

One man's efforts to document woodworking

Ray McInnis has assembled 1,500 pages and nearly 2,000 images on his Web site, so far

By Jennifer Hicks

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To update an old saying: If there's a Web site you want to read that hasn't been written, write it yourself. Ray McInnis of Bellingham, Wash., has done just that.

In 2004, McInnis created the interactive Web site, www.woodworkinghistory.com, to give woodworkers a better understanding of how their trade developed to where it is today. The site features roughly 1,500 pages with 1,800 images and represents an astounding amount of research that is still ongoing.

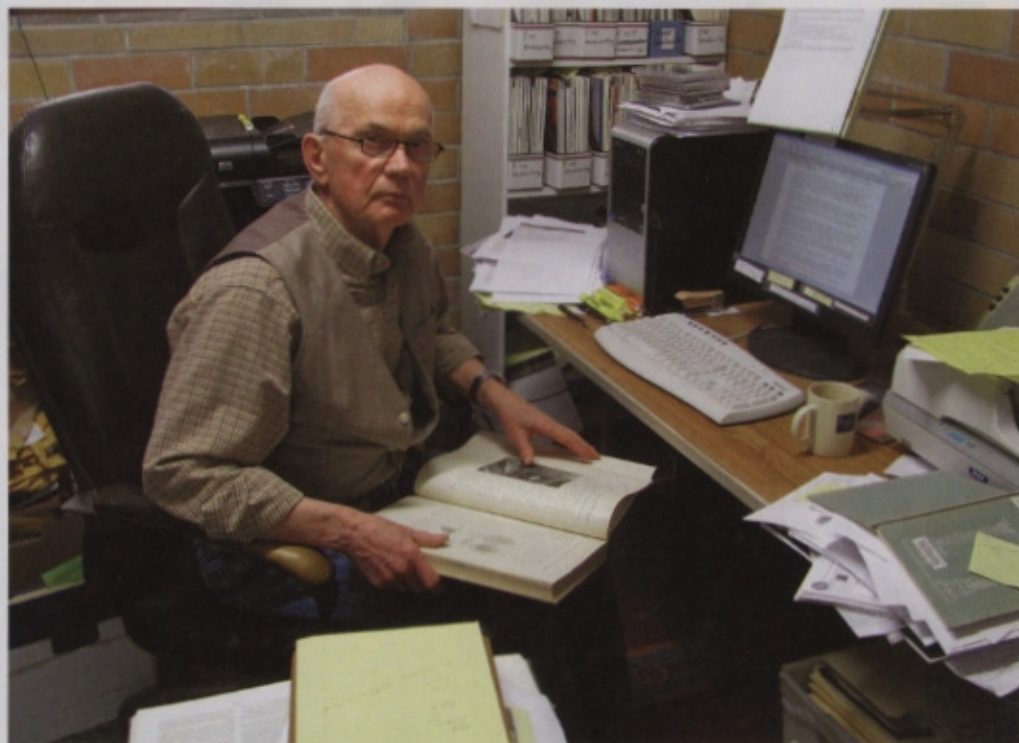
"I'm driven to write this out of the pure sense of discovery. I want to talk to woodworkers, both amateur and professional. I'd like to crack the academic crowd and demonstrate to them that they're neglecting an important subject and I want to hit the interested lay public," says McInnis.

The academic crowd he's referring to consists of cultural historians who study social history. For example, McInnis says the woodworking industry substantially contributed to the development of the American economy throughout the early to mid-1900s, yet these issues are hardly discussed in conventional accounts of U.S. history. To illustrate his point, he refers to the concept of home ownership.

"Home ownership is central to the notion of the American middle class — the satisfaction of having your own home and having sufficient income to furnish it and make it comfortable. One of the payoffs of the home ownership that came after World War II was having a home workshop for woodworking. It seems to me that kind of thing would be of interest to social historians, but I haven't seen them touch on it."

The site offers a plethora of similar topics. Dozens of other issues are based on information extracted from tooling and machinery manuals and other documentation related to woodworking, going as far back as the late 1800s.

McInnis is an avid woodworker with a solid background as a historian. He spent 40 years as an academic reference librarian and honorary adjunct history professor at Western



Ray McInnis is documenting major points in the history of woodworking on his Web site at www.woodworkinghistory.com.

Washington University in Bellingham, Wash.

"I am primarily experienced in both conducting research and teaching research, which led me to believe that these woodworking manuals and/or magazines amateur woodworkers had at their disposal, decade by decade, were the source of much of their ideas and inspiration about woodworking. Besides, I use them myself."

McInnis debated whether to approach this yearning of his by means of a book, or via a Web site, with which he had no experience. The ease of changing material quickly was the deciding factor.

"I've written books before. One of the first things you do when you write a book is look back in retrospect and say 'Why didn't I put that in there?' What was appealing about the Web was being able to continually change and update the material, and also to get to an audience of a broader spectrum."

Prior to the launch, he had surveyed many sites on the Internet for one similar to his, and wasn't satisfied with what was out there. Nothing thoroughly covered the history of woodworking thoroughly in the way he wanted to see it, so he began exploring ways to take on the mission himself.

"I could do the research, I could do the writing. What I had the most difficulty with was mastering HTML and making it possible to translate my research onto the Internet so you could read it. That was a huge learning curve for me."

The site also presents scanned copies of man-

ufacturers' catalogs and tool manuals, how-to information and furniture plans.

"Many woodworking manuals are directed toward basically three different skill levels of woodworkers. I have them arranged year-by-year, going back over 200 years. It's a little skimpy on those from the 1800s-1900s. The intent here is to show how, over the decades, woodworking has changed and how woodworking remains the same."

The site is now approaching 15,000 visitors per month. Every topic features an invitation for visitors to ask a question and ultimately McInnis wants to use the site to build a community of woodworkers. Lately, he has been working on the Web site more than the normal four hours per day and he's done at his own expense since the site does not accept advertising.

"I want to maintain both editorial control and maintain neutrality and, if I allowed advertising, I can see objections mounting that I would rather avoid."

While documenting the history of woodworking sounds steep, McInnis justifies it with a practical approach.

"In order to explain where woodworking is today, extensive historical accounts of woodworking in general can't be avoided. I would be preaching to the choir to go on and on about woodworking's place in society, so I won't bother, except to say that amateur woodworking is a huge social movement, but not very much is known about it, especially its history."