

# Meet Ralph Holroyd – Woodworker Extraordinaire

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by Sarah Luery | posted in: Design, Misc., People | 0

For Ralph Holroyd, woodworking is all in the family.

He was first introduced to the craft at age 8 or 9 by his grandfather, who “always had a small project of some sort waiting for me when I would go visit him.” Working in his grandfather’s workshop in the country (“actually I think was an old chicken coop”), Ralph got his start building wooden cars and paddlewheel boats powered by rubber bands, and even managed to replicate a sundial he saw in a magazine. “I did everything by hand tools because I wasn’t allowed to run any of his power tools,” Ralph remembers.

Ralph kept the family woodworking tradition going with his own kids when they were growing up. “Sundays were project day and we’d make anything that they wanted to make,” he explains before adding “within reason.” Together, they made everything from boomerangs to wooden swords to marionettes. “Some of the projects really stretched my abilities,” Ralph recalls. And while he loved sharing his hobby with his kids, he also found these Sunday sessions beneficial for building his own skills. “[They] allowed me to experiment on projects which, I won’t say they didn’t matter, but I wasn’t cutting up, you know, five dollar-a-board foot premium lumber.”

I asked Ralph whether his interest in woodworking all these years stemmed from a love of the hobby itself, or of the family tradition that had been built around it. He suspects it’s a little of both. “Working with my grandfather was fun — I mean doing anything with him was fun. The woodworking just kind of added to the experience.” The fact that his own kids also enjoyed working in his shop offered another opportunity for family bonding. “I could exercise my hobby, and at the same time, spend time with my kids,” Ralph explains. “It’s certainly a way to connect and to build that relationship.”



Ralph’s kids are now grown and married (one with two kids of his own), but they still like to work with their dad. When I spoke with Ralph, he had just gotten back from visiting one of his sons in Boston where they had worked on an employee lounge for his son’s start-up company. It was modeled after one of Ralph’s old workshops, using old barn lumber and corrugated tin to create a rustic appearance. “It’s fun to see the kids take an interest,” Ralph remarks. “You pass a skill set along and hopefully they’ll continue to pursue it.”

It appears that Ralph’s 5-year-old grandson may have the woodworking gene as well. When he visits his grandpa a few times a year, he looks forward to working in Ralph’s shop. “I always have a project for him. He’s cute as can be with a tool in his hand and a pencil behind his ear, just like Grandpa.” Ralph is teaching his grandson some basic techniques using hand tools — the same tools, in fact, that Ralph used in his own grandfather’s shop. “It’s kind of the whole circle of life thing,” Ralph says. “It’s fun to see it happen.”

Ralph vividly remembers the first woodworking project he did on his own. It was a shelving unit he built for his wife’s potted plants collection. It was 1980, and he and his wife had just bought their first house in Detroit. “[My wife] was very excited about decorating the house, and I was excited about building a workbench in the attached one-car garage!” They had also just had their first baby and didn’t have a lot of money, so he had gone to the local lumber yard and picked through their scrap bin for materials he needed for the plant stand.

The conditions in his garage workshop weren’t ideal; the shop had no heat or air conditioning. Working through that first Michigan winter, Ralph was at the mercy of the elements. “I remember sanding the boards and holding my hands over the vent on the side of the sander because it was generating warm air.” He quickly adds, “But it was fun.” And, the plant stand was a success, following them as they moved to several different houses over the years. Ralph reminisces, “I’ll bet we had that thing for 15 years or more!”

Over the years, Ralph’s evolving project interests have taken him in a number of different creative directions. “People always ask me, ‘What do you like to make?’ And it’s very diverse. It’s a little bit of whatever’s caught my fancy at any given time.”

He usually likes to have a big project to tinker with over an extended period of time (sometimes a few months, sometimes a few years), and then several smaller projects that he works on in between. He’s made everything from an ice boat for his father-in-law (“you’d think I’d given him a million bucks, he was just like a little kid!”) to desks for his kids to a lighted curio cabinet for the powder room in his home.

One of Ralph’s favorite mini-projects is to make hot pads and trivets out of wood and wine corks. “It stemmed from something my wife saw in a store or a catalog somewhere,” he remembers. The project has become immensely popular with the neighbors, and he now makes them to order. “The whole thing just mushroomed. I’ve made hundreds of those stupid little trivets. Everyone that knows us saves us all their wine corks,” he laughs.



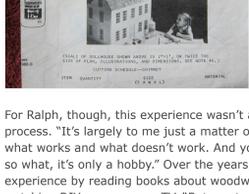
He also enjoys putting up birdhouses around his Charleston, South Carolina neighborhood to attract the local bluebirds and woodpeckers. “It sounds really cliché, working in a wood shop making birdhouses, but we live out near the water and we have a lot of wildlife and we like to watch the birds.”

His one constant over the years has been building dollhouses. “I’m not sure where my particular interest in miniatures comes from,” Ralph says. “I work in an industry that manufactures very tiny, finely machined, precision components. It just seems to be something that suits my particular personality.”



Ralph adds that the dollhouses appeal to his design sensibilities. He and his wife are members of a charitable society in Charleston that supports the preservation of old homes. The highlight for them comes once a year when the members get to tour some of the old antebellum mansions. Building Victorian-style dollhouses helps tide Ralph over for the remaining months of the year until he can once again visit the real thing. “I can’t afford to indulge myself in a real Victorian home — the upkeep and the maintenance would be more than I would like — but to be able to build it in miniature is just a lot of fun.”

Ralph actually built his first dollhouse in that same Detroit garage workshop of his first home. He still has the plans, which he got in the mail from an Elmer’s Glue promotion. Like the plant stand, the dollhouse has also stood the test of time. Upon completion, he had given it to a friend for her daughter. “Incidentally, I traded emails with her just this week. Her daughter still has it. Her own kids play with it. It is now 34 years old.”



Building that first dollhouse wasn’t as easy as the plans had made it out to be. One of the handtools Ralph was using was a try square he had gotten from his grandfather that turned out not to be very square. This, he discovered the hard way, after he cut all the pieces out and tried to fit them together, only to discover they didn’t fit. “That was one of my first lessons I learned in woodworking. You have to have good tools and make sure they’re accurate before you start.”

For Ralph, though, this experience wasn’t a setback, but all part of the learning process. “It’s largely to me just a matter of jumping in and trying it and finding out what works and what doesn’t work. And you make a few mistakes along the way, but so what, it’s only a hobby.” Over the years, Ralph has supplemented his workshop experience by reading books about woodworking, subscribing to magazines and watching DIY programs on TV. “But most everything that I’ve learned over the years has just been trial and error.”

A lot of times, people will ask Ralph, what are all the different projects he can make. “And I say, ‘Well I don’t know yet because I’m not done learning. The only things that I haven’t done are things that I haven’t tried yet.’”

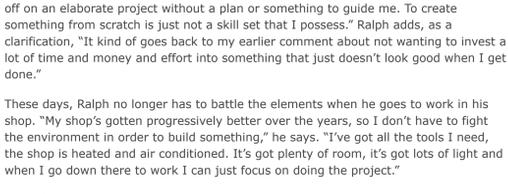
Ralph keeps this perspective when starting any new project to avoid getting intimidated or bogged down. “My experience is if you just jump in, and work at it, and try to solve it, and make an attempt, a solution will come. You’ll be able to figure it out if you are willing to jump in and try it.”

I asked Ralph how he avoids getting caught up in his projects needing to be perfect. It turns out that he does have a minimum standard for himself — he doesn’t like for his projects to look homemade. “If I ever finish a project and somebody walks in the door and looks at it and says, ‘oh wow, did you make that yourself?’ then I’ll know that I’ve failed.”

Because woodworking projects are time consuming and can be expensive, Ralph tries to practice new skills on things that don’t really matter. For instance, when designing window valances for one of his homes, Ralph noted that since everything would be covered with fabric, the construction underneath did not need to be precise. As such, he used the opportunity to practice joinery, and learned to cut dovetails to join the pieces together. “It allowed me to experiment and to test my abilities on something that, if it didn’t turn out so well, it was of no real consequence.”

Besides trial and error, Ralph’s family has also taught him that sometimes you have to step back from the problem in order to see the solution. “Sometimes you get so wrapped up in trying to figure out how to do something that you look beyond the obvious.” Ralph counts on his wife to keep him grounded. “We’ll talk about a project and I’ll say ‘I can do this or do that.’ And she’ll say ‘I don’t think it needs to be that complicated.’ She’s pretty good at making sure I don’t over-engineer it.”

Besides providing perspective, Ralph’s wife is also the source of inspiration for many of the things he creates. Oftentimes, she will approach him with a design she saw in a catalog and ask if he can replicate it for their home. Last year, he spent the winter working on a tea cart that retailed for \$1200. He was able to build it from materials left over from when he and his wife had built their house. The whole thing ended up costing him about \$100.



This approach of building from source materials appeals to Ralph’s sensibilities as well, as he doesn’t have any formal design training. “I’m very cautious about just starting off on an elaborate project without a plan or something to guide me. To create something from scratch is just not a skill set that I possess.” Ralph adds, as a clarification, “It kind of goes back to my earlier comment about not wanting to invest a lot of time and money and effort into something that just doesn’t look good when I get done.”

These days, Ralph no longer has to battle the elements when he goes to work in his shop. “My shop’s gotten progressively better over the years, so I don’t have to fight the environment in order to build something,” he says. “I’ve got all the tools I need, the shop is heated and air conditioned. It’s got plenty of room, it’s got lots of light and when I go down there to work I can just focus on doing the project.”

When I asked him how he stays balanced between his work, his woodworking hobby and his family life, he told me that he set parameters when he first started, and he has stuck to them. “One of the key decisions that I made early on was to keep my woodworking limited to a hobby. For me, doing it for hire takes all the fun out of it. The ‘doing’ of a project is more important to me than the completion.”

As a result, the balance comes fairly easily. “I work in the shop whenever I have the time. I have more time in the winter than in the summer. In the summer my time is taken up with yard work, boating, swimming, etc.” Ralph says that the benefit of having multiple projects going at once is that when he gets stuck, he can step away. “A large project, like the dollhouse, will take me over a year from start to finish. Sometimes I reach a point where I’m not sure how to proceed, like the wiring on the current house I am building. I will take a break and think about it while I work on something else.” And he always has a list of stuff to build. “My wife keeps a file of projects so I don’t ever run out of things to make!”

Ralph’s take-away advice for people just getting into woodworking? “Don’t be intimidated by the seeming complexity or difficulty of a project. Just try it!” And, when possible, don’t make more work for yourself than is necessary. “I keep a journal of all of my projects with key dimensions and assembly notes. This way I don’t have to reinvent the wheel if I want to make another one.” And finally, woodworking can be a full-contact sport, so you have to look out for yourself. “I never get in a hurry and I never, ever work in the shop if I have had a drink of alcohol. Ever. I still have all my fingers.”

Click here to see more of Ralph’s current and past projects, including wonderful descriptions of his step-by-step process.

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