



# WOOD FORUM

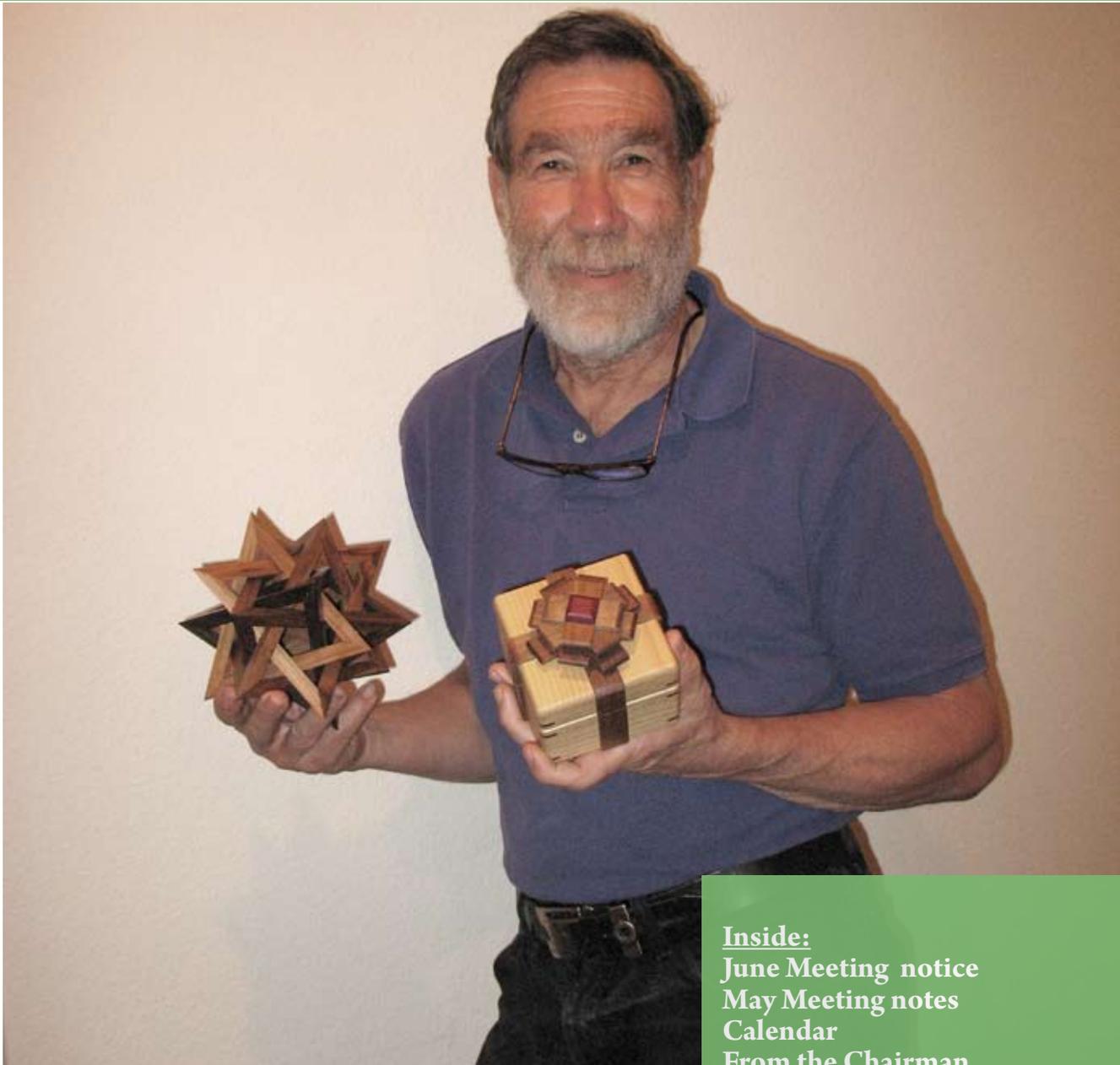
Newsletter of the Sonoma County Woodworkers Association

[www.sonomawoodworkers.com](http://www.sonomawoodworkers.com)

Volume 30 Number 06

June 2010

## May Meeting: A visit with George Miller, puzzler master!



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## June Meeting Notice

**Who:** Karl Shumaker / Greg Zall

**When:** June 1st 7:00 pm

**Where:** Karl Shumaker's Shop 715 West Sexton, , Sebastopol

**Contact:** Karl Shumaker 829-8209

### Information/Directions:

Our next meeting will take place on Tuesday, June 1 at 7 PM at Karl Shumaker's shop in Sebastopol. The topic is Two Approaches to Marquetry, one being Karl's, the other, Greg Zall's. Both are acknowledged masters as you know if you have followed our Artistry in Wood shows over the past several years. The Karl's shop is 715 Bodega Avenue, Sebastopol, CA 95472.

**Directions:** from Sebastopol head out Bodega Avenue, which is the extension of Highway 12 for three miles or so from center of Sebastopol, to Sexton Road, which is a left turn. Proceed for a half mile and turn left on West Sexton Road., and go up the hill to 715. Karl says that there is good space for parking.

### May Meeting Notes by Art Hofmann

Michael Wallace began our May meeting, by asking if any guests were present. There were two of them, both from SAW, the Sacramento Area Woodworkers Association - Andrew Silvester, current President and Gary Foster, a past President. Michael then went on with other business topics. First asking members who hadn't paid their dues for this year to remedy this. Membership tally stands in the high eighties as of now, George Nostrant, our treasurer, informed us. Next, Bill Taft, Show Chair, was queried as to the status of this year's show, which is to be held in early September. All under control according to Bill. Art Hofmann told us that the show judges were Loy Martin, a well-known professional woodworker and teacher of woodwork, now retired, who lives on the Peninsula, Jim Budlong, a long time teacher at the Fine Woodworking Program at College of the Redwoods in Ft. Bragg, and finally, as someone with a strength in woodturning, our own David Marks.

Bill Hartman had some announcements: Wine Country Woodworkers will be meeting May 18th at Bill Hartman's shop at Rancho Cotate High School. Bill also thanked Bob Moyer for his help as a volunteer aide in his shop. Bob said that he really enjoys the experience, and that Bill certainly needs the help. Don Naples announced that he had a load of wood – for free – in his truck outside the meeting room, mainly circles of various solid and plywoods, remnants from the speaker construction aspect of his business, as well as some strips of solid oak from pews originally from a church in Petaluma.

Art Hofmann introduced the evening's speaker, George Miller, a puzzle aficionado from Sonoma, who collects puzzles and makes them as well, out of wood and plastic. George brought many wooden and a few plastic puzzles along. He arrayed them on a table which was adjusted to be more in the center of the room with the members arranged in a kind of loose circle around it. George informed us, that some of the wooden puzzles cost more than \$1,000! He encouraged picture taking and questions. He rewarded the questioners with a present of a puzzle of his own design and making, which was constructed of very thin masonite. George said that he could solve all the puzzles be brought along but certainly didn't make them all. Bill Hartman wanted to know right off, if any of the puzzles could be made by a high school student, and indeed there was one.

George defined puzzles as those that are manipulative puzzles. First, for a brief history, apparently puzzles flourish with leisure, a

rarity in the ancient past. One however was discovered – at least in document form, attributed in Archimedes, roughly 250 B.C.E. Then there was a large gap until the 1700's, when puzzles thrive in Holland, with its flourishing trade, wealth, and the necessary leisure. The International Puzzle Party (IPP), of which George is an active member, scours the world for antique and ancient puzzles, so puzzle history is fairly well known. The '15 puzzle', which was developed in the 1880's by puzzle master, Sam Lloyd, was very popular for a long time. This is the one many of us played with when were young, with the sliding plastic numbers in a base that had to be arranged in proper order, from 1 to 15. It wasn't until 1977 or so that it was superseded in popularity by the Rubik's cube according to George.



*The front triangle puzzle was made by Lee Krasnow*

The first puzzle George showed, was a Japanese puzzle box, inlaid with a repeated star forming veneer on the outsides. Patterns are built in long thin staves, glued up, and then cross cut manually by hand with a very sharp draw knife. In terms of its basic construction, it is very clever. The puzzle panels slide slightly and in definite sequences, making it is very difficult to get open. His next puzzle was the notched burr puzzle. The six piece burr being an old standby and could be built by high school woodworkers.

In making a burr puzzle, one must ask, does it come apart, can it be put together, does it have integrity? One member recalled an article by an IBM engineer, who had written an article now on a website, that specified construction and solving of such puzzles. George told us that he knew the man personally, and assured us that the engineer is a card carrying member of the IPP. Six piece burr versions come in some variety. Some have holes and others have holes filled with ball bearings that have to be turned a certain way to work. Obviously these are devilishly hard to solve.

Another question asked was: are most valuable puzzles these days being made for collector? Most puzzles are nowadays made cheaply, mass manufactured. Many of us knew of George through his work as co-curator of the "Puzzles as Art" show last year for the Sonoma Valley Museum of Art. The show had over a 100 rare and not so rare puzzles many were from George's private collection. So, this lead to a discussion of Art vs. Puzzles. 'Art' is rather at times,

expensive for what it is, at least from George's point of view. Puzzles on the other hand, which might take months to create, are supposed to be priced rather inexpensively because that is the perception that most people have about them. George feels that paintings should sell for a low price, and puzzles for a high one. A discussion followed about the matter of difficulty in puzzles. It is very easy to make a puzzle too hard which makes it no fun to try and solve. Puzzles can be scaled up to the point of being too hard even for computers to solve. The ideal is some sort medium range of solvability.

Puzzles are made of a wide variety of materials, but serious collectors, of which there are 400 worldwide, like creativity, and prize, even love – wooden puzzles, because they like the look, the rarity of the wood, its feel, and the fact that it is handcrafted. An example of this type of wood puzzle George brought along, had an intricate wooden lock, and a series of cuts that were designed to open in a definite but complicated manner. Secret compartment makers might learn something here. Despite its well known tendencies to move continually with temperature and humidity, wood seems the medium of choice for true collectors,



*Some of the fine wood puzzles in George's collection*

Collecting puzzles as a serious endeavor only really started about 30 years ago. In the last twenty years there has been an explosion of puzzle designs and types. They have become numerous because of computers and automation, like CNC machines. Complexity is also prized by collectors. Some puzzles have magnets inside, others steel rods that slip or lock dependent on tilt, little steel bearings or a compass that demands orientation with the north pole.

The IPP is thirty years old, with many countries represented. It searches the world for puzzles. In their travels, members even found a puzzle museum in Ulan Bator, Mongolia. The IPP has one major meeting per year, this year's being in Osaka, Japan. At meetings, it is a tradition to exchange puzzles and that members prize something new, creative and not on the open market. Typically, a member arrives with 100 new puzzles of one's own making, and receives a similar number.

The aim of the puzzle business is to get 'published', namely, taken up by a business sponsor, who duplicates, distributes and sells your work. This is considered the height of success. There are four major publishers of puzzles; Bits and Pieces, a company with an online presence, is one such publisher, which George is quite familiar with. If someone steals a puzzle he is thrown out of the IPP. Stealing, it should be noted has

not been a major problem within the IPP. George demonstrated a puzzle that he took to the last IPP meeting. It demands simultaneous motions to solve. It can also be put together sequentially. George had laser etched faces of Laurel and Hardy on the face of this puzzle. If you don't solve it correctly, the faces don't appear correctly.

George has collected puzzles since childhood, but got seriously hooked at a friend's fiftieth birthday party, where he worked on a beautiful wood 'snake' puzzle made in Thailand. (George demonstrated on a snake puzzle made of orange and white plastic as he was describing all of this.) He didn't solve it at that time, but started thinking about solving it, and wrote a computer program for solving it, which showed that there were 2,339 ways of solving it. This sparked his collection interest. One year while in London, he found vendor selling the 'snake' puzzle, who told him about the IPP. George applied for membership, and has been an avid member ever since. A high point for him, was the 2009 IPP meeting which was held in San Francisco. The group was brought up to Sonoma County from the city on buses, where they enjoyed George's pool, the grand view of Mt. Tam and Mt. Diablo, wine and dined, and visited the show at the Sonoma Museum of Art, where George's puzzle exhibit was held. By the way, membership in the IPP is by invite only.

George next discussed woodworking techniques for building puzzles. Foremost is a gluing jig. A layer is laid down, glue is applied, and layers are built up and pressure applied. Small amounts of glue are only used. If you use lots of glue, all you have is a solid block of attractive wood. If that happens, one remedy is to take the whole thing to the microwave, where twenty seconds undoes the glue. George likes white glue, not phenolic glue. He said yellow glue would work, as well. George then showed a puzzle that had been given as a present at an IPP meeting. It was very small, and held together with a piece of scotch tape, which as it turned out was integral to its being taken apart before solving.

Finally, as an example of fine craftsmanship, George showed a puzzle made by Lee Krasnow which had very sharp angles and a highly polished look. The elements that had to be pulled apart to solve it were held in place with magnets (**Note:** this puzzle is shown on page 2). No sandpaper was used, as it would have ruined the work. Krasnow thinks everything through. He has his saw blades ground to certain specifications. The wood is pushed through the saw by means of jigs, very, very slowly. Lately, Krasnow employs robotics to push his wood through his table saw, first somewhat faster and at the end of the cut, much slower. In effect, the cuts are made so slowly and carefully, and with very sharp blades, that they result in what appear to be polished surfaces.

More info on Lee Krasnow can be found at: <http://www.pacificpuzzleworks.com/>

At that point, the general focus of the meeting shifted, with George showing puzzles to several members at a time, while many of the other puzzles circulated around the room from hand to hand eliciting smiles and a series of interesting conversations. In the final quarter hour of the meeting the tone changed to one of general amusement, outright laughter and delight at these intrinsically fascinating little objects. Finally, at the urging of yours truly, the puzzles were put aside for a moment in order to give George Miller a hearty and well deserved round of enthusiastic applause. A good time was had by all.

## Calendar

July 10 - 9:15 AM Berkeley Mills, **Saturday**. In Berkeley.

August 3 - Guild-based presentation coordinated by Larry Stroud

September - Artistry in Wood

## From the Chairman

Hello again,

Shiny toys. Seems to be a problem with me, probably since childhood. I just get easily distracted by the next thing. I have a shop filled with wondrous tools, jigs, plans, (toys you might say), but it never seems sufficient. When I want something new and my mind gets set on this, nothing helps me to put the thought away and concentrate on what I have on hand. Lately, I have been looking at scrollsaws. I think it got triggered by the thought of this month's meeting on marquetry. Once I started to dig into my magazine archive to look at scrollsaw projects, I came across intarsia. At first it looked like something that was a bit too "crafty", but then I saw some that were just amazing. That led me to the library (our local library is just a font of books on woodworking, as it shares the system with Mendocino, and specifically Fort Bragg (think College of the Redwoods)). I got out one book, then I decided I need to buy a book. Now, that I got in my mind how to do this work, I then need to look at my machine inventory. Hmm, no scrollsaw. Looks like I now need to review scrollsaws.

The problem is that I delve into situations like this all too easily. I guess I think that the next tool will get me into the shop more. I can recall when I got my bandsaw. Whoopee, I silently said, I can really do some interesting things now. A year later, it still stands ready and has hardly any sawdust on it. I've moved on.

The cure for this is lack of money. Recently, I became a member of the "under-resourced" crowd. The part-time job that I thought would last for a long while, sort of just faded. It might come back or not. However, it has crimped my impulse to rush out and buy the next thing that I am absolutely convinced will get me into the shop more. So now, I am forced to deal with my shop, (remember, it's got lots of good things in it) as is. Now, I am building with what I have.

The big benefit of this is that I am renewing my skill set. Every tool I pick up forces me to think about how to use it safely and correctly. Just the other week, I had to rout some edges, and dang it, I just thought I knew what direction to rout. But, it wasn't right. After my clumsy attempt, I got out my instructional material (books, magazines, web pages) and realized how I was doing it wrong. Relieved that all I'm doing is having some fun in making a shop cart, I now know that when I am routing some expensive wood, I will know what direction to go in.

See, I didn't need a shiny new toy as a reason to get into my shop. I just needed to "get into the shop" and do. What did Yoda say? "No try, do!".

Say if you missed last month's meeting with George Miller, you missed a good one. George is one interesting person and the puzzles he bought alone (most out of wood), where both works of high craftsmanship and tricky problems to resolve. I saw our membership just touching, pushing, pulling on George's collection, trying to understand how some of them came apart or open up.

If anyone would like to know more about how to make wooden puzzles, look at the website:

**<http://puzzleworld.org/>**

There is a link to some wonderful books and websites that shows you how to build some very nice puzzles.

Wait a minute! Is this becoming a shiny new toy too? Uh, oh!

Michael

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**Join Us!** The Sonoma County Woodworkers Association is a 31-year old association of over one hundred professional and amateur woodworkers who meet monthly at members' shops to share experiences, ideas, techniques, and mutual enjoyment for creating with wood. Membership entitles you to attend monthly meetings, receive Wood Forum, our monthly newsletter, attend our annual show, and apply for seminars and demonstrations. Annual dues, payable at the beginning of each calendar year, are \$25. New members joining after September 30 may, for \$35, have their membership extend through December 31 of the following year. Please consider joining the SCWA and meeting people who, like yourself, are interested in the art and business of fine woodworking. Send dues to:

**PO Box 4176, Santa Rosa, CA 95402 Santa Rosa, CA 95402**

*Wood Forum* is the monthly newsletter of the Sonoma County Woodworkers Association. Please feel free to submit articles, notices, photographs, announcements, and comments for inclusion in the publication. Advertisements are accepted with a per-entry cost of \$5 per column inch. All submissions for the June issue must be received by June 15, 2010. You may submit your entries to the editor listed below.

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## MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

Yes, I would like to join the SCWA and meet other people who are interested in the craft, the art, and the business of fine woodworking. Here is my application. I have enclosed a check for the annual dues of \$25 that covers my subscription to Wood Forum and entitles me to attend the monthly meetings.

Send check and completed application to: Sonoma County Woodworkers Association  
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