaks and gives demonstrations at woodworking symposiums and meetings. He spent the first week of August teaching a class at the Mark Adams School of Woodworking in Franklin, Ind.

But he’d like to teach here.

He and Clark are planning to combine their separate shops and move into a two-story Main Street location, possibly by this fall. They’ll also have some retail space. Currently, items are sold via their Web site: www.plane maker. com.

“I don’t sell anything in Arkansas. It’s mostly on the coasts,” he says. “Nobody knows we’re here.”

He’s doing exactly what he’d do if he was retired.

“I’m never going to quit this,” he says. “I’ll never retire.”