

Side  
*by Side*

# Simplicity in Storage

BY GREGORY LEFEVER

APPLYING THEIR WELL-RESPECTED PRINCIPLES OF DESIGN AND FUNCTION, THE SHAKERS ELEVATED COMMON STORAGE BOXES TO AN ART FORM. SHAKER BOX-MAKERS TODAY STRIVE FOR THAT SAME LEVEL OF ARTISANSHIP AND AUTHENTICITY.





**W**ith their penchant for elevating the purely functional to new spiritual levels, Shaker woodworkers in the 19th Century turned the common New England pantry box into a thing of transcendent beauty. For the Shakers, however, these elegant oval boxes remained merely storage boxes, with many of the surviving examples bearing the names of household items, medicinals, or even just “Chalk.”

Comparing Shaker boxes to typical boxes from the 1800s reveals the genius of the Believers’ approach to life’s plainest utensils.

A typical commercial New England pantry box had a circle of wood for the base, with thinner steam-bent wood wrapped around it for the sides. The triangle-shaped ends of the sidewall were joined with a simple but bulky overlapping joint. Such boxes were prone to warping, cupping, and splitting because bending the sidewall to match the circular base strained the wood and humidity played havoc with the crude joint.

Shaker woodworkers—always inspired to improve upon the mundane—stripped the pantry box of any ornamentation and developed instead an oval shape that put less stress on the wood. They also refined and strengthened the joint for the sidewalls by means of a graceful swallowtail design. Along the way,

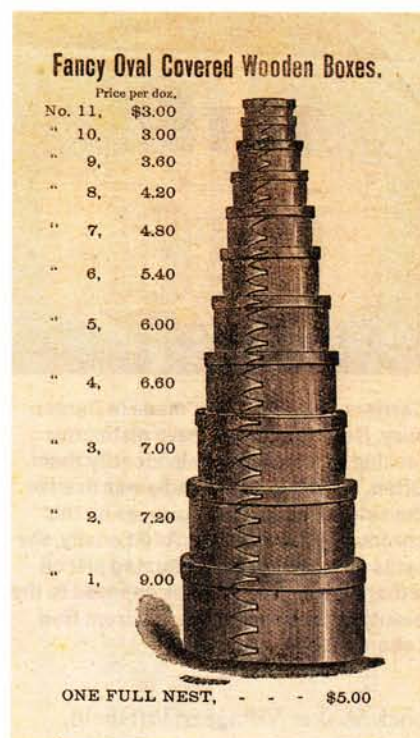
From the beginning, Shakers used forms, jigs, and templates to produce boxes in standard sizes. Boxes were identified by their individual price and later by a numbering system. This catalog page illustrating a nest of 11 boxes is from a supplement to an 1876 Shaker chair catalog. Prices ranged from \$3 a dozen for the smallest box to \$9 a dozen for the largest. A single nest of boxes cost \$5.

Shakers turned box making into an efficient and lucrative operation in several of their communities.

Although seemingly simple to make, the Shaker box is a test of woodworking skill that relies on patience, precision, and reverence. It’s no accident that those same qualities exist today among a handful of dedicated woodworkers who reproduce these lovely boxes in the Shaker tradition, some of whom admit they sense the presence of Shaker brothers looking over their shoulders as they gently plane, sand, and assemble the boxes.

#### STARTING AN INDUSTRY

The United Society of Believers in Christ’s Second Appearing—or “Shakers,” because of their physically animated form of worship—first arrived in New York from England in 1774 and over the next several decades established several communities of Believers in New England and eventually westward. Shaker brothers created boxes and carriers (essentially boxes with



COLLECTION OF M. STEPHEN AND MIRIAM R. MILLER

gracefully curving handles) for use in their communities and, in some places, manufactured them for sale.

Brother Isaac Newton Young of the New Lebanon, New York, community wrote in 1856 in *A Concise View of the Church of God*, “These [oval boxes] have been manufactured almost or quite yearly, since perhaps the year 1800. This has been a very good little branch of business, tho’ not so extensive as some.”

According to Christian Goodwillie, curator of collections at Han-

Oval box made by Daniel Crosman at New Lebanon, New York. Crosman joined the Church Family at age 12 and remained there all his life. In 1844, he took over the box making business, which had been operating since at least 1798. He likely made this box after 1832, the year a planing machine was introduced. This box, which can hold a Sister’s bonnet, is slightly larger than the largest commercial size, with 6 swallowtails instead of 5. It may have been a special order or used by a Church Family member. The finish is a bright chrome yellow wash that leaves the wood grain visible.



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Carriers and oval boxes made in Canterbury, New Hampshire, have distinctive tacking patterns that help identify them. Often, an ash carrier handle was fixed to the side with a 2:1:2 pattern, as on this chrome yellow example. Additionally, the tacks at the fingers are situated just on either side of the notch, as opposed to the evenly spaced tacks on a box from New Lebanon.

cock Shaker Village in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, the New Lebanon community was the largest producer of boxes, supplying them to the nearby Shaker communities at Hancock and Tyringham, Massachusetts. Shakers at Canterbury and Enfield in New Hampshire, Alfred and Sabbathday Lake in Maine, and Harvard, Massachusetts, also made

**Brother Delmer Wilson, who lived from 1873 until 1961, was one of the most prolific makers of boxes and carriers, finally assembling his last set of boxes in 1955 at the Sabbathday Lake community where he lived. Here he stands near 1,083 carriers he made in one season. He had been raised as a Shaker since the age of eight and became a self-taught master of several trades.**



boxes in smaller numbers.

Jerry Grant, director of research and library services at the Shaker Museum and Library in Old Chatham, New York, and a leading authority on the Believers and their creations, explained that box making was sporadic in the western communities.

"The community tooled up for a box business at Union Village (located near what is now Lebanon, Ohio, north of Cincinnati) and operated it from around 1841 until 1847, when it was determined it was not profitable," he said. Although a few boxes have been traced to other western communities—North Union (now Shaker Heights, Ohio), as well as two Kentucky communities, South Union near Bowling Green and Pleasant Hill near Lexington—no actual box-making enterprise existed in these places.

"Many Shaker villages probably produced some boxes," Grant said. "The Brother who made dippers or measures or spit boxes certainly could make a few sets of boxes as needed, but as far as making enough to constitute an industry, that happened in just a few communities."

Box making dwindled along with

the population of adherents in Shaker communities in the late 19th Century. A non-believer named George Roberts produced boxes in New Lebanon from about 1920 to 1940 using the original tools and forms, but the only



**This maple and pine carrier, made at Alfred, Maine, in the late 19th or early 20th Century, is lined with silk and contains a sewing kit comprised of a pin cushion, "strawberry" emery, poplar needle case, and wax cake. Alfred examples often have fingers that point to the left.**

authentic Shaker box industry functioning in the 20th Century was in Maine at the Sabbathday Lake and Alfred communities.

## ARTFUL SIMPLICITY

In boxes, as with architecture and furniture, Shakers were extraordinarily practical in selecting materials and construction methods. Typically they used white pine for the tops and bottoms of the boxes and maple for the sides. Pine is easy to cut and work, while maple bends well when wet. Authentic Shaker boxes made from other woods do exist—birch was sometimes preferred over maple in Maine and New Hampshire communities—but pine-and-maple boxes are by far the most common.

The box-making process can be described simply: Two bands of thin maple—a taller one for the body and a shorter one for the lid—are cut and then steamed or soaked until pliable. They are bent into ovals and then their two overlapping ends are joined to form the lid and body. An oval lid top and base bottom are then cut to size and affixed to the body and lid,



and the box is complete. But beyond this simple description are several crucial, time-consuming steps that transform the unassuming box into a piece of woodworking art.

"A number of forms, fixtures, jigs, and templates were necessary to do the production numbers the Shakers achieved," Grant noted.

June Sprigg, a respected author on things Shaker and former curator at Hancock Shaker Village, discussed the benefits of making the boxes oval. "The elliptical shape probably evolved at least in part for reasons of economy," she wrote in *By Shaker Hands* (1975). "A 12-inch circular box must be made from a 12-inch board, but a 12-inch oval box can be made from a 9-inch board."

Goodwillie observed that the oval dimensions varied. "Subtle differences abound in boxes made by different hands. With boxes from the East, telltale signs point to construction by different communities. For example, New Lebanon boxes tend to be more elliptical and less round. Boxes from Maine and New Hampshire are rounder—still oval, but not as elongated."

Shakers spent considerable effort—as do today's box-makers—on the joint that fastens the ends of the maple bands. Instead of a standard overlapping joint, the Shakers used a delicate swallowtail joint, with carved "fingers" tacked to the opposite end of the strip.

Sprigg praised the swallowtail joint: "Shakers knew that wood swells across the grain when damp, so they cut wooden fingers—the joint 'breathes' without warping or buckling—and the lids slide on as perfectly today as they did when new."

A good Shaker box requires graceful proportions on the swallowtail joints. "The relationship between the finger length and height of the box should be pleasing," Goodwillie said. "Fingers should be planed so that they become progressively thinner as they narrow."

Shaker woodworkers preferred copper tacks—which would not rust



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**Oval boxes were sold in "nests," or graduated sets. Although this group, made at New Lebanon, is not a true nest, it shows the various sizes and finishes the Shakers offered with oval boxes. They have been stacked upside down as a tongue-in-cheek reference to the upcoming book and exhibition, expected to upend some existing notions about Shaker culture and the Andrews.**

## SEMINAL COLLECTION ON VIEW

Among the first to recognize the unique contributions of the Shakers to American culture, Faith and Edward Deming Andrews acquired their Shaker collection as a fascinating tale of intrigue, promises made and broken, relationships, friendships, ethics, passion, and scholarship.

Beginning in May, Hancock Shaker Village presents an exhibition and accompanying catalog titled *Gather up the Fragments: The Andrews Shaker Collection*, which will examine the full scope of the Andrews' involvement with Shakerism as scholars, collectors, and dealers. Rare items, including many never before exhibited, will showcase the depth of their collection.

From the 1920s through the 1960s, Faith and Edward Deming Andrews actively pursued Shaker objects, collecting mainly from the Shakers themselves. Their efforts resulted in numerous publications, pioneering scholarly works that launched the field of

Shaker studies. They left two major collections of Shaker materials—manuscripts, printed works, visual art, furniture, textiles, and small craft—which comprise the most comprehensive body of Shaker materials ever assembled. Hancock was the primary recipient of the portion of the Andrews Shaker Collection that contains furniture, textiles, gift drawings, including the now-iconic "Tree of Life," and household objects.

At least 250 pieces will be displayed, including objects from private collections, Winterthur Museum, and The Metropolitan Museum of Art. The exhibition will be on view at the Chace Gallery through November.

### Hancock Shaker Village

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The #7 size bird's-eye maple sewing box, left, by Keith Dickson, has a swivel handle and a tray that holds 12 spools of thread. He also made the divided carrier. The sewing box, center, by David Coleman, has a bird's-eye maple top. Its satin lining and sewing notions mimic sewing boxes the Shakers made in the 19th Century.

and ruin the wood—to hold down the fingers. These tacks are short with broad heads, and their tips were bent over by means of an anvil after piercing the fingers and underlying strip of maple. The tacks also have to be carefully spaced to avoid splitting the fingers.

"The regularity of the spacing of the tacks also is key to making a pleasing form," Goodwillie added.

Shakers typically finished their boxes with varnish or paint. They used a wide range of pigments: chrome yellow, yellow ochre (French yellow), red ochre (Venetian red), red lead, Prussian blue, Verditer, and chrome green (a combination of Prussian blue and chrome yellow), and rarely Spanish brown. The palettes tended to vary somewhat among different communities, with some of the Maine boxes displaying darker hues.

"After the beginning of the 20th Century, paint was rarely used as a finish," Goodwillie said.

### THE BOX TODAY

Building Shaker boxes today involves fundamentally the same process as when Shaker brothers produced them. But departures exist, as you would expect in a process that has extended through more than two hundred years.

Sophisticated power tools replace the treadle and steam-powered saws and planers and some of the Shakers' hand tools, but considerable delicate handwork still is involved. Some of today's craftsmen have moved far beyond the traditional maple and white pine into bird's-eye, tiger, and quilted maples as well as walnut, cherry, and even exotic woods such as mahogany.

But as one of today's leading box makers, John Wilson, mused, "I sometimes imagine Shaker craftsmen watching my frustration with ornery cherry boards and sighing, 'Ah, the price of vanity. Stick to the utility of maple, and it would go well.'"

When the Shakers painted their boxes, they frequently painted them with the lids on, so when the lid came off it revealed a band of bare wood around the top of the box body. They left the top edge bare to avoid a fully painted body becoming sticky in humid weather and binding the snug lid to the body.

"The interesting thing is that if you do that—paint in the authentic technique with the bare band showing—people won't buy the box because they consider it unfinished or a mistake," said modern box-maker Steve Grasselli. "I can guarantee that if you painted a box in the old way, you might be the most accurate guy in the place, but you won't sell a single box."

Although thousands of people have created Shaker boxes as fascinating and moderately challenging woodworking projects, a select few craftsmen revere this simple box, not only because of the Shaker spiritual connotations, but because the boxes



exemplify the pinnacle of the woodworker's art. We profile five craftsmen who approach the building of each of their boxes with the three attributes necessary to match Shaker workmanship: patience, precision, and reverence.

All five—David Coleman of Kettering, Ohio, Keith Dickson of Westminster, Maryland, Steve Grasselli of Syracuse, New York, Don Mabry of Roanoke, Texas, and Sam Richardson of Staunton, Virginia—have been listed in *Early American Life's* Directory of Traditional American Crafts for their fine work.

### DAVID COLEMAN

David Coleman became one of the country's leading Shaker box makers thanks to one personality trait. "I'm bull-headed," he said with a chuckle as he described his journey from woodworking hobbyist to creating nearly 500 boxes a year for various Shaker museums.

Today, however, Coleman is winding down his box business due to the death in 2005 of his wife of thirty-eight years, Mary Jo, who had a major role in his success. "My wife was a huge part of this for me," he said. "She was my partner and my inspiration." While he has ceased his wholesale business, he continues to make and sell boxes on a more personal scale.

David Coleman's #8 box in chrome yellow is a replica of a c. 1860 box made at Mount Lebanon, New York, when Daniel Crosman managed the box-making industry. Coleman capped maple side bands with pine tops and bottoms, as the Shakers did on most of their boxes.



In 1991 the couple visited Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill, Kentucky, where Coleman, who was employed in the printing industry, first observed Shaker woodworking. He purchased a reproduction Shaker box during the visit.

"I started dissecting it in my mind, figuring out how to make it," but found it deceptively difficult. "But I'm a bull-headed sort of guy. I persisted and I stuck with it. I was driven to make the best Shaker box I could and I pushed my skills to the limit." He recalls working on the swallowtail joint patterns. "I traced and carved over and over and over again until I perfected my carving. I just kept looking at original boxes and boxes from other box-makers and kept improving my own."

Along the way, Coleman—again at his wife's urging—contacted itinerant Shaker-box instructor John Wilson. He and Wilson became friends and Coleman assisted Wilson for several years beginning in 1995 as Wilson trekked through Indiana, Ohio, Kentucky, and New York teaching people how to make Shaker boxes.

Coleman prefers to work with thin veneers in the authentic mix of maple and white pine. He obtained his distinctive palette of colors from Brother Wayne Smith, a convert and one of the last four Shakers now liv-



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### MENTOR OF BOX-MAKERS

John Wilson has aptly been called the Johnny Appleseed of the Shaker box. For 25 years he has taught people from all walks of life how to make these distinctive boxes.

How many people are we talking about?

"Probably in the range of 5,000," he said.

"To get a sense of it, I've been on the road since 1983 and the first year I had three classes. The next year, seven. The next, 15, and the fourth year I was doing between 20 and 30 classes. I've been going at that rate for 25 years and we have between 10 and 15 in each class, so you can work the numbers."

Throughout most of those years, he packed his tools and supplies into a pick-up truck and traveled thousands of miles as an itinerant instructor.

Talking with the country's leading Shaker box-makers, Wilson's name comes up often, first because he taught many of them, and second because his business, The Home Shop in Charlotte, Michigan, is the leading (in some cases, only) supplier of bendable stock, copper tacks, pegs, templates, jigs, and much more.

Wilson came to woodworking first and to things Shaker years later. Now nearly 70, he has worked with wood most of his life, putting himself through college as a carpenter.

On the way to teach his first woodworking class at Lansing (Michigan) Community College—he hadn't yet devised his lesson plan—Wilson stopped off at a library and on a whim checked out *Shop Drawings of Shaker Furniture and Woodenware*, by Ejner Handberg. In it, he spotted the plans for a Shaker box and his next career was born.

"People who are teachers don't feel proprietary about their information the way some craftsmen do," Wilson said, explaining his willingness to teach others everything he knows about box-making. "If you share information, you get more connection, business, and loyalty."





Keith Dickson's divided carrier is based on similar carriers the Shakers used to hold flatware on their dining tables. The handle is Dickson's design. The #8 box is made from tiger maple, finished with a dark stain.

ing, who left the Sabbathday Lake community in 2006. "Brother Wayne was huge when it came to helping me with the paint," Coleman recalled. "He was very generous in sharing the color samples with me—the specific blue, green, yellow, and dark red."

Coleman still sells boxes and takes orders at various festivals and events in the Midwest, with prices ranging from \$20 to \$125 for boxes and \$150 for his special sewing carrier.

## KEITH DICKSON

Keith Dickson started making Shaker boxes to relax from the rigors of cabinetmaking, but in no way did he ease his penchant for precision.

"The fact that I'm a woodworker means there's a lot of difference in what I choose and how I see a piece of wood compared with some other people," he said. "When I make a nest of boxes, I'll cut all the pieces from the same board so it's a perfectly matched set and not a mix of cherry or whatever. People at a show will look at a nest of my boxes and say, 'I really like that, but I'm not sure why,' and I tell them it's because it's all from one board,' and then they see it and realize that's why."

Dickson has been a cabinetmaker for twenty-five years. Before that he built log houses and refinished antiques. He began making Shaker boxes fifteen years ago when he took a class from John Wilson.

Precision remains a big part of

Dickson's box making. "All of my patterns are from original pieces. One thing I do that's different is carve my swallowtails to be very fine and delicate, and I take a lot of effort to make sure the line of tacks is dead center so that when you stand the whole nest upright, the tack line runs exactly up the center."

He prefers bird's-eye and tiger maple, cherry, and walnut. He finishes every box, including painted versions, with light or dark lacquer. Over the years, he has expanded his line to include carriers, divided carriers, button boxes, sewing boxes, pin boxes, and an open-swing box popular with knitters. He gained acclaim in 2001 for creating a commemorative Shaker box for the annual White House Easter Egg Roll.

Dickson has wholesale arrangements with several retailers and Shaker museum gift shops. He sells retail through his web site and at selected shows. Prices range from \$20 to \$140 for his high-end sewing box.

He also teaches Shaker box making at Mercer Museum in Bucks County, Pennsylvania, and locally about six times a year. He says teaching is becoming a larger part of his interest, and he plans to expand his classes from New England to Florida. "I've had people from fifteen to seventy-five years of age in the same class, and they love it," he said. "Some have taken my classes six or seven times."

## STEVE GRASSELLI

Steve Grasselli sums up his Shaker box making with one word: authenticity. The degree of authenticity he has achieved is confirmed by curators at several Shaker museums where Grasselli's boxes are sold.

A cabinetmaker by trade, Grasselli worked seventeen years at the renowned Stickley Furniture Company in Fayetteville, New York, where he developed his keen eye for detail and finishing techniques. A longtime admirer of Shaker workmanship from visits to Hancock and other Shaker museums, Grasselli decided in 1994 to take a box-making class from John Wilson.

After learning the fundamentals, Grasselli embarked on many months of research, delving into both public and private collections to examine every surviving Shaker box he could.

"I've been able to hold—right here in my hands—hundreds of antique boxes from the old Shakers," he said. "Because I have the eye and the attention to detail of a cabinetmaker, I've been able to recognize the huge range of boxes they made. There are definite differences—some were just not as good as others—and I saw an opportunity to be at the higher end of a style I really admired. The box-maker I adopted as a role model was a fellow named Daniel Crosman, who was the master box-maker at Mount Lebanon for about forty years. Crosman transcended craft and made boxes that were art."

Grasselli abides by Shaker preferences in types of wood, tending to be less experimental than some other contemporary box-makers. "Most guys use a lot of cherry for their boxes, while I use more maple and Eastern white pine, which was the authentic combination of woods the old Shakers used."

He also researched finishes. For



his painted boxes, as an example, he carefully thins his paint, applies it, and then sands it until the wood grain is visible. "The Shakers used a very different type of painting technique," he explained. "Getting the right colors wasn't hard to master. Getting the technique is what was hard."

Grasselli teaches classes in Shaker box-making at Hancock Shaker Village. His boxes are available through most of the Shaker museums and run from about \$25 for a small box to \$140 for a large bonnet box.

#### DON MABRY

Don Mabry has a long history of working with reproduction early American furniture, but once the allure of Shaker had him in its grasp, things changed. Mabry now focuses his business primarily on Shaker

boxes and carriers.

"It sounds rather hokey, but as I'm building a box, I go through each step thinking there's a long-passed Shaker brother looking over my shoulder," he explained. "It has a real effect on the quality of my work."

Mabry, who spent his working years at Texas Instruments with a side business creating colonial furniture, visited Shaker museums at Hancock, Sabbathday Lake, and Canterbury about five years ago. "I was hooked," he said. "I came away thinking I was going to start building Shaker reproductions and should start with something simple, like a small wooden box. And I'm still building those small wooden boxes. It turned out they weren't quite as simple as I'd imagined."

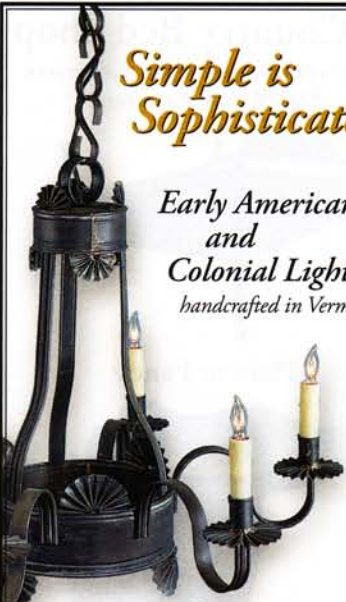

Most of Mabry's boxes are made of cherry, although he uses the tradi-

**Although he frequently uses traditional maple and pine for his boxes, Steve Grasselli now offers a new combination, this nesting set with walnut sides and bird's-eye maple lids. He prides himself on creating thin fingers on the box joints (inset).**



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Don Mabry used hard maple for his stack of painted boxes (the largest three are shown below, the smaller two above), finishing them with milk paint in traditional Shaker colors. The unpainted box above is cherry with a curly cherry lid, finished with linseed oil and paste wax.

several styles of carriers at craft fairs, and he has a catalog on his web site. Prices range from \$15 for a small box up to about \$80.

### SAM RICHARDSON

Sam Richardson figures he could make a Shaker box in a couple of hours. Instead, he spends two or more days on each one so he can come close to the perfection he demands of himself.

"Sure, I could make a box in two or three hours, but I just can't do less than my best. And that means it's going to be thirteen or fifteen or more hours," he said. "If I can see a way to do something better and it'll take another hour to do, then I'll take that extra time just to do it better."

It's evident where the time goes. For example: "The Shaker box has a band for the body and a band for the lid. Instead of just randomly selecting two pieces of wood big enough for both pieces, I take one piece of wood and see which way the grain goes and then see which way I want

tional maple and pine combination when duplicating an authentic box. He also experiments with more dramatic pairings, such as cherry for the bands and quilted maple for the top of the lid.

He's convinced the Shaker brother looking over his shoulder would approve of using various woods. "We have to remember that today's box-maker is usually making a box for an entirely different purpose than the original Shaker boxes. The originals were for necessary purposes, such as storing spices in the pantry. But the box being built today is more for decorative purposes, and I think it's okay for us to take more liberty with the selection of materials."

Mabry markets his boxes and







Sam Richardson used various figured woods for his diminutive elliptical boxes. The largest, a #2, is bird's-eye maple, while the smallest (#0) is blistered maple. The three #1s are quilted maple, cherry with a bird's-eye maple top, and walnut with a walnut burl top (inset).

it to point, and then I'll cut the top band and the body band out of the same piece so I have a grain match."

He measures the location of each copper tack to the nearest millimeter. He even studies the underside of each tack and accommodates any tiny amount the stem of the tack might be offset from the center of the tack's head. "I spend literally hours sanding the swallowtails," he said. "And I use a dial indicator to measure the width of the swallowtails so they're all within a couple thousandths of an inch before I put the wood in the water to bend it."

Richardson made birdhouses in the third grade and when he was fourteen won an award from the Shell Oil Company for the best-constructed Soapbox Derby in his hometown. He retired in 1999 after thirty-three years at the DuPont plant in Waynesboro, Virginia.

A few years before retiring,

Richardson took a class in Shaker box making from John Wilson, where he made his first five boxes. "I've almost completely changed the way I make boxes from what I was originally taught," he said. He uses more woods than most other box-makers, including cherry, walnut, tiger maple, quilted maple, bird's-eye maple, sycamore, mahogany, and even non-native woods. He prefers to finish only with oil to reveal the beauty of the grain.

Despite the amount of time he spends per box, Richardson's prices are in line with his peers, ranging from about \$30 to some over \$100. He does local shows and gains customers through word of mouth. ★

Oregon writer Greg LeFever is a contributing editor to *Early American Life*.

New Shaker boxes were photographed by Winfield Ross at Pine Tree Barn, Wooster, Ohio.

SOURCES ON PAGE 78



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This diminutive oval box from New Lebanon is only 1<sup>7</sup>/<sub>16</sub>" high by 4<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>" at its widest. It has a translucent varnish finish.

## SOURCES

### David Coleman

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### Keith Dickson

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