



Diary of a Class: Green Woodturning

Planted in the traditions and crafts of Southern Appalachia, the John C. Campbell Folk School offers supportive, creative learning while building a community that feels like home.

By Autumn Foushée

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We're loving our John C. Campbell experiences. Here's more of what we've learned: Tinsmithing

Fall Vegetable Gardening

Gifts of Food and Friendship

Sunday Arrival: Follow the Winding Road

Sharp turns to the left, then back to the right on narrow country roads with no shoulder—I had started to see the value of I-75 when I decided the mountains were telling me to “slow down, take your time and enjoy the sunshine streaming through the quaking leaves; the Folk School will be there when you arrive.”

It isn't often that you get to experience beautiful October forests in southern Appalachia!

I arrived at the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, N.C., in the midst of the annual fall festival.

The campus bustled with music, vendors and visitors from all over. Amid the Bluegrass music, dancing and hundreds of vendors, there were also blacksmithing and woodcarving demonstrations that hinted of what was to come during my week at the school.

With the delightful help of the Folk School staff, I got situated in my cozy quarters for the week and took off to explore the festival before it ended.

Getting Started Right

Supper was served around 6 p.m. and the campus was just beginning to quiet down from the festival as the new students arrived.

Long, oak tables seated eight people for a family-style supper. The dining hall was filled with windows that looked across the valley to the mountains, offering a peaceful view of the land.

I took the last seat at a table filled with students of many ages. Though I understood the Folk School's principles of noncompetitive learning and tolerance, I was still surprised by the diverse group of people all interested in learning a traditional craft.

From age 20 to 79, I talked with people from places as varied as one town away to California to as far away as New Zealand! The dining table was already a microcosm of what the Folk School strives to create: a community of caring, tolerant people eager to learn from each other.

After I was stuffed with a lovely meal, we divided into our classes to meet our instructor and begin learning. To my surprise, the woodturning class was a great balance of men and women, which was even represented by the instructors: Dave Barriger and Connie Lefebvre.

Our first night of class uncovered the variety of student skill levels.

We introduced ourselves and Dave discussed safety and a few basics of woodturning, and introduced us to the machines we would be using: woodturning lathes—large, strongly built machines that struck fear in the hearts of the novices in the group (but we kept silent at first).

When those fears were finally expressed, Dave addressed them with guidance and a warm chuckle—obviously, he believed we could overcome them.



I left the woodshop that night feeling expectantly eager about the first day of woodturning.

Monday: Flying Chips!

A sunrise walk shrouded in mist started my first day. Led by a Folk School staff member, we walked along a path crisscrossing the campus. I decided quickly that the peaceful, invigorating morning walk would be an enjoyable, daily ritual for me.

After a scrumptious breakfast, woodturning class started with a discussion about what else—wood!

What is green woodturning? Green wood is that which has been cut down or has fallen recently, but has remained in whole pieces; in other words, it has not been allowed to dry out.

Green wood is softer than dry wood because it contains more water, making it easier to turn on a lathe.

After Dave discussed how to use the lathe and cutting tools, it was time to jump in.

Our first task was to turn a bowling pin from a heavy and unbalanced, rectangular block of cherry wood. The technique used was called “end turning,” where the piece of wood is pinched between the lathe’s drive center and tailstock.

With the wood spinning at roughly 800 to 900 RPMs, the first challenge was to convince myself to place a long, sharp metal blade against an irregularly shaped piece of wood spinning so fast that its blurred image appeared round—yes, it was slightly intimidating! But with reassurance and a few sample cuts by Dave and Connie, I put the blade against the wood and let the wood chips fly!

After an intense day of learning, I had a bowling pin that looked more like a bloated Coke bottle, as well as a spindle that had some nice, smooth cuts. I didn’t turn any amazing works of art the first day, which wasn’t even important because there was no competition between students; we were there to learn. However, I realized that I had learned some key green woodturning tips and techniques.

I knew that the idea wasn’t just to cover the woodshop in wood chips; the point was to master your cutting skills so the cuts became long and smooth, leaving the wood not only in the shape you wanted, but also with a smooth surface.

It sounded simple enough, but I quickly learned from Dave and Connie that every piece of wood is different and the techniques come with practice. We got a lot of practice on our first day—that was for certain!

Tuesday: A Test

Day two was a challenging day for me. Feeling a little tired from the vigorous day before, but with a breakfast boost, I went to class excited. We were supposed to turn platters.

A wooden plate seemed a much more elegant beast to master on the lathe than did a bowling pin. I was nervous, but ready.

Dave and Connie first demonstrated how to safely use a chainsaw to cut green wood for turning. The shape in which the wood is cut sets up the type of piece you can turn on a lathe.

For example, to make a platter, you typically need to cut the wood roughly into a square slab. This slab is then mounted on a lathe and cut into a round platter.

After Dave demonstrated his impressive ability to turn a clean, well-done piece (by student standards) in 15 minutes or less, we hesitantly started our own platter projects.

The first step was to cut the backside of the platter, smoothing it to create the slight slope characteristic of a plate’s underside.

To do this, I followed Dave’s example by rounding the edge, then cutting from the center to the edge to form the stock and smoothing the backside of the platter.

The stock is an elevated, beveled edge of wood at the center of the turning piece that allows it to be held tightly by the chuck (the main part of the lathe, which rotates the wood).



After I shaped the edge and back of the platter, and cut the stock, I turned the piece around on the lathe so the unfinished face could be cut, smoothed and detailed.

Feeling tired, my inexperience at judging the right cutting angle got a little worse and I caught the edge of my tool in the wood, jolting the platter from the chuck. It fell to the floor with a loud crash. The woodshop had heard this sound already in our class—most wood turners, novice and proficient, catch their blade at some point. It shook me up a little, but I quickly realized the mistake I made with the cutting tool.

After I talked with classmates and the instructors again about how to hold and position the cutting tools, I realized I could salvage my platter.

I also realized the noncompetitive spirit of the Folk School certainly existed in our class. My classmates were eager to help and learn from each other.

Even the more-experienced students sought help from the novice wood turners at different points during the class. My rough day on the lathe was made more than bearable because of the support and guidance from my instructors and fellow classmates.

Wednesday: Lessons Learned

With a good night's rest, I was eager to reclaim my platter! I learned another lesson from the day before—turning wood when you're tired is dangerous. Woodturning requires complete concentration and awareness, otherwise the many hazards can turn quickly into accidents and injuries.

With renewed concentration, I finished the platter and moved on to the next project—a goblet!

Dave brought a few branches of live oak from Florida for the students to turn. Live oak was a lesson in the nuances between different types of wood.

The branch I chose for my goblet was dense and had dried a little more than my previous pieces of wood. Turning this wood proved interesting and challenging because of its hardness, but also because of the wood's beautiful grain pattern.

I didn't know that a goblet—an item of such small, intricate detail—could be made from wood on a lathe as large as the ones we used.

The method of turning the goblet was similar to both the bowling pin and the platter. We combined the simple techniques from different pieces to create more intricate turnings. After finishing our goblets, we took a field trip to the woodturning studio of a local legend—Lissi Oland.

Oland is a woman of tiny stature with scrappy fortitude. She's known for turning pieces of wood larger in diameter than she is tall!

Oland guided us through her woodshop and studio, describing how she turned the extremely large pieces by hoisting them from roof rafters to place them on her lathe. As we drove back to the Folk School, I realized that like so many crafts, there are many styles and methods of woodturning. While there are some basic principles, no single method is necessarily the "right" one—it all depends on experience and preference.

Thursday: Ride the Bevel!

All week the conundrum for many of the woodturning students was a single phrase that Dave and Connie said to us every day: "Ride the bevel!" The bevel is the smooth edge of a cutting tool, right next to the sharp edge of the tool's blade.

The goal was to keep the bevel against the surface of the wood while rotating the tool to allow the blade to cut smoothly as the tool is moved across the wood's surface. It was a technique that took a lot of practice to master for every piece of wood.

The woodturning lesson of the day was a natural edge bowl. To create the bowl, I had to do my best bevel riding of the week because gouging out a bowl can be disastrous if the tool edge catches the wood.

I made slow, deliberate cuts and took a lot of time to think about how to angle my cutting tool; I began to understand how "riding the bevel" feels when cutting the wood.



Woodturning doesn't take a lot of strength, but rather demands mastery of skill. The more experience I gained, the more I understood that when I made a good cut by riding the bevel, it felt smooth and fluid, and didn't tire my hands and arms.

I was grateful to Dave and Connie for being so patient with my questions (often the same questions over and over!). I was amazed by the skills I learned in a week and by the pieces I was ultimately able to create. In my memory, my classmates and my instructors made it seem so effortless.

To end class that day, Dave led us on a tree walk to learn what many of the woods we turned look like in their tree form. Following a tradition started by a long-time woodturning instructor at the Folk School, we finished our tree walk with a stroll to the ice cream shop in Brasstown. We celebrated the end of a great week with laughter and conversation. (Enjoying the school beyond the classes is important, says Autumn.)

Friday: Finishing Touches

Watching the morning fog roll across the valley as sunrise approached, I couldn't believe the last day had arrived so soon. I joined the morning walkers for another lovely walk and enjoyed breakfast with new friends, all of whom were talking feverishly about finishing their projects for the student exhibition that evening.

They weren't alone. After breakfast, I went to the woodshop and put the finishing touches on my natural edge bowl, giving it a coat of lacquer to preserve the red maple's white color. I turned a couple fun projects that looked like little mushrooms.

As we finished our projects, students from other classes toured the studio to see our creations. Before long, it was time to move all of our finished pieces to Keith House, where all the students were showcasing their works from the week. This was the most incredible part—to see all the creative effort that came from one week!

The blacksmithing class had created beautiful tools and decorative hangings; the woodworking class crafted intricate chessboards; the bookmaking class displayed gorgeous paper and bound books—there was no shortage of lovely, hand-crafted pieces, all created in a week by newcomers and experts alike.

We shared our trials and triumphs as we talked about each piece we'd created. I loved hearing each story and seeing the joy it brought to the teller's eyes. We wound down the evening by gathering together to hear the toe-tapping Bluegrass music of Curtis Blackwell and Charles Wood.

Saturday: Turning Homeward

With Bluegrass music still in my ears, I went to breakfast before hitting the road back home. Students milled around the coffee and tea table in Keith House, some looking at the newspaper and commenting that the world had indeed been turning while we were "away."

As I joined other students and instructors at the dining table, I felt a little sad to leave.

It had been such a transformative week, where I learned more than how to turn wood. I reaffirmed in my mind and heart the importance of tradition and community in my life.

The Folk School is built upon the community of people who formed it, and it continues to be built upon the community of people who come there each week to grow creatively and socially. Any winding road is worth driving if you arrive at a place like the John C. Campbell Folk School.

About the Author Wood isn't the only green interest in Autumn Foushée's life. She currently works in the University of Kentucky's Forestry Department while pursuing her master's degree in restoration ecology. If not in the woods, you'll find her greening her thumbs in the garden.