

# Last Was Best

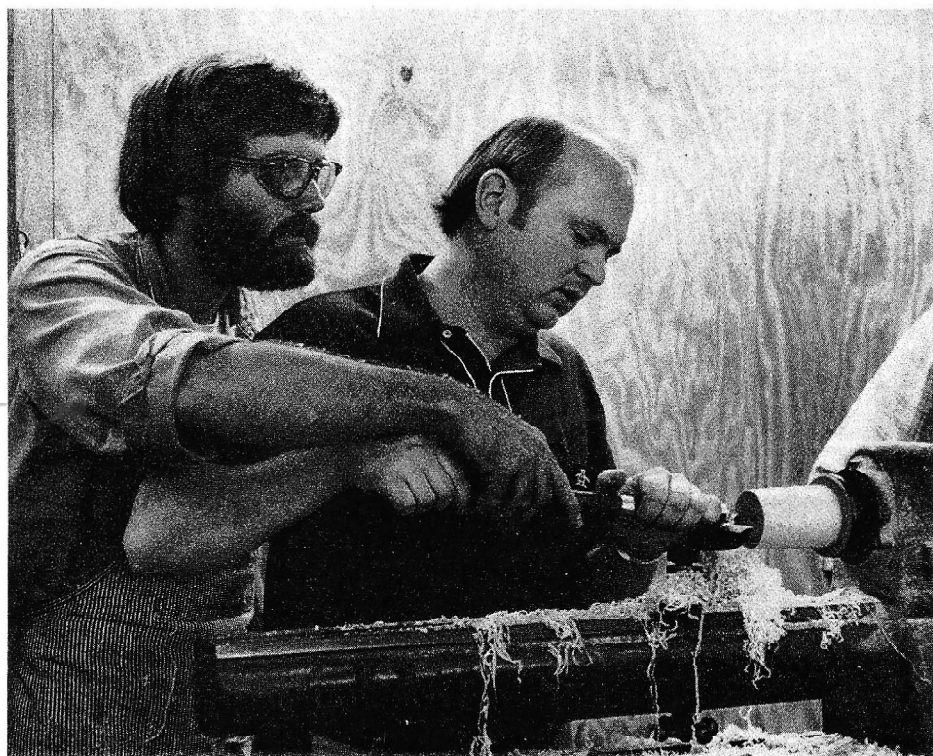
by Richard Starr

Since he started the first woodturning symposium five years ago, Albert LeCoff has collected interesting woodturners the way other craftsmen collect special pieces of wood (*FWW* #3, Summer '76, p. 44 and *FWW* #19, p. 72). By the fourth or fifth symposium, LeCoff had visited everyone he could find who was doing outstanding work on the lathe, and had recruited most of them as symposium instructors. Meanwhile, talent was emerging spontaneously from among the hundreds of symposium participants. It became apparent that a new degree of interest and a new level of technical skill was developing in this craft. Who could say whether these symposia were just riding the crest of the wave, or were actually creating the wave?

Each weekend symposium was limited to 50 participants with five instructors and 25 lathes (although by Sunday the crowd had usually swelled to 75 or more). The directing troika were volunteers: Albert LeCoff, who designed the program and collected the talent; his twin brother Alan, who managed the business logistics; and Palmer Sharpless, woodworking teacher at the George School in Bucks County, Pa., who made his school's shop available and mobilized the tools and lathes needed for hands-on experience. The three emphasize that their whole five-year operation never had any formal structure, no corporation, nonprofit or otherwise, no foundation funding nor any other kind of bankroll. By charging participants a reasonable fee (which has ranged from \$35 to \$125), the first nine symposia paid for themselves, if only barely.

The spirit of LeCoff's method was easy, informal exchange of information and ideas, plus deliberate diversity. Says LeCoff, "I've always felt that there is more than one approach to any woodturning topic. That's why all the symposia have had five or more instructors, always different people. If one instructor was a sculptor, I'd be sure that another was a production turner. A participant might decide to come for the production turner's techniques. Then he'd get hit when he wasn't looking by a guy with a sculptural outlook. It'd start him thinking about the forms he was turning, not just how he was doing it.

"Turners have come a long way in



Instructor Del Stubbs (left) shows a woodturner how to hollow a box, at the Tenth Woodturning Symposium. The gist of Stubbs' hands-on demonstration was to practice positioning the tool to cut while the lathe is turned by hand; the noodles of shavings on the lathe ways prove that if it cuts right slow, it will cut right fast.

technique since we started," LeCoff continued. "But we've also gone from looking at *how* things are made to *why* they're made. We used to look at the bottom of turnings to see how screw holes were filled. Now we also look at the objects themselves."

LeCoff conceived the 10th symposium as a climactic recapitulation of the entire series, with all previous instructors invited to return. A state-of-the-art gallery show would inspire the participants, then the show might go on tour for a couple of years to enlighten the public. A Herculean task, it all finally happened as planned. It was wonderful, but the event left the LeCoff brothers exhausted, \$15,000 in the hole, and ready to let others take over. Two weeks later, LeCoff could be philosophical about the financial loss and ready to talk about new challenges. Though he plans no future symposia, he is satisfied that the original series of nine has encouraged similar events in turning as well as in other areas of woodworking. "It seems like everybody is doing workshops, and it's great," LeCoff said. "For example, there are events at Provo, Utah, Berea College in Kentucky, and at Memphis State in Tennessee, using pretty much the format we pioneered. Since other people are doing them, there are new things I

can do now. I'm concerned with making the marketplace more aware of what's happening in woodworking and I've got some ideas about how to do it. I'm also thinking about a permanent site for workshops, maybe even a school. I'd have to find some sponsorship, maybe a college or corporation, to back me up."

What began as a low-key gathering of craftsmen seemed to have become a permanent institution. But at the summing-up session on the last day of the tenth symposium, Albert LeCoff announced that this was the end, there would be no more. Most of the participants were astonished by this news, and several seemed willing to pick up where the weary three, Albert and Alan LeCoff and Palmer Sharpless, were leaving off. □

*Albert LeCoff and photographer Bobby Hanson have put together a catalog of the Turned Objects Exhibition. It costs \$7.95 from Brigham Young University Press, 205 UPB, Provo, Utah 84602. The exhibition, all 100 turnings, is ready to travel around the country but it costs a few thousand to crate, insure and ship, and it can't budge without local sponsors. To find out more about the exhibition, contact Albert LeCoff, Amaranth Gallery and Workshops, 2500 N. Lawrence St., Philadelphia, Pa. 19113.*