

Milestone

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Carving His Own Niche: Jim Dixon showcases tradition, technology & teamwork



Traditional Enterprise Team poses with Chippendale Oxbow chests, tea caddies, scrolled mirror with carved phoenix adornment and pie crust table. From left: Monty Holliday (furniture maker, CNC operator), Ginger Dixon (co-owner), Matt Dixon (drafting), Mike Martin (furniture and tool maker), Andy Ruf (drafting), Carl Ewing (furniture maker), Greg Harding (drafting), John Dadds, (carving), Marc Stockley (furniture maker, shop manager), and Jim Dixon (owner).

By Debra R. Messick

"The more things change, the more they stay the same." If you have any doubt, a visit to Traditional Enterprises in Northern Dorchester County will make a believer out of you.

Jim Dixon and his wife, Ginger, had long dreamed of and planned for the opening of their own workshop creating museum-quality reproductions of traditional American furniture. Since the dream became a reality, about a year ago, company members have diligently honed their collective skills, and are now attracting attention from a growing clientele of individuals and businesses seeking their unique and growing array of products and services.

An award-winning wild-life sculptor since graduating from high school in Kent County, Maryland, Dixon is a



Carver John Dadds details mahogany table legs.

self-described "detail fanatic" as well as carving aficionado. He's also a self-educated expert on American furniture and on those dedicated to promoting and preserving it. His life experience and character traits combined to create

an entrepreneur for whom success is measured by adherence to the highest standards of quality.

Clearly inspired, Dixon described how Early American furniture craftsmen were freed from the conventions of traditional European thinking on every level, including the creative ones. Unlike the Old World's ostentatious ornamentation, in the colonies form became the focal point.

In Dixon's workshop, a similarly open atmosphere prevails, with results that could be best described as revolutionary. The 10 workers he employs are referred to as "team members" who meet at a round table to discuss design ideas and troubleshoot. "You never know where good ideas will come from," says Dixon. "It took a while to get the right group of people together. I

wasn't necessarily looking for specific skills, more for what each one would bring to the table and their work ethic."

Located in Hurlock's Industrial Park, the building's exterior exudes country

charm. Inside, the stately presence of 18th century styled Queen Anne highboys, classic tea caddies, porringer tables and scrolled mirrors adorn the entryway showroom. Nearby, the faint hum of computers can be heard while three of the skilled craftsmen responsible for these creations pore over their work. Instead of bending over a block of wood with a hammer, however, each member of this drafting team is manipulating a mouse to finesse traditional designs with the aid of today's advanced software – technology also employed by such modern giants as NASA, Disney and the automotive industry to render ultra-realistic 2D and 3D drawings. Besides furniture, current projects are as diverse as a wooden mural for the Talbot County Law Library, a custom-designed mantel for a private residence, and a strawberry tower for another company.

In similar fashion, tradition and technology coexist throughout the

workshop. A corner cupboard and tray-top tea table display handiwork details such as dovetailed joints and ball and claw feet, which reflect their origin in the pre-industrialized world. Just out of sight, however, is the CNC (Computerized Numerical Control) router which helped form them, adding accuracy while subtracting time and expense from their creation. An on-site profile grinder supplies custom router bits for their own router as well as for companies from Cambridge, Chestertown, Easton, and Salisbury in just half a day instead of several weeks. A carving machine makes it possible to rough out up to 24 carved parts at a time. A giant sander smooths and levels large planks of wood to precision specs. Within the self-enclosed finishing room, water-based dyes are applied uniformly in a dust-free environment.

Although he appreciates the assistance these modern marvels provide, workshop manager Marc Stockley believes they are an enhancement, not a substitute, for old fashioned craftsmanship. "We don't want people to think we're so automated that



Carefully crafted reproduction of Philadelphia style pie crust table, 1760-80.

a log comes in one end of the shop and comes out [the other end] this masterpiece," says Stockley, with a laugh. "It's still a painstaking process of hands-on work, which is very important, and it never stops. Paying attention to that detail, going behind that machinery, is the essential creative aspect to it all."

Jim Dixon describes symmetry and balance as crucial ingredi-

ents to successful woodworking. To those complimentary qualities he could add the seamless blending of state-of-the-art technology and traditional craftsmanship. In so doing, the team at Traditional Enterprises manages to emulate the masters of the past, and carve out its own distinctive niche.

For more information on Traditional Enterprises call 410 943-1005 or visit their website at www.traditionaleenterprises.com.