

# CURT THEOBALD

## Heir to a Legacy in Segmented Turning ?

KEN KEOUGHAN

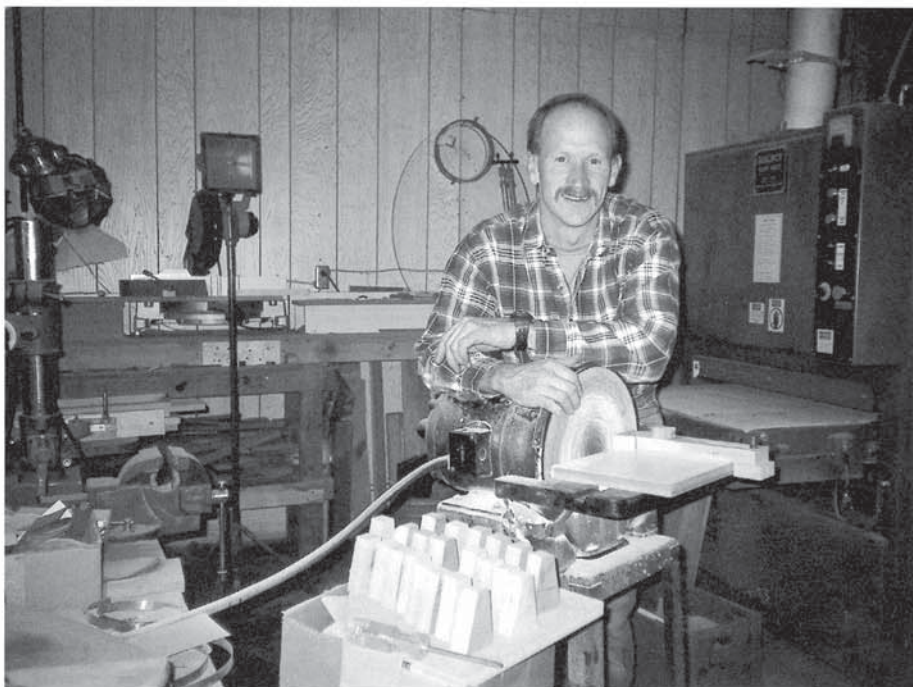
AS I SIT DOWN TO WRITE THIS IT IS 30° below zero in Cheyenne, WY. The wind is howling; the snow is drifting. Pine Bluffs is 40 miles east of Cheyenne. Pine Bluffs, WY, is where Curt Theobald was born, raised and still lives. Curt is gentle and soft-spoken. He has a wiry build and rust-red hair. And unless I miss my guess, he can be as High Plains hard-nosed as the Wyoming winter. He is angular, linear, logical ... and does exquisite segmented turning. He is the guy that drew the crowds at the September 2000 Rocky Mountain Woodturners 2nd Annual Symposium.

Asked how he got started, he said that in 1992 he bought a vintage 1957 Shopsmith for \$75. "After scraping out a few walnut bowls, I discovered segmented turning. Clunky form, inconsistent wall thickness and plenty of sanding marks were common in my early turnings." Nevertheless he pieced together some very impressive work on the Shopsmith. "I became enthralled with trying to better my segmenting techniques and woodturning skills. Accordingly in 1993 I joined the Denver chapter of AAW, the Front Range Woodturners."

### An education in turning

"I began to get tips from other woodturners. Trent Bosch suggested that I get a bowl gouge and learn how to use it. With people like Lee Carter and Trent and David Nittmann encouraging me, I began to learn."

In 1994 the AAW Symposium was held in Fort Collins, 1½ hours away from Pine Bluffs. As he says, "I soaked in as much knowledge as I could get that weekend. It was at the instant gallery that I first saw the segmented work of the late Ray Allen (See the back cover of *American Woodturner*, Fall 2001). I tracked him



Curt Theobald in his shop, in front of what he calls his high-dollar sander, which cost him more than any car he's ever owned. Photo by Wanda Theobald.

down and asked him as much as my limited knowledge of segmented turning could come up with at the time. That fired my passion to create more accurate segmented turnings and more pleasing shapes."

I asked Curt about his background. His grandparents had gone west from Ohio in early 1900s. In 1918 his grandfather bought a section of land (640 acres) in Pine Bluffs, then a mere cluster of buildings a half-mile from the Nebraska border. The land was High Plains land, over 5000 feet elevation. "The top soil was thin and more sand than loam. He was a wheat farmer," Curt said, "winter wheat and he grazed some beef cattle." We were looking out the shop window. The wind had whipped the surface layer into a dust cloud not quite as thick as a Nantucket fog. "A little bit of this wind goes a long way." It's almost always windy there in the daytime in winter. "It dies down little at night,"

he said.

His dad works the farm now. He has accumulated more land, built the farm up to 2000 acres. Winter wheat needs a long spell of sub-freezing weather to germinate. While it's germinating, his dad does carpentry, puts up some metal pre-fabricated buildings and generally makes use of his ability to repair or fix "almost anything". He has stopped grazing cattle, "No money in it anymore." And he's not much inspired with Curt's work ethic.

### An indefatigable work ethic

"My dad is a 5 o'clock riser, always has been. If I'm not in the shop "doing" at 6 a.m., he thinks I'm screwing off. The fact that I'm out here in the shop at 11 p.m. after a full day in my cabinetry business doesn't do it for my dad."

At age 20, Curt left home. He'd had a year at the community college

and was not satisfied that more "formal" education was going to get him anywhere. He traveled south and east working road construction, and building concrete forms. This is itinerant work, so he had a Post Office box to call home. By the age of 22 he was a foreman. "Some of the guys didn't like it, me being a foreman at 22 and not very big at that, but I was the foreman and I'd get the job done. And if they didn't like it, well too bad." He did some power line work. Worked on the housings of rock crushers. Then one day he woke up in his motel, saw his suitcases at his feet and said "I don't want to do this anymore." He was 26.

### Becoming a cabinetmaker

Returning to the Cheyenne area he got a job in a cabinet shop. Again he worked, watched, listened and learned. Curt is a quick study. Within a couple of years the owner said, "You stay out here and build the cabinets. I'll go on into the office and estimate the jobs." Curt stayed there for another three years before going out on his own. Today he has a very successful cabinet business.

He married late, just about a year ago. "Finding a bride is easy. The trick is finding the right bride. Marrying Wanda was the best thing that ever happened to me," he says with a little nod of conviction.

When his grandmother decided she'd like to move into the town of Pine Bluffs he graciously agreed to take over her house. His dad built her a new house, in town near him. So now Curt operates his cabinet business from his shop on the farm and it is here that his segmented turnings come to life.

### First, a full-size drawing

"My segmented turnings begin with a full-scale drawing to use as a blueprint. I often use colored pencils to shade in different patterns so I can



Explorations in Segmented Turning: Clockwise, from above left: Sandblasted Bloodwood, Holly, and Ebony 4-in. high, 5-in. diameter. The Ebony base and rim were left smooth while the body was aggressively textured. Top, left: Pear, Ebony and Bloodwood, 8-in. high and 10-in. diameter; above, right: Imbuaya and Pear, 8-in. high and 4-in. diameter.

better see what the finished piece will look like."

The Shopsmith incidentally, was replaced by a Woodfast bowl lathe, which has since been replaced by a Oneway. He cuts most of the small pieces that he uses to assemble the segments with a big DeWalt chop saw. "I like using a saw that cuts down instead of up when I'm cutting small pieces." His primary sander is a heavy old disk sander with a good table. Sort of the old Oliver lathe of disk sanders. He uses a 1/2-in Glaser gouge for most of his turning.

"Segmented turning is not for the

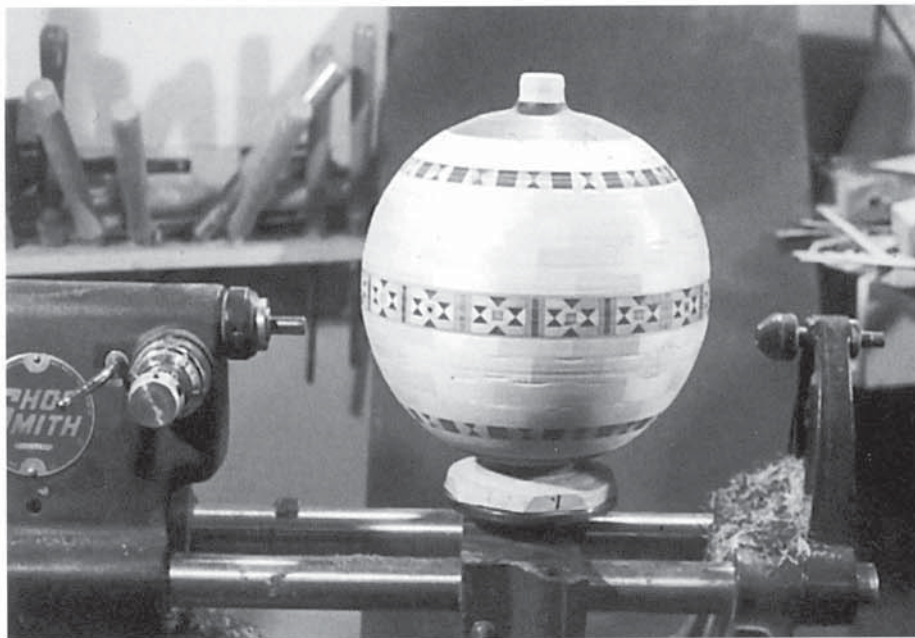
timid. I've learned the hard way that correct grain orientation, precise measurements, accurate sanding jigs, proper tool usage and quality sanding techniques are all vital to good segmented turning."

### An 80-hour disaster

"I spent 80 hours on a 16-in. platter only to have it come apart three months later when winter came and the humidity changed. I called Ray Allen. After a few minutes of discussion, he asked me about my grain orientation. Bingo! My grain orientation was mixed. The grain has to be



## A Shopsmith And A Dream



Theobald's current work, like the piece shown above left, is precise and sophisticated, an exercise in perfection, but he started out with only a Shopsmith and a fascination to learn and master the intricacies of segmented turning, a demanding discipline which he says is not for the timid. One of his early pieces is shown on the old Shopsmith; the piece at left is titled "Lightning Snake." It's 4-in. high and 5 in. in diameter and assembled with Holly, Jarrah, Pear and Ebony.

running all the same direction so that when the wood moves, which it is guaranteed to do, it moves at the same ratio. Moisture content is also critical to minimize the wood's movement. I don't put a piece of wood in a turning unless it is at or under 6% moisture content."

### Working in thousandths

"Precise measurements are critical. As a segmented turner, I use thousandths of an inch, not  $\frac{1}{16}$ ths or  $\frac{1}{32}$ nds. The glue joints have to fit perfectly or loose joints will occur. I use a machinist caliper with a dial indicator to make all my measurements. It is also easier to do the math on the segment widths using thousandths rather than fractional inches."

"Accurate sanding jigs are the key to a successful segmented turning. I go to great lengths to make my sanding jigs as accurate as I can. I check their accuracy with my machinist calipers and try to get them as

close to perfect as possible. I may spend six hours adjusting one jig before I can use it confidently. That jig is used to sand all the pieces that go into a turning, including the edges of the  $\frac{1}{28}$ -in. veneer that I may use. If the pieces don't fit perfectly, I don't glue them together. Glue will only magnify any open joint that you have. Some may say this is overkill, but I challenge them to find a loose joint in one of my turnings."

### Perfection as goal

Curt is a "practical perfectionist". He sands to 1200-grit inside and out. He has developed a nine-step process of finishing that concludes by hand buffing a piece, inside and out, with a brown paper bag. Note: this bag must have no seams and no printing. Unlike many artists "perfectionism" isn't an excuse not to grow, it is simply a goal.

Curt is a smart, determined, meticulous, young man, 35-years-old. He

has no debts, paid more for his wide-belt sander than he has ever paid for a car. He says very sincerely, "Each piece I turn and every blueprint I make are learning experiences for me and provide me with a sense of accomplishment, especially as I see the finished piece take shape."

Ray Allen left us a treasured legacy and an expectation of segmented turning that we would never have had without him. Bud Latven, applying some of the same techniques to his own esthetic, has broadened the horizon of this rich legacy. Curt Theobald may further expand and enrich our world as his expressions in segmented turning continue to evolve and find their own esthetic. He has the skills, the determination and the heart that it takes to break new ground in the world of wood art.

*Ken Keoughan is a turner in Friendship, ME, and a Contributing Editor at American Woodturner.*