



U-“TURNING” MY WAY ACROSS AMERICA

Cheryl Lewis

Woodturning is for loners. That’s one of the things we love about it, right? We can hole up in our shops, immune to the problems of the world, and tackle just the challenge in front of us. At least that had been my experience since I discovered woodturning last winter. In fact, when I was away from home for a month last summer, driving my nieces from California to Georgia, I began to miss my lathe—the peace, the focus, the possibilities.

On a whim, I posted my return road trip route to a woodturning group on social

media and said I’d love to turn a bowl in each state I passed through on my way back home. I had already found the woodturning community to be like a chosen family—freely sharing information, welcoming, and encouraging—and the response to my online post, true to form, was heartwarming. So, as I traveled solo westward across the United States, I enjoyed a unique woodturning adventure. Alas, it didn’t include every state I passed through, but enough of them to prove the woodturning community is alive and well—not to mention friendly and interesting.



The author began her woodturning road trip adventure in the shop of Louisiana native Donald Thibodaux, whose shop was expanded after Hurricane Katrina and featured in The History Channel's *Axmen*.



Louisiana

I approached the home of my first host with anticipation and a bit of apprehension. Sure, I had screened my hosts as much as possible (then shared my whereabouts with home) and am fine meeting people I don't know. But being a beginning turner, I thought turning on an unfamiliar lathe might be awkward. I shouldn't have worried. Donald Thibodaux welcomed me to his acreage in Ponchatoula, Louisiana, and put me right at ease. He and his wife Melanie live on what was once the dairy farm of her family, some of the town's original settlers in the late 1800s.

Donald offered me a rare privilege. Local sinker cypress trees—abandoned underwater in the swamps during the area's lumber boom of the 1800s—are highly prized now. He let me turn a bowl from a slice over 500 years old!

"The sinker cypress is all old-growth wood and there isn't much left of those trees," he said. "The logs that either got lost in transport or didn't seem to have any value were left out in the swamp, and we go out there and get them. It's not easy;

you need a lot of heavy equipment." That reality was made clear by the History Channel's shows *Axmen* and *The Legend of Shelby the Swampman*, which were filmed in Donald's shop and area swamps and highlighted the dangers and rewards of cypress logging. Fans still drop by Donald's home and ask if he is Shelby Stanga, the swamp logger and shows' star.

Confession? I was intimidated to turn the valuable timber, but Donald's easygoing attitude gave me confidence. "I just take ugly pieces of wood and cut the ugly off of them," he said, laughing. "I mostly turn artsy bowls, natural-edge, and things like that—hardly anything utilitarian. It's more of a way to de-stress. Something to take my mind off of my regular work making cabinets and furniture."

I'd love to say our efforts yielded a beautiful bowl like those Donald showcases on his shelves, but to my horror I turned too thin when removing the tenon and the bowl shattered. Donald wasn't fazed and sent me on my way with another block to try at home and also a

chunk of 1830s cedar from Alabama's Bermuda Hill Plantation. Not content to let me leave with only historic timber, Donald demonstrated more Southern generosity with a massive jar of fig preserves and sent me on my way with a smile and a wave. ▶



The author tackles a blank of rare 500-year-old sinker cypress, raised from an area swamp.



Colorado

As I neared the home of my second host, I felt a thrill knowing a new bowl would soon exist. Branden O'Brien, who lives in Colorado Springs with his fiancée Thana and 7-year-old son Gabe, said he loves that feeling. "There's so much beauty inside a tree that you just never know until you open it up," he said. "I grew up in the workshop with my grandfather and got an appreciation for carpentry through him, so I thought it would be fun to learn to use a lathe."

He began turning just a year earlier.



The adventure continues in the shop of Colorado Springs's Branden O'Brien.



Branden's current interest is turned rings. Here he applies finish to a nearly completed ring.

"Right now I'm really liking wood-turned rings, with a stainless steel core that I dress with whatever wood appeals to me," said Branden, as he helped me turn one of my own. He also thrilled me with my first chance to turn a bowl from aspen.

As a new turner, he shares my desire to get to know other turners. "I like meeting other people who are interested in woodworking and turning," said Branden. "It's a unique group of people. It seems we're all a little bit crazy and fun to be around."

His words perfectly prophesied my next host, Michael "Roper" Roper in Golden. Anyone who knows Roper—and everyone seems to—surely shares the opinion that being in his company means a lot of laughs. "You have to remember I'm not like the average woodturner," said Roper, grinning. "For me it's how outrageous can I make something on this machine that only does three things: You can only make a cove, a bead, or a V-cut. You've just got to experiment from there."



The author proudly displays her first turned aspen bowl.

It's clearly working for him. A career carpenter, he shifted to woodturning after getting injured at 32 and taking a furniture class that put him in front of a lathe. Now he teaches the craft at a local college and has a thriving business. Denver's Kirkland Museum of Fine and Decorative Arts recently chose to include a multi-axis hollow vessel crafted by Roper in its collection.

"I probably have forty or fifty hours into that one," he said. "I'm somewhat of an instant gratification person and love the speed that I can get an idea from inside my head onto a piece of wood, so this was an exception. A lot of it was the sandblasting and all the little things that came after the turning."

Since moving the business from his home to a spacious facility in Golden, Roper has had more than enough room to get creative.

"When I leave work, I go home to my family," said Roper, referring to his wife Leah, 12-year-old daughter Rose and 2-year-old son Parker. "When I worked in my garage, there was never any leaving work. That has been a bonus to us."

His space is also shared by John Medina, an arborist and wood supplier, and Josh Scharfenberger, a former student. "I came home from the military about five years ago and used my G.I. Bill to go to Red Rocks Community College's woodworking program, with the intent to be a furniture maker full time," said Josh, who lives nearby in Lakewood. "I realized after about two semesters that I just wanted to turn. It was a giant catharsis and change from breaking and destroying to having to be light and delicate. Turning healed me."

Soon I was diving into the inner beauty of a block of boxelder burl Roper gave me to turn. His help was monumental and I came away with a beautiful turned piece of art and new friends.



From left: Josh Scharfenberger, Michael Roper, and John Medina hang out in their shared work space in Golden, Colorado.



Michael Roper demonstrates the hollowing of a boxelder burl vessel.



Michael Roper explains proper technique to the author.

Still beaming over the new vase, I headed to Denver to join Robyn Herman, who'd invited me to her club's monthly demonstration. I was excited to get to know her. As you may have noticed, there are far fewer women than men in turning, though our numbers are growing.

"I got into woodturning about three years ago, because my husband wanted a lathe," Robyn recalled, chuckling. "A friend invited us to go to the Front Range Woodturners and I was amazed at how quickly they could turn a bowl. I got my husband the lathe, but kind of took it over," she said, laughing. "I had to learn everything from scratch. I think a lot of men have had wood class in high school, but not most girls. I was very intimidated the first time I turned. The woman who taught 'Ladies of the Lathe' was very patient with me." Hosted at no charge by the local Rockler Woodworking store in its onsite classroom, "Ladies of the Lathe" is a chapter mentoring initiative that uses volunteers to teach

varied topics monthly. Robyn says that thanks to all she has learned, she's hooked.

"I'm an IT director and it's a high-stress job," she said. "When I turn, I forget everything."

After dinner, we headed over to the meeting. I was delighted we'd be learning from renowned English turner Jimmy Clewes—then stunned as he included the vase I'd turned that afternoon among those he'd critique.

Jimmy's turning skill was obvious, but it was wonderful to find that he

was also engaging, animated, and accessible to all. "I love teaching," he told me. "I really enjoy people and getting to know them. The cream is when they leave with a big smile after turning a great piece. My style of demonstrating is really my own—what you see is what you get. I wear my heart on my sleeve and am a bit 'edgy.' I can say things in demos that the U.S. lads could never get away with!"

Full of my own adventures in turning, I said thank you to my new buddies in Colorado and continued westward. ▶



Robyn Herman (left) invited the author to join a meeting of Denver's Front Range Woodturners, an AAW chapter.



Jimmy Clewes critiques the author's turned vessel, created under the guidance of Michael Roper during her stop in Golden.

Utah

Filled with rugged beauty, wild canyons, and soaring cliffs, Utah is the state that led me and my husband to move west, though we've settled in California. Eagerly I drove to Pleasant Grove, where I would meet with Matthew Deighton. He and wife Heather have three children: Kendall, 8, Cole, 6, and Holland, 4.

An avid turner since 2014, Matthew said the day four generations of his family toured Craft Supplies in Provo made the difference. "I turned a little bit in high school, then forgot about it for years," explained Matthew. "My dad and grandfather were visiting, so I took my son and we went to check out

the woodturning store. It was pretty exciting. We went to the Utah symposium and realized there's a lot more than just bowl turning. About two months later, my dad called and said he'd gotten a lathe, so I got one, too.

"It has brought us even closer together," he said. "We'll call each other at night and talk about techniques and the different things we've made. We pass wood back and forth." It's a closeness he hopes to pass on to his own children. There is plenty to teach.

"I think I've had a hundred 'aha' moments," said Matthew. "If you're not [having them], you're not growing.

When I first started turning, I would sharpen my tools once every two or three projects. Over the years, I realized I should be sharpening my tools about ten times every project. Having sharp tools makes it a lot more enjoyable."

During our time together, Matthew helped me turn my first footless birch bowl and also a cottonwood bowl.

"I love woodturning and love sharing it with other people," said Matthew. "I think the woodturning community is a very fun and positive community and, if I were traveling the country, what you're doing is exactly what I would want to do."



Utah's Matthew Deighton shows just a few of his turned creations.



Thanks to the author's error in judgment, her large cottonwood bowl became a small one. She proudly displays her turned creations.



Nevada

As my meandering continued, I was growing a bit tired, but still the prospect of turning new creations each day spurred me on. Watching the changing topography of each state was mesmerizing, and I frequently u-turned to capture images of fresh wonders.

When I arrived at the Reno home of Andrew and Amanda Rothwell, I found a great partnership. They each have a lathe and area in which to turn, plus myriad tools of the trade within easy reach.

"Well actually this room is hers and that room is ours," said Andrew,

chuckling, his South African accent becoming apparent. "About nine years ago, a friend had a lathe and I turned a little spin top. Fast-forward to two-and-a-half years ago, Amanda and I went on a date night at the local turning shop and learned to turn pens. That was it! We were hooked."

As we toured their space, he opened a few of the drawers of Amanda's pen-turning supplies. "I am very definitely not organized," Andrew said, laughing when I complimented the tidiness and precisely carved foam inserts. "I'm scatterbrained and will lose the tape measure



Andrew and Amanda Rothwell, Reno, Nevada, enjoy working together in their home shop, and each has a lathe.

that I'm holding in my hand. Amanda is very meticulous and organized. We're at complete opposite ends of the spectrum."

Despite that difference, a great part of their pleasure in turning is their ability to enjoy it together. I was grateful for his help as we turned a maple bowl. Nearing the end of my travels, I was running out of steam and yet so pleased with our results.

"I'm a nice guy," he said, laughing, when I asked why he let a stranger into his domain. "Besides, you were doing a fun thing."



The author tackles a maple blank in the Rothwell's home shop.

California

Happy to be back in California at last, I had the privilege of turning with one final host, a fellow member of Nor-Cal Woodturners. Mike Mahoney has long been hailed among the finest woodturners and teachers, and I was delighted to visit him and his wife Jenni at their home.

"My dad did a little bit of turning," Mike said of his own introduction. "I had maybe one or two woodturning experiences in my family shop and then many years later I was at San Diego State attending school. I had parked my truck by a woodshop and saw a guy making a bowl. I was mesmerized by it. When I found out Industrial Arts was an actual degree, I changed my major a week later.

"Then I made bowls the rest of my life," he added with a chuckle. "It really hasn't gotten old. The most satisfying part is being my own boss. I never had a commute and I did what I wanted to do at all times.

"It's not for everybody," he said, "because you're constantly working when you're your own boss. I always had deadlines and the physical work of the job would turn a lot of people off. When I was 25, it never bothered me at all, until when I was maybe 30 and met some professional turners who were physically broken down.



Professional woodturner Mike Mahoney and wife Jenni relax on the porch of their home in Mount Aukum, California.



Shavings fly as Mike continues work on a commissioned urn.

"They told me not to overdo it," Mike recalled. "I took most of that to heart, but probably worked a little too hard physically in my day. I don't regret that, though."

In his home, he and Jenni, his college sweetheart, are surrounded by functional turnings. "We eat on wood plates and use everything," he said. "If it doesn't have much function, I don't have use for it. It's the way I've always lived life. I can't be saddled with things that aren't usable."

I asked him how being a production turner has shaped his approach to the craft. "It's a perspective more than anything," Mike said. "I think anybody who does anything repetitive tries to figure out the easiest way

to get from point A to point B without a lot of zigzag."

After a month on the road, it felt like I'd been doing quite a lot of zigzagging. I helped (but mostly watched) Mike turn a commissioned burial urn that was one of the most beautiful things I'd ever seen and then I headed home.

As I said, woodturning is a lousy pastime for loners. There are way too many interesting people to meet. ■

Cheryl Lewis lives in Auburn, California, where she turns imperfect bowls. She belongs to the Nor-Cal and Foothills Woodturners AAW chapters and is the Women in Turning (WIT) liaison in each. She can be found on Facebook and Instagram @theUtturner or road tripping to meet that next bowl.