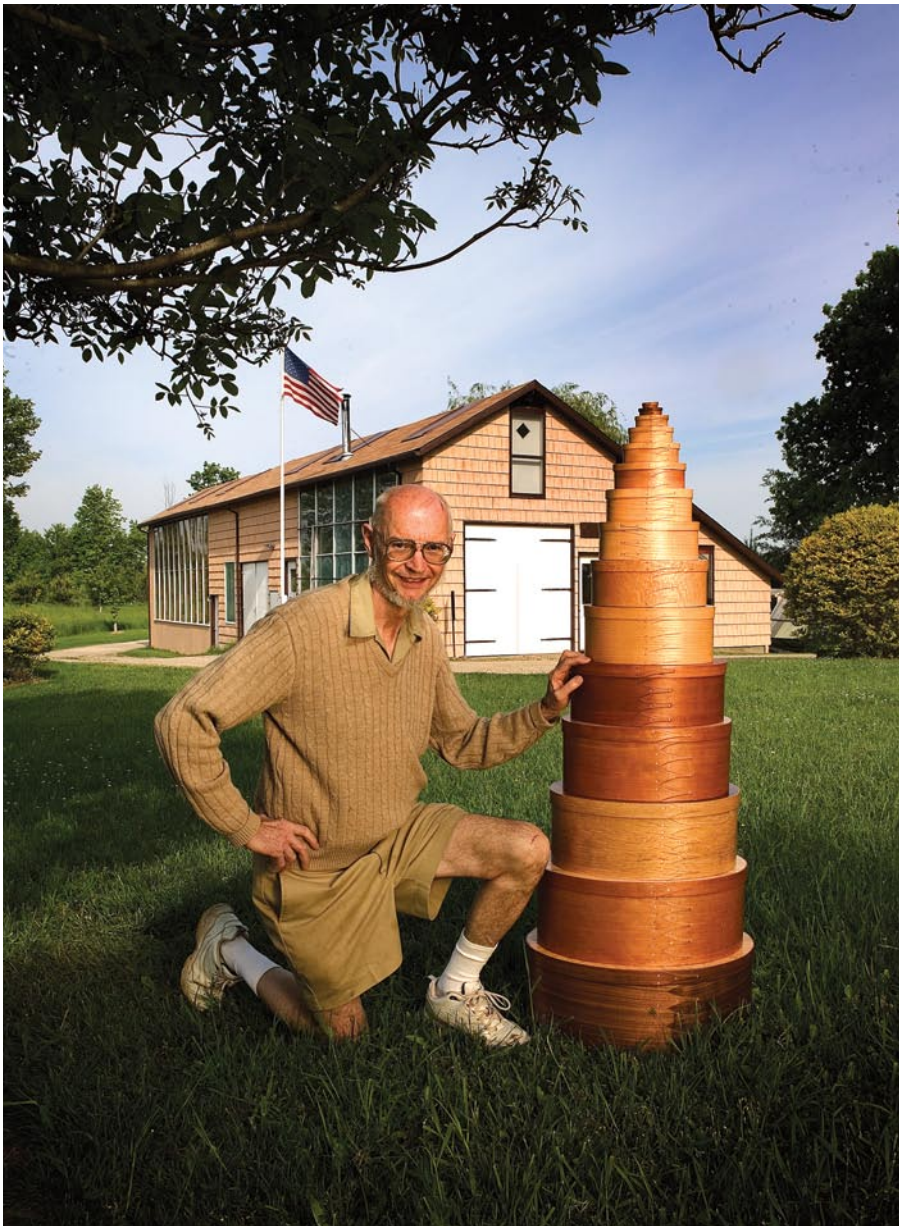
BY KARA GEBHART UHL

The Home Shop

John Wilson has made a successful career out of writing, teaching and selling a Shaker craft.



Shaker oval boxes. *John Wilson, shown here in front of The Home Shop, is renowned for his reproductions of these useful and decorative pieces, and for teaching others how to make them.*

In 1977, Wilson received an offer to teach furniture making at Michigan's Lansing Community College. There was only one catch: The class they wanted him to teach began in two hours. Wilson drove to a library, checked out Ejner Handberg's "Shop Drawings of Shaker Furniture & Woodenware" (Vol. 1), and with the help of his students chose a dovetailed dining tray as the class project. It was in that book the now-famed Shaker-box maker discovered the oval boxes.

Wilson tells this story 30 years later on a cool May evening in Charlotte, Mich., while sitting around a bonfire and eating chocolate with his wife, Sally, and two children, 13-year-old Molly and 7-year-old Will. In front of him is his 32' x 86' shop, The Home Shop. To the right is The Little House, 16' x 16' of space in which he lived for 12 years, including five years making boxes before his shop was finished. Behind him is his current home. For Wilson, home and shop have always been deeply intertwined. Although once one-in-the-same, the two are now separated only by a small yard that serves as a playground for Molly, Will and a handful of chickens.

Today, the teacher, craftsman and writer is best known for his Shaker boxes (see August 2003, issue #135 for his *Popular Woodworking* article on how to make these). For more than 20 years he has made boxes, taught box-making classes, and sold bands, tops and bottoms for various sizes and styles of boxes, carriers and trays. Since 1991, Wilson also has produced and sold the hard-to-find copper tacks, distinctive of the box lap.

Rehoboth – Ample Room

Wilson, who grew up in Syracuse, N.Y., was given free reign of his dad's small basement shop, which consisted only of hand tools. "My parents must have subscribed to the adage that hand tools are reasonably safe if reasonably used, or pain intervenes before damage is done," he said. "Think hand saw versus table saw."

While studying anthropology, Wilson, now 68, worked his way through college as a carpenter. After earning his master's degree

PHOTOS BY AL PARRISH

from London (England) University, Wilson taught anthropology from 1962 to 1972 at Purdue University, Michigan State University and Albion College. Failing to get tenure, Wilson changed careers and became a licensed residential contractor for the next 10 years. Following that was another 10-year period as a teaching craftsman, making and selling Shaker boxes. By 1992 Wilson was a full-time businessman, selling Shaker box supplies and teaching on the side. In 2002 he added writing to the mix.

Walking around his property, Wilson points to a large, old farmhouse, which he no longer owns. There he lived with his first wife and two sons, both now in their early 40s. After his divorce, Wilson moved into The Little House, which he initially built for his sons after vandals burned their fort. Now a guesthouse, The Little House features a wood-burning stove, bathroom fixtures, kitchen appliances and a loft for sleeping. Carved into the bed is the Hebrew word "Rehoboth," which means "ample room." For five years it also held a workbench, lumber and tools.

Growing Business, Growing Space

Wilson finished the first section of The Home Shop in 1988, just in time for his May 8 wedding to Sally. It was in the then-empty shop that they had a potluck reception with friends, piano and dulcimer music, and folk dancing. After the wedding, Wilson moved his shop out of The Little House and into The Home Shop. He and Sally lived in The Little House until Molly was born.

Today The Home Shop consists of three sections on three different levels, which follow the slope of the land. This allows for a 10' ceiling in the main room, and 12' and 14' ceilings in the inventory and storage rooms. Wilson recycles building materials when possible. The 32' x 32' main room contains a 16' x 20' cider mill that resembled a carriage house. A friend offered it to Wilson, so he simply loaded it onto a trailer, took it to his property and worked it into the design. Light floods the shop thanks to 13 skylights – made from old sliding glass doors – and, what Wilson calls "window walls" everywhere.

"I don't regard myself so much a green person, as being a resourceful one, which is a virtue I hold in pretty high regard," he says.

Most of the tools Wilson shares with his two partners – Eric Pintar and John Kellogg – are in the main shop. Work areas are arranged in triangular shapes. Wilson spends 15 to 20 hours a week at his Craftsman table saw cutting bands for sale. Completing this triangle is an old 10" Craftsman radial-arm saw and a jointer. Another triangular work area consists of a 24" Performax drum sander, a 15" Delta planer and an 18" Grizzly band saw.

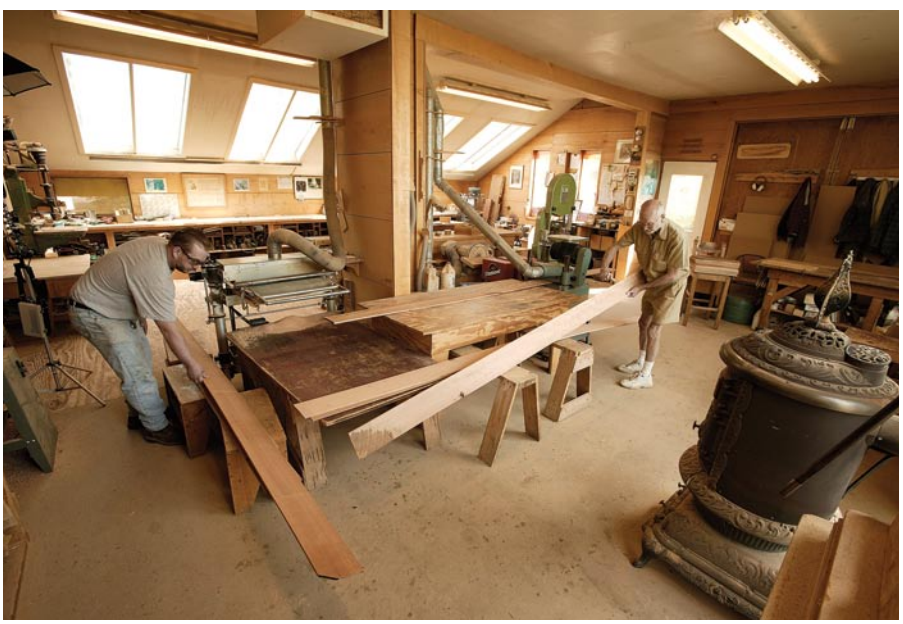
A long counter lines the back wall with shelves underneath filled with box-making supplies in cherry, bird's eye maple, Eastern white pine and lacewood. In front of the counter is a large, freestanding workbench, one of several in the room.

The main room is heated using an old and ornate, twice-owned potbelly stove fed with wood scraps. (Wilson initially bought it for his old farmhouse. When the farmhouse's new owners decided to sell it, Wilson bought it again for his shop.) Next to the stove are a 1920s veneer press and a four-bag customized Grizzly dust-collection system.

The second section is a 32' x 20' inventory room. In addition to several workbenches, stacks of box parts, including tops, bottoms, shapers and molds, line a counter and shelves.

The Home Shop's third 32' x 36' room is used for an impressive amount of wood

The Little House. *Wilson's home and shop were all in one in The Little House (right) before he built The Home Shop (left).*



Re-purposed. *Recycled sliding-glass doors serve as skylights, flooding the shop with natural light.*

storage. Wilson buys all his wood in the log form. By doing so, he says, you learn the connection between the log and the finished product – you also learn how to live with everything you buy. At least once a year he buys, for example, 3,000 board feet of cherry and 4,000 board feet of pine and basswood. Wilson oversees all the log buying and cutting, and personally controls the drying in hand-built kilns behind the shop (see Wilson's article on building a backyard solar-powered kiln in issue #159, December 2006).

"All logs are cut to dimensional stock and from that point on we handle them," he says. "To be able to dry our own material is an important ingredient."

But the room's main attraction is two machines from the 1880s used to make copper tacks. In 1991 the W.W. Cross Nail Co. – the one small copper tack manufacturer – decided to stop manufacturing tacks. Wilson smartly acquired two machines and today makes seven sizes of tacks and 1/2" copper shoe pegs, which some people use to secure a box's top and bottom boards instead of wood pegs.

Wilson fires up one of the pulleys on one of the old, oily, ingenious machines to show how it works. Depending on the size, it takes from 10 to 50 minutes to make one pound of tacks. Considering there are about 750 tacks in an ounce, that's 12,000 copper tacks. They're tiny, like garden seeds, and easily fit in a small box. Tacks sell from $40 to $130 a pound – enough for a lifetime of box making. And he sells 300 pounds a year.

Copper tacks. *John Wilson runs the more than 125-year-old copper tack machine.*

However, box makers aren't the only ones delighted that Wilson is making copper tacks. He also sees healthy business from the makers of Adirondack guide boats and organ restoration companies.

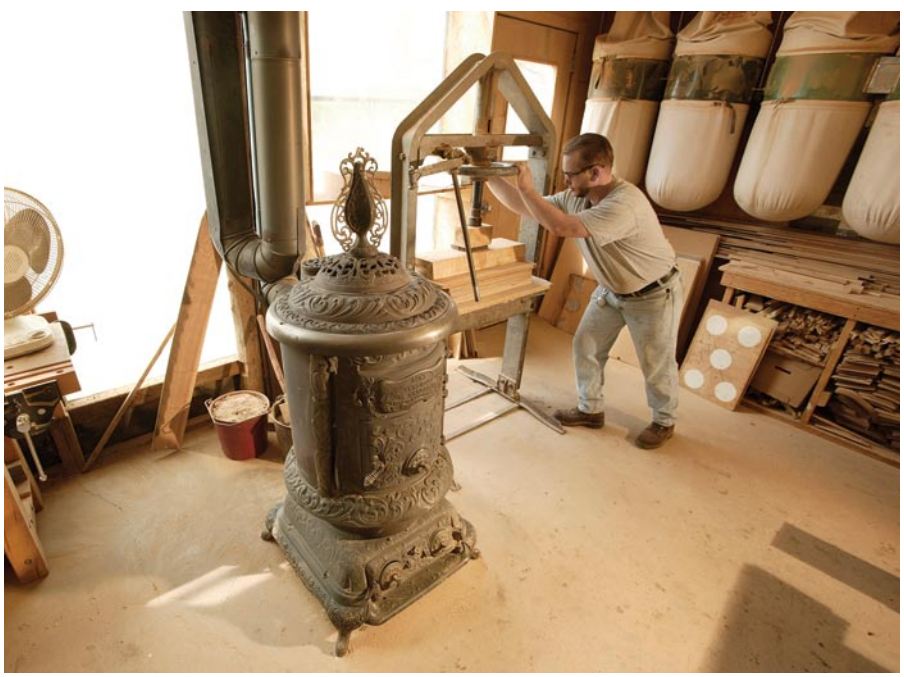
"Talk about specialty," Wilson says, laughing. "This is the ultimate niche business."

A Blend of Hand and Power

"What would a craftsman of 200 years ago do in my shop?" John asked. "He would delight in the thickness planer, table saw and drum sander to relieve much of the drudgery of woodworking. At the same time he would laugh at some elaborate setup for the router, which could be done simply and quietly with chisel and mallet or with a well-tuned hand plane."

Wilson says the choice to use power tools or hand tools depends on the situation. "The power tool – hand tool debate isn't an exclusionary 'either/or,' but an inclusive 'both,'" he says. "Tools of any kind are problem-solving objects depending on the skill of the craftsman. Learning this is what gaining an educated pair of hands is about." His favorite tools – a blend of power and hand – include a 3" x 21" belt sander, 2 1/2" Red Devil scraper and a Stanley low-angle block plane.

Wilson sponsors events at The Home Shop



Yesterday's press. *Eric Pintar uses a 1920s veneer press. Feeding the potbelly stove keeps the shop warm during Michigan's cold, winter months.*

taught by others besides himself. In 1997 John Brown taught a class on Welsh chairmaking. "He's passionate about hand-tool work, leaving the world of power behind right after blocking out the chair parts on the band saw. It was by far the most effective style for teaching chairmaking I have witnessed. As sponsor as well as participant, I faced a dilemma in getting both jobs done, something not uncommon in life in general." So, Wilson decided save time by using power tools – a decision that didn't go over well with Brown.

"John Brown, who can be a curmudgeon at times, came in at the start of the day after I had been in the shop for three early morning hours getting my chair done. I received a proper dressing down such as a boot camp sergeant might give. I stood attentive like a good soldier, listening to a man deserving of respect because of his expertise and experience. I could appreciate his point of view, so passionately given, on the virtue of hand tools while blending that kernel of truth with the mix of tools I had just employed that morning."

The Business of Selling to Woodworkers

Near the door in the shop's main room are a desk, telephone and files, where Wilson does much of his business. Although he has a web site (ShakerOvalBox.com), he's only seen it once; he leaves the computer world to his business partners. Customers can't order online and Wilson doesn't accept credit cards. Instead, everyone is a "preferred customer" with shipment first and payment after they receive the order.

Once an order is received, Wilson and his partners fill, package and ship it, along with an invoice. They simply trust customers will pay, and 99.7 percent do.

In addition to selling kits, Wilson sells bands, tops, bottoms, handles, forms, patterns, tools (including copper hot water trays, a drilling jig, anvil and sanding block), copper tacks, pegs and rivets, booklets, pattern packets and a DVD video.

Many of Wilson's clients have particpated in his classes, and classes aren't limited to box making. Fond of making his own tools, Wilson also teaches classes in plane, spokeshave and travisher making, as well as hand-cut dovetails, mortise-and-tenon joinery, sailboat building and paddle making.

Wilson has done well thanks to his good business sense and self-described frugality.

"The business has been successful for me," he says. "It supports three families." Currently he grosses about $250,000 a year.

Wilson says part of his success is because of his willingness to share information for free. "I've always made it a policy to be totally open," he says. "It's the only way I want to live."

Piles of stock. *Wilson keeps an impressive supply of wood on stock to ensure constant inventory for his customers.*

Customer service. *Wilson insists on talking through orders with customers to ensure they receive exactly what they want and need.*

Simple Gifts

The Home Shop does have a second floor, used mainly for storage. Boxes, paper bags, $500 worth of toothpicks and pages of material fill the space. Recently Wilson created a kit for a Shaker music box. Its song? The well-known Shaker hymn, "Simple Gifts:"

'Tis the gift to be simple, 'tis the gift to be free,
'Tis the gift to come down where we ought to be,
And when we find ourselves in the place just right,
'Twill be in the valley of love and delight.
When true simplicity is gain'd,
To bow and to bend we shan't be asham'd,
To turn, turn will be our delight,
Till by turning, turning we come round right.

As the bonfire dwindles, Wilson reflects on his accomplishments as well as his goals for the future, which include writing three books. Although Wilson now expects life changes to happen about every 10 years, it's clear he's content with his mix of selling, teaching, building and writing – he's where he ought to be … in his place just right. And, looking at his home, shop and family, it's hard to argue that it's not a valley of love and delight. **PW**

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