

# Unique group raises bar on refinishing

BY ANNE ADAMS • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — As a nearly full moon rose late last Thursday evening, 30 people gathered in a barn for something special. Maybe something spiritual, too.

Dark descended on the mountain landscape. Friends pulled together a mess of heavy extension cords for equipment and light bulbs strewn from the ceiling joists. A generator hummed from below, providing just enough power for what looked like your mother's dough mixer, precariously situated atop a heavy worktable.

All were members of the International Professional Refinishers Group — some had been here before, to help erect this barn after it was moved in pieces from Illinois to Don Williams' place near the quarry just north of Monterey.

Shellac-happy and crazy for faux finishes, they didn't look much different than your average carpenter, but the well-calloused hands and well-worn jeans belied the intelligence and skill among them.

What they do is far from ordinary. So specialized are their trades that most are in high demand across the U.S. And yet, here they were — gathered in the least populated county east of the Mississippi, in a barn, to share their deep knowledge with one another, in complete solidarity. No pretentiousness exists among them; each praises the skill of another with enormous respect.

As the equipment was readied, the group quieted. Williams gathered his ingredients, and began to deliberate, one suspender hanging slightly off-kilter over his worn t-shirt.

"He looks like a wizard when he does this," whispered Craig Cianciolo of the U.S. House of Representatives Finishing Shop, "like he's adding essence of bat wing and such."

Williams carefully weighed each ingredient — 950 grams of mineral spirits, 2 grams of resin, beeswax, special detergents — all measured with precision. He mixed the batch, slowly heating it to just the right temperature, and cooling it just as slowly. When complete, the mixture was a high-performing, easy to use, very stable furniture wax — a prized recipe created by Williams' colleague at the Smithsonian, where he is senior furniture conservator.

Williams calls it "Mel's wax," in honor of its inventor, Mel Wachowiak.

"You can have a copy of the recipe, and make it in your shops," Williams told the group, "but you cannot sell it." The Smithsonian owns the patent for the formula, he explained.

"It's really incredible stuff," Cianciolo whispered again. "Much better than something like Pledge. That stuff just kills us, it's so bad."

Earlier that week, the group was trans-



The first of 43 total from all over the country gathered last Monday, many of them meeting for the first time. Don Williams, seated center, welcomes his friends and colleagues, all members of the International Professional Refinishers Group, founded 13 years ago by Alan Marriage "to promote the exchange of information on all aspects of the business of repairing, refinishing, and conservation of furniture and architectural items." For the majority of participants, it was their first visit to Highland County. (Recorder photo by Anne Adams)

fixed by another presentation, one given by Juliane Derry about shellac. Derry, of Oslo, Norway, had been to India, and shared images she took at a shellac plantation. "We were agog," Williams said.

"Uh, oh. Are you all using the 'S' word again?" one man chimed in.

There is an insect, the lac bug, that leaves its resin on a particular native tree in India. That's shellac — a substance refinishers buy in flake form to create an incredible finish. The presentation explained how workers in India scrape bark off the trees; few on this continent have seen the process in person. "That's probably the first time that some of this information had been made available to Westerners," Williams said. "We were just spellbound for two hours. It was a touchstone event."

"Have you tried the new shellac nail polish?" added Kevin Hancock, a piano refinisher. "My wife and daughter swear by it. It lasts forever."

The story of shellac created quite a stir; the group agreed that as a finish, it's one of the most stunning. "It's a pretty esoteric subject," Williams admitted, "but there's no other natural material like it. It cannot be duplicated in synthetic form by the industry, so it's a passion for us."

They were equally impressed by David Reeves' demonstration on French polishing.

"It's amazing," said Jerome Bias, of North Carolina. "That kind of finish just glows; it's like you could dive, dive right into it."

The technique involves hours of labor. "It's sort of therapeutic to do," said Cianciolo. "It's painstaking — a highly detailed method — and it's a challenge. But there's only one way to get that effect."

Reeves, an expert in antique restoration based near Knoxville, Tenn., explained French polishing is a technique dating back to at least the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and involves hundreds of thin coats of shellac to get the high-gloss, clear finish. He learned how to do it in 2007. Someone came to him with



Faux finishing is far more than refinishing — it's a fine art and takes extraordinary skill. The artists uses techniques with a brush to make plain wood or panels look like fine cherry, walnut or exotic woods with incredible grain patterns. This was on panel faux finished as an example to those attending classes last week. (Recorder photo by Anne Adams)

a replica 17<sup>th</sup> century desk. "I offered to French polish it for him," Reeves said. "And I learned a lesson."

Reeves attended a workshop to learn the method, common on older pieces.

The desk, a 7.5-foot tall secretary, required 300 hours of work. "It's crystal clear," Reeves said about French polishing. "You don't even see the finish ... but your shoulder takes a beating."

It takes incredible time and patience to apply with a pad, layer upon layer, he said. Reeves was one of few in the IPRG who had been to Highland before, to work on Williams' barn, and that's where he slept

through the week. "I've known all these guys through the Internet," he noted, explaining this was his first chance to see many of them in person.

Tredway Childress, who works in the U.S. House of Representatives Finishing Shop, astounded the group with his class on faux finishing. On panel after panel, he demonstrated how to use stains and brushes to mimic the look of specialty woods and grain patterns. He even showed them how to paint wood to look like marble.

Childress and his colleagues maintain furniture in the House of Representatives

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**Tredway Childress paints a panel to show participants the art of faux finishing last Thursday. Childress works in the U.S. House of Representatives Finishing Shops in Washington, D.C. (Recorder photo by Anne Adams)**



**Late last Thursday, Don Williams gave refinishers a lesson on how to make "Mel's wax" — a wood and furniture wax created by one of his colleagues — in the barn-turned-shop, where several classes were held all week. (Recorder photo by Anne Adams)**

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— roughly 150,000 pieces, he said. "There are a lot of nice things; some are mundane tables and chairs but most have a lot of history, or are original pieces of furniture," he explained. The shop has stripped and refinished some of the same pieces over and over through the years. "That stuff gets a lot of use, a lot of wear," he said.

Childress and Williams collaborated once on a turn-of-the-century roll-top desk, an original Cannon piece. "That was one of only six known to exist," Childress said. The desk is now used ceremonially in the House.

"The week was amazing," Williams concluded. "Every presentation hit the mark." Remarkably, he noted, some of the week's presenters had never taught classes before. "Most of these guys are self-employed, at that level, not working for the government. I was really thrilled ... they sensed what their audience needed to know."

This group, by all accounts, is unique. Their particular skills used to be considered highly proprietary, and thus, not shared, they agreed, but thanks to IPRG founder, the late Alan Marriage, and his e-mail list, they now share tips and techniques with one another readily and enthusiastically. As Hancock explained, most of them work alone in their shops. "When you think about it, we're really a bunch of introverts," he said.

Mike Mascelli of Latham, N.Y., is one of the group's trustees, along with Fred McLean of Athens, Ga., and Dave MacFée of Topeka, Kan.

Mascelli remembers emailing with several folks when Marriage suggested a get-together in Minnesota. About 65 of them turned out for the occasion. "Here we all were, strangers except for emailing each other, and we just all hit it off right away ... we got this buzz going. And since (Marriage's) death, I've been the money man for the group."

But there's more to it than sharing information. The group has formed a tight bond,

much like a brotherhood though it has some female members, too. They support one another personally, not just professionally.

Hancock has been a piano refinishing professional for 35 years, and when he joined the IPRG years ago, he was delighted to find friends who shared his love for the skill.

Ten years ago, he learned firsthand how supportive they could be.

His shop, located in his backyard in Maryland, was struck by lightning. He was home at the time, and reacted quickly, but still lost \$30,000 in inventory. Exhausted after the ordeal, he wrote about what happened on the IPRG web site. "Suddenly, they were all immediately asking what they could do to help, these strangers on the Internet were so supportive to me. At one point, they decided to donate one hour of their own shop time to help me and I was getting \$50 checks pouring in within three weeks."

When Hancock first started in the business, the profession consisted of mostly "dip strippers" — folks who immersed furniture in chemicals to strip old finishes. But this group is trying to elevate refinishing to a new level. One way they do that is by teaching other woodworkers the process of fine finishing. "A lot of really good woodworkers are afraid of that final touch, afraid to refinish," Williams explained, "so they just slap something on."

Because refinishing involves an education in chemistry and physics, not to mention application techniques, many furniture makers take great pride in creating a piece but then freeze when it comes to the last step, and put little effort into understanding how to finish the wood properly.

They're planning to hold a retreat weekend this spring designed for woodworkers who want to improve their finishing skills. "One of the most important things to learn is how to react when something doesn't work," Hancock added. "We know what to do when something goes wrong."



**Sharon Que of Ann Arbor, Mich., was one of four women attending classes last week for refinishers. Que introduced herself to the group last Monday, and taught a class on special clamping problems that evening. Que is one of the nation's premier violin makers and restorers. (Recorder photo by Anne Adams)**

Each became a refinisher in a rather roundabout way. Some were sparked by their initial interest in woodworking. Others got into it following classes or short courses on the skill. Williams recalls dropping out of college to pursue his passion for it, with a warning from his academic advisor that there was no future to be had in "handwork." He subsequently received a triple degree in chemistry, art history, and studio art 10 years later.

Tim Puro of Bloomington, Ind., got into it mid-career. He had been in banking for 17 years, worked his way up to bank vice president. But after a spot finishing course, he decided refinishing was what he really wanted to do; he quit his job, and went full-time into the trade. "I was hanging on too long to my wife when I hugged her goodbye in the morning. I didn't look forward to going to work; I didn't look forward to the (bank) job," he recalled.

That course had a special teacher — a man Williams credits for teaching him how to teach, and whose name participants last week uttered with respect — Mitch

Kohanek of Dakota County Technical College's National Institute of Woodfinishing in Minnesota.

"It's all about following your passion," Williams said. "It's the joy of solving the problem ... we are created to be joyous creatures, so why not do something that makes you happy?"

These refinishers are more than eager to share their knowledge — and much of that occurs when they interact with clients. "We try to teach them why it's important," Williams said. "They think it happens by magic. The more we try to demystify it, the more magic they think it is."

The process isn't easy, Hancock added, but it helps when clients grasp the depth of skill involved. He has special tabs on his web site to explain his work. "We have to have ways to legitimize ourselves," he said.

All in the group have had jobs they didn't care for, mostly because they weren't particularly challenging, but they take enormous pride in doing something that makes people

Tredway Childress even showed participants how to paint wood to look like marble. (Recorder photo by Anne Adams)



Members of the International Professional Refinishers Group gathered in front of Don Williams' cabin as they wrapped up a week of classes. Pictured are (l-r) kneeling, front row: Bill Robillard, Dave Reeves, Joe Hastings, Dan Bos, Al Lopez, Dan Carlson, Kevin Hancock; standing, second row: Bruce Hamilton, Bob Mustain, Dick Patch, Craig Cianciolo, Fred McLean, Brian Webster, Don Williams, Steve Baxter, Sharon Que, Juliane Derry, Tredway Childress, Joshua Klein, Tim Puro, Karl Kennedy, John Howell, Sean Harrigan, Dave MacFee; on porch: Neil Williams, Rick Bean, Ben Myre, Jerome Bias, John Szalay, Bob Judd, and Jim Young. (Photo courtesy Tom Phardel)

## Refinishers take full slate of classes

BY ANNE ADAMS • STAFF WRITER

MONTEREY — Forty-three refinishers from 19 states and the District of Columbia gathered at Don Williams' place near Monterey last week.

The event, dubbed "Groopstock II," was the second held here for members of the International Professional Refinishers Group. Classes were held for five days, and included:

- Molding and casting by Williams, Senior Furniture Conservator, Smithsonian Museum Conservation Institute, Suitland, Md.
- Special Clamping Problems by Sharon Que, of Ann Arbor, Mich., one of the nation's premier violin makers and restorers.
- Piano finishes by Kevin Hancock, of Frederick, Md., one of the best experts in finishing high end grand pianos.
- Inpainting and color theory by Williams.

- Gel formulation, solvent thermodynamics, detergency and pH for selective coatings removal, by Williams.

- Furniture connoisseurship by Bob Klein of Pensacola, Fla., a dealer, collector, and restorer for more than 40 years.

- Business practices, moderated by Jim Young, a furniture restorer in Connecticut.

- French polishing and related dark arts by Dave Reeves, artist and furniture restorer from Oak Ridge, Tenn.

- Electricity and electronics in the shop by Bill Robillard of Green Bay, Wis., furniture restorer and electrical engineer.

- Veneer repairs and replications by Williams.

- Faux finishing by Tredway Childress, U.S. House of Representatives Finishing Shops.

- Upholstery fundamentals by Mike Mascelli, national award-winning vintage auto and furniture upholstery specialist.

- Sharpening hand tools by Williams.

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happy. Puro mentioned giving a client the joy of seeing an old piece brought back to life. "One of them just hugged me and cried," he said. "You can't beat that."

Hancock agreed, recalling the time he restored a toy piano for someone who loved it. "It wasn't a valuable artifact," he said, "but it was an artifact in her home — something she wanted to save. And when she saw it after I finished it, she sat down and cried, too. I told her it was an honor to do it."

"It's really a combined art and science," Williams said. "You're using applied chemical engineering, with artistic skills ... the people here are fully left- and right-brained."

The others agreed, noting how much they learned in Williams' color theory class about matching finishes. "A lot of people think it's all about getting the color right," Williams said. "But that's only a small part — you first have to look at things like texture, sheen and gray value. It's cerebral physiology."

The men launched into a discussion about how those who are color blind are sometimes better at this skill because they are not confused by seeing color, and are more apt to correctly match finishes based on the patterns they see.

Hancock pointed out that not only are refinishers historians of the technology, they are also saving resources. "A friend of mine had this t-shirt that said, Refinishers: the Original Recyclers, and that really is true," he said.

Furniture that becomes an eyesore is hard to deal with for most people, he explained. They either store it out of sight, or give it away, and eventually it ends up in a landfill and the owners simply buy new furniture. "Every time they make a new piano, they're using trees and chemicals and so forth, not to mention an old one has ended up in a landfill. But I can restore and refinish an old one, and I've saved all those resources."


The more people who appreciate and invest in refinishing, he concluded, the more natural resources are saved and less waste generated. "So, we really are recyclers," he said.

Once people understand what they do, they are compelled to tap into their knowledge. They might visit a home to see one piece, and end up with a house tour of all the owner's furniture. People are eager to learn more about their furniture and what it needs, Williams said. "I know how a doctor feels at a dinner party," he laughed.

Williams was delighted to bring these 43 people from across the U.S. to Highland.

Each participant praised county residents and businesses for the friendly atmosphere and warm welcome, and appreciated the hospitality offered by Williams and his wife, Carolyn, at their home. Most of all, they enjoyed the opportunity to share their passion for refinishing with like-minded friends.

"We really are like a family," Cianciolo said, "and we're trying to raise our craft."



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# Using the numbers wisely

For years, education officials have predicted benchmarks for pass rates under the federal No Child Left Behind Act would eventually become too difficult to achieve for most school divisions.

When results of Adequate Yearly Progress scores were released last week, the number of divisions making AYP had dropped off steeply.

A year ago, 61 percent of Virginia's schools made AYP, but that has sunk to only 38 percent, and only four divisions as a whole met the standards statewide.

Fortunately, Highland County Public Schools was one of them. Unfortunately, Bath didn't meet the standards as a division, though two of its three schools did.

The NCLB Act has been the subject of serious, often divisive, debate for a decade. Most agree with the philosophy that all students, no matter their disabilities, ethnic backgrounds, or language barriers, should be equally educated successfully so that no child is ever left behind. Most agree, too, that teachers and schools should be held accountable for bringing every student in their charge up to par in core subjects.

But measuring success, setting the standards, and agreeing on the best way to test? Muddy waters.

AYP standards rise annually. For example, 81 percent of students needed to pass tests in reading in the 2008-09 school year. Last year, 86 percent had to pass in that subject for a school to make AYP.

The end goal is for 100 percent of students to pass math and reading tests three years from now.

It's a lofty goal worth pursuing, but is it realistic?

Children are different; they don't learn the same way. Some do not have English as their primary language. Sadly, many come from family backgrounds where school success isn't supported or encouraged. Some have physical or mental disabilities that preclude them from learning the same subjects at the same pace as their age peers.

While AYP measurements attempt to account for the wide variety of challenges and differences, they cannot possibly account for every circumstance students face. Thus, school administrators will tell you, it's unrealistic to require a 100 percent pass rate three years from now, or ever. Every child will not pass every test every time. There are far too many socio-economic and physical factors involved.

## Pictorial



John Szalay was one of 43 professional refinishers who enjoyed his time in Highland County last week, and found it a great opportunity to work on a new sign for his workshop in New Jersey. Highland landowner Don Williams invited his colleagues for five days of top-notch classes at his place near the quarry north of Monterey and they arrived from 19 different states and D.C. For most, it was their first visit here, and to a one, they had high praise for the county and its friendly people. The event was one of four recently that helped fill hotel and B&B rooms, and host visitors who patronized local businesses and vowed to return. Between the Mountain Mama bike challenge, the Virginia Consortium of Quilters, the Virginia

Society of Ornithology, and Williams' "Groopstock," this county has managed to welcome roughly 500 people over the course of three weeks, and accommodate them comfortably for one day or several. What does this tell us? That Highland can attract more than tourists seeking scenic beauty — these were craftsmen and women, bird-lovers, and cyclists. We know our retailers and innkeepers appreciated the boost, and we hope more individuals like Williams and groups like the local quilt guild and bird club will consider Highland a destination worth finding. We also hope county leaders will proactively do whatever they can to make sure it's not hard to find us. (Recorder photo by Anne Adams)

Then there's the politicking behind the scenes — internal and external arguments about whether schools should be financially punished for not meeting the standards, and whether AYP goals rise too sharply too quickly for educators to keep up.

The good news is, most teachers and administrators in Bath and Highland see AYP goals as important regardless of pass rates and politics. Our divisions want students to succeed, and it's everyone's job to hold our schools accountable for making that happen.

Bath educators have already reviewed their students' scores. Instead of berating one another or pointing fingers, they are using the information to change strategies. If nothing else, AYP numbers help them identify where improvements are needed.

Highland educators see those scores the same way — they now know where to focus more attention and at what grade level and subject, even though they made the AYP cut.

Highland County Public Schools should be proud for hitting the mark, but they also know the division has advantages other schools do not, which makes it easier to accomplish. Due to the small number of students, some of the major subgroups for AYP testing don't exist at HCPS, and therefore cannot be held against them in pass/fail categories. Teachers are doing exactly the right thing — keeping their eyes on areas where students could do better, and focusing on ways to make that happen. That's the reason HCPS is so successful.

The NCLB Act has its critics, and rightly so. We hope state officials can negotiate any improvements to help all Virginia schools succeed, without lowering standards for education. In the meantime, we are confident Bath and Highland schools will use the AYP scores to further students' knowledge and learning skills no matter their backgrounds and barriers. That's what it's all about.