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LIFE & ARTS

Wednesday, April 20, 2011 | THE DAILY TEXAN | Amber Genuske, Life&Arts Editor | (512) 232-2209 | dailytexan@gmail.com

SHARPEST TOOLS IN THE SHED

Local carpenters refurbish decaying woodwork out of two-car garage workshop, residence

Editor's Note: This is the first installment of a three-part series profiling artisans who work with their hands.

IN GOOD HANDS By Amber Genuske

"The body becomes a tool in one way or another," said Shane Shannon as he chips away a layer of caulk on a late-1800s window. "I may have a hammer in my pouch, but I find myself using my hand instead."

His sturdy hands are calloused from years of working with tools, but today, they are required to do a finer job.

"You think it's mostly masculinity and hard work that gets the job done, but it's really more about finesse," he added.

Shannon is a woodworker. He is one of a team of six with Red River Restorations and Fine Woodworking, located in a two-car garage apartment on Red River Street between 37th and 38th streets. Owner John Hindman opened the shop in 2003 but founded the company with the trademark name in 2007.

"The way our society is headed is people don't create as much anymore — they don't work with their hands," he said. "We are doing things no one was doing [in Austin], like restoring original windows. You can throw them away and put in new windows, but they don't look right and the quality is not there. I want the original wood screens because that is the charm and jewelry and look of the house."

The doors to the two-car garage workshop are almost always open during business hours, allowing the sound of saws and the smell of paint and cut wood to permeate the surrounding air



David Loesch, a woodworker at Red River Restoration and Fine Woodworking, uses a drill press while restoring a 100-year-old window. The company specializes in hands-on craftsmanship, from renovating an entire house to preserving an antique door.

as the men work inside.

The workshop looks like a snapshot from 50 years ago. The walls look like they could tell stories from long before the company's establishment, with layers of dust and wood shavings covering nearly every inch of the collage of sheetrock. The apartment above the ga-

rage workshop is home to the owner, his wife Erin and their son, Jack. The small one-bedroom home also doubles as the shop's office and dining hall for the six employees.

At any given week, Hindman said they have anywhere from four to 15 customers. The artisans specialize in traditional, hands-on craftsmanship;

from building customized screen doors to restoring antique windows, such as the one Shannon is working on that will allow light and air into a local architect's office.

The art deco-style window takes nearly an hour to dismantle as Shannon strips the paste that held the wood and the rippled glass to-

gether for more than a century.

The craftsmanship that it took to construct the original window and the work that the shop does cannot be imitated with a machine — it takes the tact of nimble fingers combined with a strong hand.

"Most of it's on the fly anyway," said Jacob Barnes, the main wood-

worker and first employee who started less than a year and half ago.

Barnes is working on building the frame of a screen door, known as a stile, that will find its place at the same office as the antique window. His body co-

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David Loesch changes a drill bit in his garage workshop, one of the tools he uses to refurbish aging woodwork.

Photos by Shannon Kintner
Daily Texan Staff

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ordinates with the machine he is working with — known as a jointer — to smooth the surface of the wood. His tedious movements are not perfect, as he lets out an exasperated yell, realizing he made a mistake.

“Jacob is quick, dirty — gets the job done. He’s the best — self proclaimed,” Shannon said.

Barnes retaliates in a cool tone, “No, I am slow and methodical.”

Unlike the older men of the shop, Barnes, 24, stumbled upon woodworking as a summer job at a trim carpentry shop after his freshman year of college in 2006.

Realizing he was good at the craft, he pursued it on the side throughout school. After graduating from UT in 2008 with a bachelor’s in geography, he said he hunted Hindman down for a job when he heard about the work that Red River Restorations was doing.

The employee seeking out employer seems to be a trend among the woodworkers of the shop. David Loesch, also 24, who got into working with his hands because his grandpa was a railroad day worker, said he asked Hindman for a job after delivering a sandwich when he worked for Jimmy John’s.

“I always had a crush on this place,” he said.

Similarly, Shannon, a seasoned craftsman who started woodworking with his brothers when he was a child, said he found Red River Restorations a year ago when he was out on a run. After introducing himself and asking for a job twice, Hindman hired him.

“You have a balance between new guys with enthusiasm and excitement and old guys that just know a lot of stuff,” Hindman said. “You put them together and you have a pretty neat recipe for creation and ideas.”

Like most children, Barnes had a set of Legos that he would use to construct and build — though his childhood precursor to woodworking has become something of a joke around the shop.

“[Jacob] likes to build things out of Legos, did he tell you that yet?” Loesch asks with a taunting laugh as Jacob walks back in the shop.

This witty dialogue is something of a regular occurrence around the shop, one that only the closest of friends can get away with.

“We love each other dearly,” Barnes said. “We are the best of friends. We never fight, even in this small space.”

The next task on the list is restoring the crumbling house on the same lot as the workshop. Hindman purchased the house in 2006, renting it out to various tenants in hopes of one day restoring and building his dream home. They started work on that same Friday.

From a task as daunting as restoring an entire house to something as delicate and complicated as restoring a 19th century window, they use the utmost care and precision when at work.

Their dedication to quality is what makes woodworking more than a job for these craftsmen; it is a passion. Red River Restorations is a fraternity of artisans, bound by a fervor for working with their hands.

ON THE WEB:

Check out a video of Red River Restorations @dailytexanonline.com