



Antique Restoration and Wood Crafting

Text and Photos by Al Cornell

Tom and Sally McMahon live on a ridgetop west of Boaz where a buried REC line delivers their electricity. Tom restores antique furniture, but it has not always been that way.

Though Tom took some shop classes in high school, his interest in woodworking was really piqued by his uncle's father, who was a cabinet maker. The chance to help out there set the stage for creative woodworking.

The first interruption was a tour of duty in Viet Nam. Tom was an infantry staff sergeant and received two purple hearts for being wounded in action.

Back in the states, he married Sally in 1971 while he was working toward his two master's degrees from Northern Illinois University in DeKalb. The city had "junk days" during which people set old furniture and other stuff by the curb. It would be collected and hauled to a dump if nobody took it. Since they were surviving on the GI bill, Tom found it challenging and beneficial to collect and repair various household furnishings.

Soon he was teaching a variety of art courses at Forest View High School in Arlington Heights and Harper College in Palatine, Illinois. Gradually, he prioritized teaching design and photography. He was also building a business and was soon doing all of the music instrument repair for seven music stores in the Chicago area.



Then 1984 marked the time for a change. The McMahons purchased a 56-acre farm near Boaz. But how do you make a living in this area? There were odd jobs, but there was also a daughter closing the gap toward college age.

It looked like dairying was the logical choice. Tom repaired the barn, and they bought 18 cows. From there the farm grew to 350 acres owned and additional fields rented. It peaked at over 140 cows milked.

Looking back, Tom is not so sure dairy farming was the best choice for paying for a child's college.

Tom's open heart surgery in 2000 necessitated the next change. As things sorted themselves out, the couple ended up with a house on acreage from a piece of the farm. Sally

went to work for Foremost in Richland Center, and Tom started building a woodcraft and antique restoration business.

He had a booth at the Antique Store in Richland Center and later moved into space in the downstairs of the City Auditorium. Tom's touch in antique restoration soon became known, and indeed he had full-time work doing what he loves. His creativity resonates from various furnishings in their house and the projects he is working on in the nearby shop.

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Two years ago, Tom determined it was no longer necessary to advertise. Individuals who need a family heirloom restored or other wood projects done constitute the majority of his clients.

Antique dealers account for some of his projects. He said, "At one time, an antique dealer from Texas brought a whole truckload of antiques that needed repair. He had purchased them from various places. I worked on them for over two years, and he returned to take part of them a couple of different times."

Tom has done some restorations for the Stone Cottage Museum in Platteville and the Gundry House in Mineral Point, and he's restored a mirror frame for Villa Louis in Prairie du

Chien. He also repaired a 4x8-foot painting of the inside of the first barbershop in Dickeyville. That painting hangs in the Grant County Courthouse.

He described restoring two oil paintings for the Stone Cottage. They are of the man and woman who built the first European settler's house in Grant County. He had to remove the original backing from the oil paintings by first attaching them face down on other material. Then he removed the old



1. A reproduction of a seventeenth century blanket chest with a modern piece sitting on it.
2. A reproduction of a William and Mary dressing table.

On page 15: Tom McMahon stands in front of some tools in his shop beside a spinning wheel that needs to be restored.



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3. This historical piece is a desk from the Richland Center Women's Relief Corp that Tom restored. 4. Tom attached a piece of wood to a board and carved an applied carving that will be glued onto furniture. 5. There is something attractive inside those old boards, and Tom will pull it out when he needs to restore an antique.

backing and transferred them to new canvas. Then he removed the material from the face of the paintings and did touch-up restoration.

He gets a lot of projects through Internet connections. He was a bit surprised when he was contacted by a woman in Indonesia. It turned out that she was from Richland County and returns here once a year. The cabinet she wanted restored was over here. She delivered it to him when she was back and picked it up the next year.

Tom said, "In order to restore old furniture, I need old lumber. I cannot go to a lumber yard and purchase a pine board to restore a 150-year-old piece. I purchase old lumber when I can find it and have it on hand for projects." That explained the piles of old boards around his shop.

He also makes custom-designed furniture and reproductions. Furnishings in their house include restoration pieces and

newly crafted pieces of his unique design.

Large shops that produce many copies of particular patterns with their cutter head tools come to Tom for those one- or a-few-of-a-kind pieces that he can fashion by hand. They lose money on those pieces if they have cutters made for them.

About two times per year, the Society of American Period Furniture Makers acquires Tom's services to demonstrate various techniques. Next, he will be demonstrating the art of creating applied carvings at their meeting in Pewaukee. These are elaborately designed pieces that are glued to furniture. He attaches the piece of wood he is working on to a board, and, with his various hand tools, extracts a delicate piece of art from that piece of wood.

Often the folks who are doing the thing they really enjoy got there by a circuitous route, and some of them ended up in the hill country before they found it. 📍



STRAWBERRIES AND WET HENS

Sometimes getting accustomed to the ways of some of our city-bred neighbors

who moved to the country took some patience. Tom C. moved into the neighborhood with little or no knowledge of farming and country life. One time he stopped by our farm and noticed we were picking strawberries on a hot June afternoon. "There must be a better way," he said to my dad. "That's seems like a rather unpleasant task, picking strawberries with a hot sun blazing down on you."

Not long after that encounter, we stopped by Tom's place. "Let me show you my strawberry patch," he said.

Pa and I looked in disbelief, for Tom had planted a couple of rows of strawberries under a big maple tree that shaded his backyard. "Lot easier to pick strawberries in the shade than sweating under a hot summer sun." Pa didn't have the heart to tell him that strawberries needed full sun to amount to anything, and he likely wouldn't have one berry to pick in the shade.

Another time when we'd stopped by Tom's place he wanted to show off his flock of chickens. Pa expected that maybe he had bought a hundred or so laying hens, which is what we did every year. When we arrived we saw a small cluster of chickens scratching around in the chicken yard.

"Where are the rest of them?" Pa asked. "Our chicken flock is about 150 laying hens."

"Oh, goodness, we wouldn't want that many hens. We couldn't come up with that many names," said Tom.

"You name your chickens?" Pa asked, not sure he had heard correctly.

"Sure, don't you? After all they are a part of our family."

"Well, I'll be," is all that Pa could think to say.

Just then, Tom whistled loudly. The chickens quit scratching and lifted their heads, and began trotting toward where we stood near the farmhouse.

"Here Mary," Tom said as he tossed a piece of bread to the first chicken to arrive at his feet.

"Here Florence," he said as he tossed a bread crust to another plump bird.

He continued tossing hunks of bread, calling out the chickens' names—Amy, Debbie, and Louise. Ruth, Martha, and Eleanor. He continued calling names until all 20 had been named and fed a hunk of bread.

Tom had a problem with wild animals. It seems a fox had run off with one of the chickens and he asked Pa what to do about it.

"Here's what you do," said Pa. "Tie a string around one of your chicken's legs and tie it to a stake in the woods. Then you crawl up in a tree with your gun, and when the fox comes to grab your chicken you shoot the fox."

"Oh, but I could never subject one of the family to such cruelty," said Tom. We later learned that they only used the eggs from their small flock of chickens and would never consider eating one of them. We never did hear what he eventually did about the hungry fox.



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