



**Working under a legacy of craftsmanship**—Duane Mendenhall (above) carves shell drawer fronts for slant-top desks. He's surrounded by sample carvings from past Irion Company carvers. Specializing in 18th-century reproductions, Irion Company does its work in this former hardware store (right) in Christiana, Pa.



# A Visit to Irion Company Furniture Makers

*Passion for period furniture creates a brotherhood of joiners*

by Jonathan Binzen

Irion Company Furniture Makers is 17 going on several hundred. Walk into the shop, and you can feel a direct connection with the roots of American furniture. Patterns, samples, templates and story boards hanging from the walls and rafters spell out the aesthetic of the 18th century. Half-made highboys, tea tables, secretaries, beds and chairs fill the first floor bench room. The furniture is made with scrupulous fidelity to the originals, and the wood it's made from is extraordinary. But what's most striking is the brio with which the furniture is made, the complete immersion of the craftsmen in their work. "Making 18th-century furniture is a real charm. A labor of love," said Kendl Monn, nine years at Irion. "We've been lucky—we've grown slowly and ended up with the people who really live this stuff."

Lou Irion founded Irion Company in 1977 after working in his father's cabinetmaking shop for a year or so. He was soon joined by Chris Arato, a college friend, and together the two built the business over the next 15 years. Arato left in 1992 and opened a small shop of his own in Maine, but he is still a presence at Irion, recalled by everyone I spoke to as a master at the bench and an inspiring mentor. When the two pitched their lots together, neither one had much experience in woodworking or business. "We set out to survive," Irion said. "There was no grand plan. If we'd had one, we would have failed miserably." Their survival strategy was to take any work they could get. At the beginning, that meant mostly furniture repair, refinishing and restoration. As the company grew, they built more furniture, but restoration and repair remained the engine of the business.

That was a lucky thing, according to Monn, because in addition to paying the freight, that work also paid the tuition. "Dealers would bring in this great stuff, and everyone would be all over it. We'd see great pieces and great ideas every day, and that's absolutely the way to learn. You see the real stuff, and you see it the right way—you're not looking at somebody's interpretation."

Perhaps because the company's founders discovered firsthand that passion and not prior experience was the key to success, they've fostered an atmosphere of learning. Irion has rarely hired fully trained cabinetmakers. "For some reason, we seem to do best with people who learn most of what they know with us," Irion said. The learning occurs off the job as well as on. If an employee wants to make something for himself, Irion gives him lumber and free run of the shop after hours. A number of Irion employees said that's how they got from one level to another. "As we see you can do something effectively," Monn said, "you'll get to do it for the shop. Then you have to do it *cost-effectively*, and you get a



**Irion's broad range is evident in the prep room**—At one end of the room is a Chester County highboy in tiger maple, a mahogany Chippendale corner chair and samples of bedposts.



**"Working wood like this is a privilege,"** says Brian Shultz as he carves the fluted knee block on a figured mahogany Chippendale ball table.



**Replicating a finish**—Jeff Rath applies a coat of orange glaze to a Dutch cupboard. Coats of sprayed shellac and hand-rubbed wax will follow.



**Reproducing furniture with a reproduction plane**—Gerald Martin, building an 18th-century Chester County slant-top desk, smooths end grain with a reproduction Stanley #9 plane made by Maine planemaker Lie-Nielsen.



**Hand-crafted detailing is important to the work**—Jeff Williams does final spokeshaving on the crest rail of a Chippendale camelback sofa in tulip poplar and Cuban mahogany.

raise.”

The variety of work Irion does keeps even the most experienced furnituremakers interested. Different types of furniture are rotated, so everyone gets a shot at the more involved or unusual pieces. Irion explains, “It was obvious early on that you either challenge the guys or you lose them.”

Irion also keeps his furnituremakers happy with the outstanding wood he obtains. Even very wide tops and case sides are made from single boards, and grain is always carefully matched. On practically every piece that leaves the shop, the wood’s color is rich and the figure is stunning.

Brian Shultz, an Irion employee for 14 years, still gets excited by the wood. “It felt like Christmas,” he said, when he planed the one-piece mahogany top of the Philadelphia Chippendale hall table in the bottom left photo on p. 83 and revealed the full effect of the crotch figure. “I went and bragged it around the shop.” He stopped carving the volute on one cabriole leg to fetch a rag and some mineral spirits to rub on the top, so we could see the feathered depths of the figure. “If I had to glue up four or five boards to make a top for this piece, I might be going through the motions, just getting it out the door. But when you get to work with wood like this, you feel like you’re letting it down if you don’t give it your best.” □

Jonathan Binzen, formerly the assistant editor of *Fine Woodwork*

# Hand-picked wood for handmade furniture

"Wood is at the heart of our business," Lou Irion says. From what I saw on several visits to his shop and his nearby farm, the heart is healthy. Irion, on the tractor in the bottom right photo spends three-quarters of his 70-hour week working with wood—and that's before the wood ever reaches the shop. He buys by the log and has the logs custom cut by small sawyers who understand his needs. "Most lumbermills saw for clear," he says. "They constantly turn the log to find a clear board. And they're paid by the board foot. There's no incentive to cut wide boards or boards with figure." After much fighting with mills, Irion found some small local sawyers who understand his needs and have the same feeling for the wood that he does. "Instead of grinding a great tree up into hamburger," he says with satisfaction, "they'll cut it for me like a butcher." —J.B.



Photo: Gerald Martin

**"We've made wood the focus of our furniture."** Lou Irion seeks wild figure and wide boards and regularly finds both, as in this Pennsylvania Dutch cupboard in flame birch. The sides of the upper and lower cabinets are cut from the same board. Doors, drawer fronts and face frames are cut from the same plank or the same tree. "You can only make a cabinet so well," says Irion's Gerald Martin. "At the end of the day, what sells people is the wood."

**Planks are carefully selected**—Lou Irion personally picks the primary wood for all the furniture his company makes. In the central bay of one of his two larger wood-storage barns (below), he lowers boards he has picked from racks of shorts on the upper level. He has planks stacked in five smaller outbuildings as well, including one shed dedicated to pieces with crotch figure.



**Controlling the wood from stump to workbench**—Lou Irion buys logs and has them custom sawn to yield wide boards with the best figure. He air-dries the boards in stickered stacks at his farm (above) for a year or more and then kiln dries them. To make loading and unloading his dehumidification kiln easier, Irion had an Amish neighbor build this special steel-wheeled wagon. It stays in the kiln and is guaranteed against flat tires.

