

## **The Vermont Woodworking School**

**by Stephen Russell Payne**

After learning the woodworking trade in the Army during the 1960's, Jeffersonville native, Robert Fletcher came home to Vermont and started an antique furniture restoration business. Soon he began designing and building his own custom furniture and over the last thirty-five years has become a well known and respected master furniture maker. Over the years, Bob also became interested in teaching furniture making in the Vermont tradition and began taking on a few apprentices and teaching in community woodshops. During this time he recognized the need for a full-fledged furniture making school in Vermont so he, along with one of his students, Carina Driscoll and her husband, Blake decided to start a school of their own. In 2007 the three of them founded the Vermont Woodworking School in an industrial park outside of Burlington.

As the school became successful, Bob and the others decided they wanted to find a more rural location that would be better suited to what they wanted to accomplish. They soon found a large abandoned dairy barn which overlooked the Lamoille River valley in Fairfax. Though strikingly beautiful, the stately 1870's barn was in very bad shape and they knew it would take an enormous amount of work and money to renovate it into a modern woodshop capable of housing their new school.

Fortunately, another former student named Bert Steen came forward to help. Bert is a successful businessman from Swanton and a passionate supporter of Bob's teaching methods. After looking over Bob and Carina's plans, Bert decided to buy the barn and fund a complete renovation from its field stone foundation to its custom cupola high atop its roof. After a tremendous effort by many local craftsmen, in February of 2009 the Vermont Woodworking School moved into its new home. The expansive new wood shops have combined the rustic character of the historically significant barn with environmentally sound technologies resulting in a beautiful, state-of-the-art facility. With Carina's assistance, Bert was even able to secure a grant from the USDA to help purchase a special furnace which burns wood pellets and kernel corn as well as wood scraps from the school. This modern heating plant allows the School to comfortably operate through the frigid Vermont winter without using any petroleum products.

Walking into the barn you are likely to be greeted by Sadie, a wonderful black Lab who usually naps on the wide plank floor near the brightly lit library where students and faculty share coffee and review detailed drawings of the projects they are working on. The warm air is sweet with enticing aromas from the cuttings of many different woods and the rich oils and stains used to finish the students' furniture. Once an active milking parlor for a herd of dairy cows, the spacious main shop has individual workbenches for each student. Hanging on the large hemlock post and beams that support

the high ceiling are an intriguing variety of both modern and antique joinery tools. A hundred year old hay saw still hangs on a hand-hewed post in the corner.

An adjacent room houses a collection of commercial saws, planers, sanders and lathes that have been brought here from many different parts of Vermont, including the former Ethan Allen Furniture factory up in Island Pond. The School is committed to using as much native wood as possible thus most of the furniture is built from lumber sourced from the surrounding forests.

Adjacent to the barn sits the original farmhouse where Carina and her young family live. A new addition on the back of the house serves as a dorm wing where students from around the country can live while attending the school. The boarding program has already become so successful they are about to renovate the barns' two round silos into four more unique dorm rooms. Carina's face beams when she speaks of living there. "My husband and I both work across the farmyard at the school and as a mom, I have it all. We live in this beautiful place overlooking the Lamoille River and my kids are growing up on this old farm with wonderful gardens and big dirt piles to play in next to this magnificent red barn which is filled with interesting people from all over the place."

The School offers several different courses of study and in September of 2009 became the first in Vermont to offer an accredited, two year Associates of Arts Degree in Woodworking Craftsmanship and Design through Burlington College, just twenty-five miles away. In a short period of time the School has become well known for its unique, twelve week Total Immersion Program, in which students spend long hours each day both working on their projects and receiving one-on-one instruction from the faculty, which is composed of members of the Vermont Furniture Makers Guild. One such instructor is Janet Collins who specializes in building remarkably beautiful chairs from historic designs. After teaching at one of the oldest woodworking schools in the county, the North Bennett Street School in Boston, Janet became intrigued with the unique programs at the Vermont school and joined its faculty in 2009. In addition to teaching in Vermont, she also teaches at the famous Wooden Boat School in Brooklin, Maine.

Carina says an important emphasis of the school is "to teach our students not only how to make beautiful furniture but also how to make it as a furniture maker." One way students are exposed to the world of business is to seek private commission work to build custom pieces of furniture. The income from commissions also helps them defray the costs of tuition and room and board.

The outstanding quality of the school's furniture has already been widely recognized. Custom pieces have been made for upscale home décor companies like Anichini in Vermont, specialty stores in Manhattan and Greenwich, CT as well as Southwestern boutique stores like the Longoria Collection in Houston, Texas and Cielo

Home of Santa Fe, New Mexico. Not only does the School build the wooden furniture, it's upholstery program professionally finishes each piece. As Carina says: "our students are not only immersed in very intensive learning with great teachers, they are also exposed to real-world marketing of the goods they make. We now have customers from across the country that recognize the truly special qualities of our custom made furniture. In fact, in addition to our active students, we've hired one of our graduates as a full time apprentice for Bob to exclusively make his original designs."

On the upper floors of the barn are workshops that are rented to local carpenters and craftspeople that need more space. One such person is Early Americana artist Martha Kinney, who builds her own designs featuring classic 18<sup>th</sup> Century stenciling and also teaches workshops for the School. Additionally, Bob and Carina have turned the old second story chicken coop into a fine arts and furniture gallery. This area of the barn really brings the rich history of the farm to life for on the deeply worn plank walls are colorful signatures and dates hand painted by itinerant farm workers from Mexico and Jamaica back in the late 1800's.

During a visit to the School I chatted with a young student named Dallas from New Orleans who was hand rubbing an intricate cabinet he had built out of bird's eye maple. He had worked for several years as a carpenter down South but felt he need more training to improve his skills using fine hand tools. He learned about the Vermont Woodworking School by searching the internet and became intrigued by their unique Immersion Program. During his twelve week stay, Dallas boarded in the farmhouse and spent as much time as possible working in the shop, often late into the night. His enthusiasm was indicative of the feelings of all the students I met. "This whole place has a wonderful personality," he says. "This beautiful old barn is awesome, and the incredibly knowledgeable staff who clearly love to teach are amazing. And it's all without the pressure and competition I found in the city. This is a very special program."

Through the passionate devotion of its staff and students, the School appears to have a very bright future. "I feel really good about what we're doing here," co-founder Bob Fletcher says with a smile. "Not only has this landmark barn been preserved but we're passing on great Vermont skills and traditions to new generations of woodworkers who are now using them all over the country. I think the old woodworkers that came before us would be proud."