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Wood Giraffe Sparks Career Change

A Woodworking Weekend

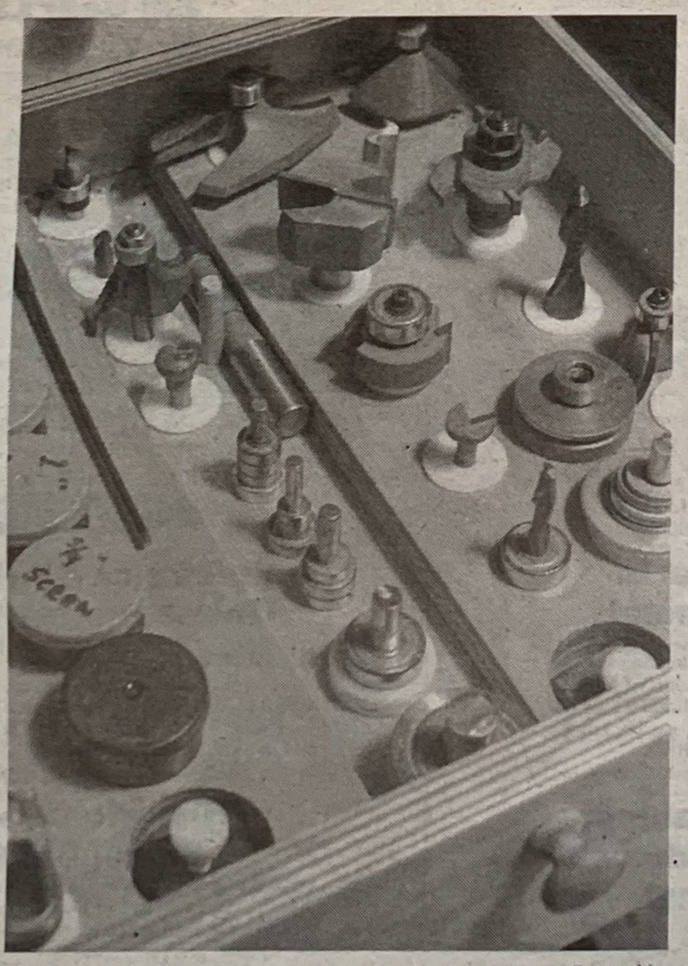
The Router Lady is not put off by the suggestion that a router resembles the garbage disposal unit to be found under many a kitchen sink. On the contrary: "That's not a bad description. Actually, a router is nothing more than a motor that holds a sharp cutter. And that would describe your garbage disposal, too. The uniqueness of the router is that, in addition to being that simple, it's also extremely versatile."

Decorative edge work is the most common use for a router. It's the tool for making all types of joinery — for example, tongue-and-groove, mortises, rabbets, and dovetails. It can plane, shape, and carve; produce mouldings; is useful for inlaying; and will help you make exact duplicates from a pattern.

LOCAL EVENTS

The Veg-O-Matic of the woodworking world, it is, however, something many people buy, then never use. Not long ago, says Carol Reed, which is the Router Lady's real name, a survey discovered that, of all the people who have ever owned a router, 83 percent have used it only once or not at all.

"I remember when I first got mine, I had no clue what to expect," Reed says. "I turned it on. 'Whoa!' I turned it right back off. But what amateurs don't realize is that a router is not used successfully freehand, except by those really talented sign makers you see at county fairs. It needs to be guided by something."



Router bits

Jigs are one thing you can use to guide it, says Reed, who has also earned the nickname "jigmeister," because she makes her own.

The 58-year-old past president of the San Diego Fine Woodworkers Association specializes in ecclesiastical furnishings. They include pulpits, lecterns, and other furniture of the chancel areas at, among other places, Escondido's Grace Lutheran Church and her own Community Lutheran Church, where she sings in the choir. She considers the work part of her personal ministry as well as her career.

She credits her grandfather with getting her started. "He, my father, and all my relatives were dairy farmers in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. But one day, to get me out of his hair, my grandfather put a piece of pine in my hand, gave me a hand plane, and showed me how to make what he called pine 'curlicues.' Pine is pungent and very beautiful, and I was really taken by it." That was the beginning of what she calls "a love affair" rather than "an organized quest to become a woodworker."

Over the years, she tried to learn as much as she could. She considers herself to have been self-taught until the mid-1980s, when she signed up at Palomar Community College in San Marcos. Eventually, she had taken every course they offered. Later, the college hired her as a teacher.

She claims to have been "forced" into making her hobby her profession. "I was among the many people who got laid off by the phone company, in 1984, and was not feeling great about it. And I did what lots of ladies do when they're bummed with life: I went to the hairdresser." This was in Ramona, where she lives. Trying to cheer her up, Pat the hairdresser asked what Reed would do now that she was "retired." Reed kidded back: "I think I'll build rocking horses." Pat said, "Well, my daughter saw a rocking *giraffe* at a craft fair." But Pat couldn't afford it, which was too bad, because the daughter collected giraffes. "How about if you make her one?" Pat suggested.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVE ALLEN

Carol Reed operating router

Geronimo, as he was christened, turned out to be 6′2″ and still gets decorated at Christmas time with sleigh bells, Santa's hat, and twinkling lights by the giraffe collector, who now has children of her own.

But it would be nearly a decade before Reed could support herself by woodworking.

This weekend, as part of the Ultimate Woodworking Event at the convention center, Reed will be giving seminars and demonstrations with her router. She encourages women to join the men. "I was usually the only woman in my classes [at Palomar]. Now women are getting into woodworking for a variety of reasons. For one, their husbands are into it and they want to support them. For another, they have realized wood is just another medium in which artists work. Third, they have a 'honey do' list and no honey to do it. Finally, it's a practical thing. Obviously, we're overrun with furniture stores. But the fact is, most of it isn't very well built *and* it's expensive."

Of the noise and flying sawdust, Reed says, "Wear good ear- and eye-protection" — although safety precautions, she knows, are not considered "macho."

"A tool does not make a woodworker," Reed warns. "Back 200 years ago, those fellows made their own tools with whatever they had." Then, again, she wishes today's toolmakers would be more responsive to changes in their customers' demographics: "They are reluctant to make tools for smaller hands and a little less physical strength. But we're working on 'em."

— Jeanne Schinto

The Ultimate Woodworking Event
San Diego Convention Center
111 West Harbor Drive
Friday, March 16,
11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.
Saturday, March 17,
10:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.
Sunday, March 18,
10:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m.
Three days, $10;
$5, students 18 & older with ID;
Families on Sunday, $20 discount coupon available
www.americanwoodworker.com

Carol Reed's seminars:
"Planning Your Project"
Friday, 1:00 to 2:30 p.m.
and Saturday, 2:30 to 4:00 p.m.
"Choosing and Using Your First Router,"
Friday, 3:30 to 5:00 p.m.,
and Sunday, 12:00 to 1:30 p.m.
Cost of seminars: $20
Demonstrations free
Info: 800-394-5157