



WOOD FORUM

Newsletter of the Sonoma County Woodworkers Association

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Relax and Enjoy the Summer

The meeting with Tripp Carpenter at his shop in Bolinas on Saturday, July 9th has been cancelled. Tripp has been working very hard, and wants to take some time off in July. Working hard for a long period without some time off isn't healthy, he says. I'm sure we can agree with that. We will do our best to re-schedule at a future date. Stay tuned for that. Meanwhile, it is summer and the weather is fairly good. There is lots to do and enjoy, projects to build and our annual show to get ready for.

Art Hofmann



Sharing the Secrets

by Art Hofmann

The June 2 meeting got underway at 7:00 pm. Bill Taft thanked Michael Cullen for hosting the group. Bill asked if there were any new members in attendance; there were several who introduced themselves. He then reminded us that *Artistry in Wood* is coming up. The two major dates are September 8, which is Entry Day at the Sonoma County Museum, and Judgment Day, the evening with the judges on Wednesday, September 14.

Art Hofmann announced the July meeting (since cancelled) at Bolinas at the shop of Tripp Carpenter, Art's son. He then introduced Len Brackett, a woodworker in the traditional Japanese style, who studied in Japan and adapted his skills to Western requirements. Len came to us from Nevada City in the Sierras.

Len Brackett gave us a very nice talk about learning carpentry in Japan. As a young man, just after finishing Reed College in Portland, Len set off for a world tour, but made it only to Kyoto, where he became enchanted with the temple architecture and the relationship of the gardens to the buildings.

Kyoto was his first stop, and he never went any further. The city is the size of San Francisco, incredibly dense, and has about 2500 temples and 1500 Shinto shrines. It is a city with much cultural history, which he compares to Paris or Rome. He had been a Zen student and a cook at Tassajara, and wanted to continue with his meditative practice. One place open to him was Daiko Toji, and he asked the abbot if he could sit every

morning. One morning, during an interview, the abbot asked what he intended to do with himself, and he blurted that he wanted to study temple carpentry. The abbot, who was the Japanese equivalent of the Archbishop of Canterbury, was very well connected and introduced him to the best temple carpenter in Japan. He had no prior woodworking experience. The temple carpenter told him that it would take five years, and he decided to do it, understanding only that it was an amazing opportunity.



Hido-san became his teacher. The people around him were extremely skilled, and very polite and sweet to him, at least for the first six months, until they decided that he was serious, and then things got heavy. But this, too, was a gift. Their view was that he would be there for only five years, so he needed to learn a lot, since the real apprenticeship took fifteen years. The work was ten hours a day, seven days a week, with one day off every two months or so. If the Japanese can come up with a Lexus

in thirty years, akin to Mercedes or BMW, then in fifteen hundred years, they can work out the kinks in woodworking. It is like a body of knowledge comparable to classical music. Each generation adds to the knowledge. There are specialist carpenters in temple building, tea house construction, and box making, etc. Japan is an organic culture in the sense that it is like an old growth eco-system. There are tool makers, plasterers and copper-roof makers. The early twentieth

century produced some of the finest tools made in Japan, when the sword makers turned to making tools for working wood, after sword carrying had been deemed illegal in the Meiji Restoration.



Photos this page by Jose Cuervo

Len began as an apprentice and did most of his work on Buddhist temples in Kyoto. His company was selected to restore an Imperial Shrine. For his teacher to do this work, Hido-san had to go through two months of purification rituals. That this hi-tech culture has a Neolithic side to it is one of things that makes Japan so charming. There was virtually no time off, but it was interesting work.

When he returned to the U.S. he found that he knew something about Japanese woodworking, but nothing about Western building practices and contracting. He had a strong desire to build a Japanese house, so he borrowed money from his brother and built a house in the woods north of Nevada City. People came and said, This is lovely, it belongs in museum! Fine, he thought, but how do I make a living of this, when Americans want furniture and don't want to live in a



cold house. What about code requirements, and most importantly, what about Western expectations? They want a house that is sealed from the elements, warm, and with indoor plumbing. The problem, as Len saw it, was how to retain the form, which is lovely, but

make it congenial with the Western life-style. He is still working on this after a long career in the business.

Building the Japanese House Today (2005) is a book that took five years to write; it was written twice. After readying it for publishing, Len and co-author Peggy

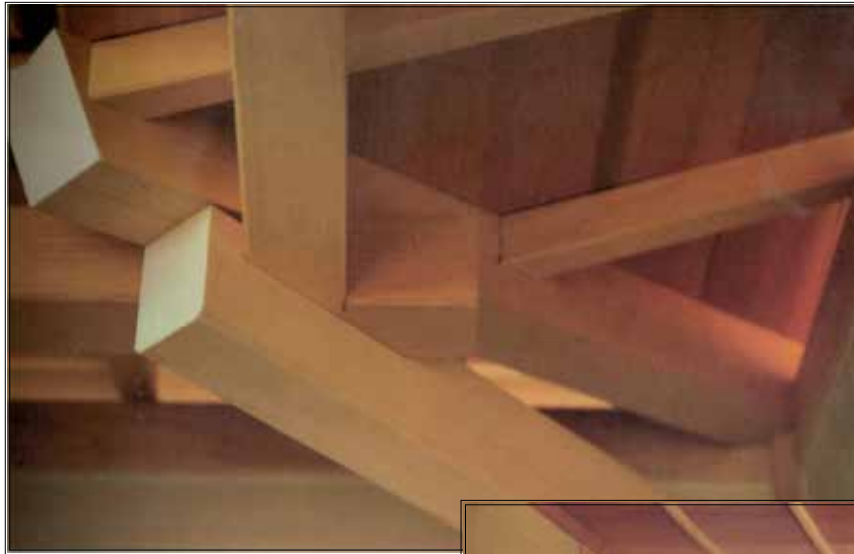
Landers Rao decided to re-write it. Though the book is still current in its information, Len and his team have come a long way since its publication in modifying the Japanese home for Western requirements.

In response to a question about the language barrier, Len said that he married a Japanese girl and became proficient at Japanese, though far from perfect. The lack of real ability with the language was a boon in that it kept him from asking questions about complicated things. When he did ask questions, he was told to be silent. Just pay attention! Once, he asked about fan rafters, and listened to the explanation long after losing the thread; he realized then that it was just as well not to speak Japanese so well.

Len at first learned how to plane for several years. He sees this now as a great experience, though he didn't see it that way at the time. He wanted to be cutting joints, but was told that they were easy, and depended on layout. The difficult tool was the handplane. He was about the only person of his generation to have this experience. In 1970, Japan was emerging into the world economy, and had electric handplanes and planers and jointers.

He stopped his apprenticeship after five years and a total of seven years in Japan. At that moment, he felt that he was in a straitjacket: quoting C.P. Snow on China, he said, "social pressure weighs five tons." Citing several key moments, he said that he felt constricted by the expectations of his peers, not to mention his masters, and by the landscape, so that he knew in his heart that he had to go. Matsomoto-san, his teacher, saw his wife and family only once a year. The man, who lived carpentry, could adze a wide

board flat to within a sixteenth of an inch – a man who looked homeless, raggedy and unshaven, and was one of the best carpenters in Japan. Len counts himself lucky for the whole experience, but after seven years in Japan decided to return to the U.S.



Len then turned the conversation to planing. The blocks of his planes, he apologized, might not be quite up to standards, having been in his hot car all day. He set himself up on Michael Cullen's bench with a stop and some water for a sharpening



stone. Len set about planing a piece of Port Orford cedar and explaining the process. The planed surface is smooth, compared to a sanded surface, which under magnification looks like it was dragged down the road. The only finish in a Japanese house is the planed surface. He used a fine grit stone from a mine north of Kyoto. He also had a 1000 grit ceramic sharpening stone, but those were his only stones. He also used a scraper plane to adjust his block, which wasn't

performing perfectly. Len has made his own blocks, but never the steel, laminated like all Japanese blades. Asked about hollows in the bottom of the block, he pointed out how the plane bottom contacts the surface at given points. His comment: this must be very subtle, and you don't want to overdo it. He turned to a finish plane and did some tapping on the block and iron. A lot of planing is just being able to see the blade. Test cuts were made, and further adjustments. He produced some very fine shavings. When you are cutting with a tool that sharp, you get a really nice finish.

Other finishes? If he does a tokonoma or art alcove, then he uses a finish, usually an automotive acrylic finish, though very hard to work with. His company? We are craftsmen but work with clients from the design

process on. Modifications on Japanese houses? Weather stripping, insulation, and some elements of design. The Japanese sit on the floor, Westerners stand or sit, thus the eye level is higher. In fact, Len thinks that one of the inspirations for the ranch house that sprang up after WWII began after soldiers came back from Japan, where the idea entrenched itself in their minds based on the houses they saw there.

Photo by Karl Rudman

For a practical approach to Japanese planes and tools, Len recommends Toshio Odate's book, *Japanese Woodworking Tools: Their Tradition, Spirit and Use* (1998), which he finds well done and true. Len is a real enthusiast of Japanese planes. The Japanese square is very easy to use and he is a proponent of that tool also; they are obtainable marked in inches, and on the back they have the square root of two scale, which he finds invaluable in doing hip rafters. Marking gauges are really neat. A woman named Suzuki sells Japanese tools

from a company called Suzuki-ya and which can be found at suzukitool.com. You can find very good tools through her. She is trying to support the remaining, and now aging and dying tool maker community in Japan. Planes fall into all price brackets, well into the multi-thousand dollar range, with very good planes in the \$150 range. His teacher gave him a ten thousand dollar plane, which he did not bring with him this evening. Len promised to use it up before he dies. There are some young guys, university graduates who don't want to work for a bank, who make tools and do really excellent work. But they are few.

In response to a question from Larry Stroud about the younger generation of carpenters, who were rebuilding the old bridges and such, Len embarked on a disquisition about Japanese culture. His wife's family, he said, lived in the same village for the last six hundred years. If one of the family had moved to the next village over, the question would have been 'Why?' with the implication that they had done something wrong. Her whole life was planned from the time she was a child: whom she was going to marry, her work, everything, including where she would live. In the meanwhile, Japan has become rich and traditional culture unmoored. Len is a friend of the poet Gary Snyder, and they talk about this a lot. Gary said that "there is nothing more destructive to traditional culture than money." Young people leave the countryside for the cities, where the air may be worse qualitatively but better socially and financially. In the old days, options for a life in the trades existed, but the applicant faced a hard life in a strict culture. The city wins out. True, the government subsidizes the re-building of National Treasures, but there are really

very few of them, though the term is bandied about a good deal here. The government picked out one or two buildings of a given style and offered to help maintain it as it was. The average temple does not qualify. Living National Treasures are masters who are supported by the government in order to maintain their apprentices, so that their specialized technique does not vanish.



Photos this page by Jose Cuervo

Len then demonstrated a chamfering plane, saying that it is a useful tool. It gave a wonderful crisp chamfer on the Port Orford cedar, as he demonstrated. It is necessary to pre-sharpen the back, making it perfectly flat, adjust the block, and the chipper to the blade. This led to a plane blade sharpening demonstration,

accompanied by a discourse on the physicality of Japanese culture, which extends to woodworking and plane blade sharpening. Standing throws one out of balance. Len sharpened in a crouched position. Len brought an ali ama stone that he used. A stone is purchased in Japan only after being tried out for awhile, sometimes three or four times.

He has no difficulty finding people who want to work at East Wind, his company. They do use power tools wherever they can, otherwise their work would be too expensive. He built two of the buildings on the famous Paul Disco job, where he met others, such as Chris Weiss, who presented to us last year. East Wind works with clients that range from schoolteachers to billionaires. Len always encourages people to build smaller houses. Japanese homes use half the space for a given function compared to Western homes. He advocates public and private parts of a house, the former Western, the latter Japanese. Sleep on a futon on a tatami and you can cut a third off your floor area. A room with a dining table demands three hundred square feet. He has served twelve people breakfast in a four and half mat room, 9' x9'.

Len said that he has no secrets, that his knowledge is open to anyone who asks, a stance he learned in Japan, where his fellow workers and teacher would share their knowledge. Our role as craftsmen should be to strengthen everybody's game. Anyone who is being secretive about their knowledge is simply being ungrateful, because they learned from others.

Lenny quit the formal part of his presentation here, and received a round of applause, then individuals came forward to ask him further questions, and the evening went a bit longer.





A Note from the Chairman

Bill Taft

With every meeting I learn something new about woodworking. At our June meeting I learned that a Japanese plane is a pull plane, not a push plane as our American planes are. Seeing the results of Len Brackett's demonstration, I have to believe that there must be an advantage to using pulling planes.

What if we only had a few meetings next year, maybe four? What if there was no *Artistry in Wood* Show? Would you still be a member? It could happen, because four board members are vacating their positions at the end of the year. I have been writing about this every month this year, asking for volunteers, with absolutely zero response. We had a board meeting last night, and the other board members understand the reality of it. You will be hearing from them.

Entry Day for our *Artistry in Wood* 2016 Show is September 8th. The schedule and all of the information about entering work is on our website. Please consider volunteering to help with the Show. I think that you will find it a rewarding experience. We will be sending out the requests for volunteers starting in mid-August.

Once again, my goal is to bring more members into sharing the duties of running the Association. If you are interested in finding out what is involved, please contact me.



Redbud Bowl by Steve Forrest



Dream Bowl by Warren Glass



2x4 by Les Cizek

Artistry in Wood photos
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Wood Forum is the monthly newsletter of the Sonoma County Woodworkers Association. Please feel free to submit articles and photographs for inclusion in the publication. You can send your submissions to the Wood Forum Editor at SCWAEditor@gmail.com. Advertisements are also accepted with a nominal cost for paid members.

Membership Application

I would like to join the SCWA to meet other people interested in the craft, the art and the business of fine wood-working. Enclosed is my check in the amount of \$35 for the annual dues. I understand that this fee entitles me to attend monthly meetings and to receive the Wood Forum newsletter by email or via the SCWA's website.

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What can you do to help further the organizational goals of our volunteer-run association? Please tell us how you would like to help:

Please send check and completed application to:

Sonoma County Woodworkers Association, PO Box 4176, Santa Rosa, CA 95402