

Chestertown furniture maker has passion for antiques

By **RICHARD MCNEY**
Editor

CHESTERTOWN — Wherever Frank B. Rhodes Jr. goes he gets the same questions. People always ask him to look at their furniture and to give them advice on restoration and conservation.

Rhodes, who has operated Frank B. Rhodes — Furniture Maker since 1983, compares the questions he gets to how a doctor gets health questions at dinner parties or in the grocery store.

The questions often lead to business for Rhodes and his employees who specialize in repair, restoration, refinishing and upholstery of antique furniture. The business also works on contemporary furniture, performs upholstery work on marine interiors and builds antique reproductions.

Starting the Business

Rhodes started with woodwork during his high school years. He has a black and white photo of himself at a drill press drilling holes in a piece of wood to prove it. He took woodworking class throughout his school years.

Rhodes' grandparents, Colonel Edgar William and Bernice Garbisch, collected early American furniture

and art work. Much of their collection of American naïve (primitive) paintings and furniture, called the Garbisch Collection, was left to various museums throughout the country, with an extensive collection at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.

"At a young age I was exposed to a lot of early American art work," he said.

Rhodes' grandparents' appreciation of art instilled an appreciation of art in him. He attended Washington College, where he earned a degree in history. Over time he came back to working with wood.

"I found that I was good with working with my hands," he said. "I spent a lot of years learning and building things and learning how to work with wood."

Rhodes' experience with woodwork and appreciation of art gave him a good eye for design.

"You can have all the skills in the world, but you have to have an eye for design," he said. "I can look at something and say there is something wrong with that or that is great. I don't know why, but you know by sight. Great designs just resonate with me."

In 1983 Rhodes decided to start a



PHOTOS BY **RICHARD MCNEY**

Frank B. Rhodes employee Rhonda Gover strips the finish off of a piece of furniture that was damaged in a fire.

business to reproduce early American furniture and furniture of his own design. He also specializes in repairing and refinishing antique furniture and will work on any furniture. He added an upholstery shop in 1985 when upholsterer Bob Sederquest joined the business.

Great Employees

Frank B. Rhodes — Furniture Maker is a small operation with only one part-time and six full-time employees.

"I have a really good group here and everyone works really hard," Rhodes said.

Brad Ahrens has worked on and off with Rhodes for about seven years. He does wood work, upholstery and chair weaving.

"In school I did nothing but wood work," he said. "I always wanted to get into furniture work, but all I could get was wood work."

When Ahrens met Rhodes he jumped at the chance to work on furniture for a living.

"I really like working with furniture," he said. "There are a lot of stories in it."

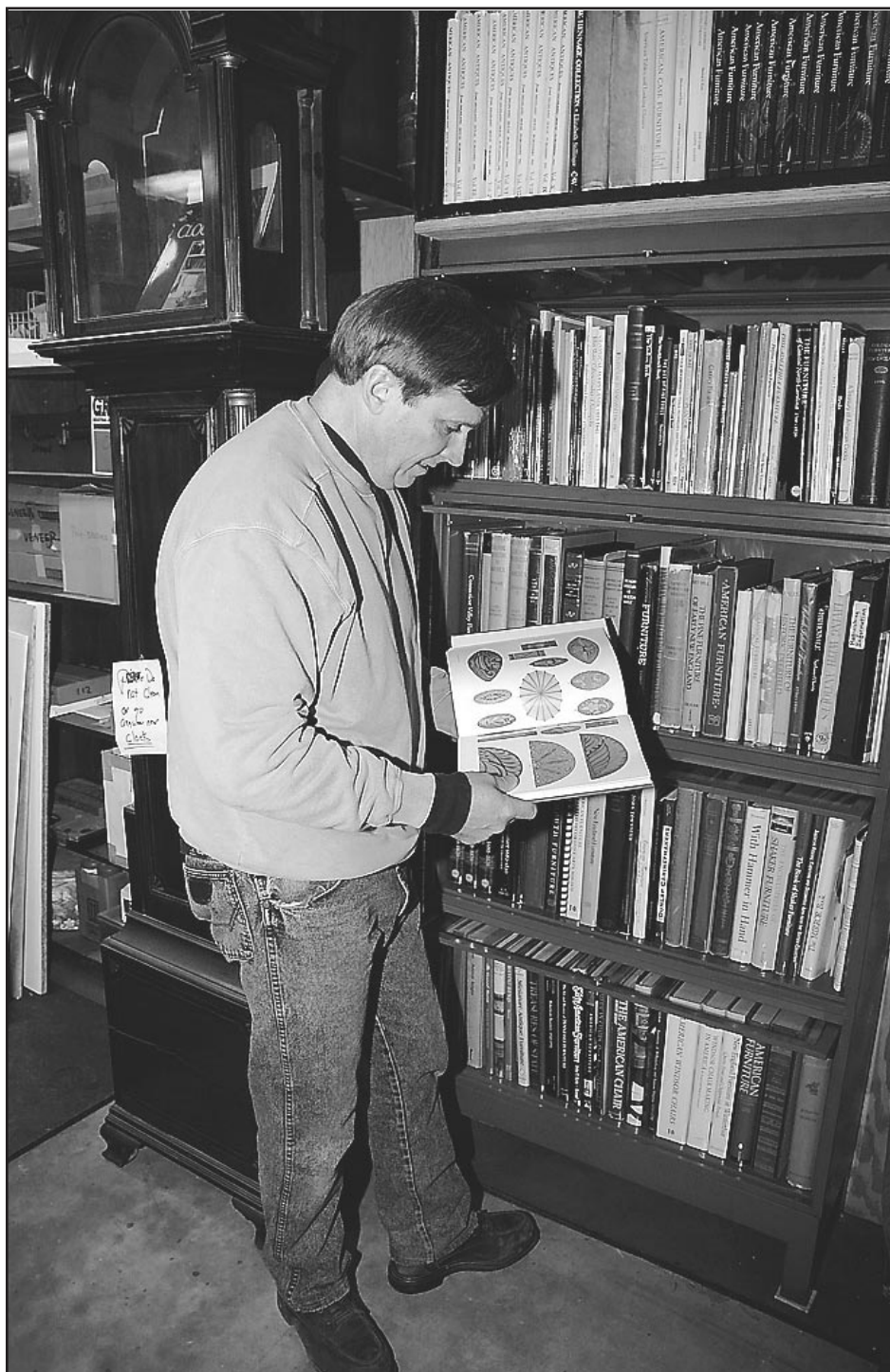
Rhonda Gover has worked with Rhodes for more than 11 years. She does furniture stripping and refinishing work, some upholstery work and helps people select fabrics.

Her father worked as a union carpenter and built furniture as a hobby. Her grandfather was a shipbuilder and carpenter. Gover has learned on the job and describes the business as a "little family."

"You never work on the same thing twice," she said. "There are different things to do everyday."

Sederquest has been an upholsterer

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Frank B. Rhodes Jr. always consults his extensive library on early American furniture before restoring, conserving or reproducing any piece of furniture.



Bob Sederquest works on a cushion in the upholstery shop.



PHOTO BY RICHARD MCNEY

Brad Ahrens works on a pedestal table in the wood shop.

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for about 34 years and will retire in a year. He met Rhodes by accident while he was doing contract upholstery work for Marriott in a local building. Rhodes came in to look at that building for potential purchase. He did not buy the building, but did get an upholsterer out of the visit.

Before joining the business Sederquest had done limited antique reproduction and restoration work. He now specializes in faithful 17th- and 18th-century upholstery techniques using only tacks, horsehair and other traditional materials when reupholstering antiques. He also does work on modern

furniture and marine interiors.

Sederquest is currently training apprentice upholsterer Diane Duke, who has been working with the business since January. She had been doing some upholstery work for her friends and had visited the shop a couple times for supplies. Her family collected and sold antiques.

"I love it so far," she said. "I have always liked working with fabrics and I have always loved furniture... It is really fun to take a ratty old chair down to the bones and build it back up into something beautiful."

Lori Elborn-Brown has been working with wood for about 15 years. She specializes in finishing, building and carving fine furniture.

Doris Reedt keeps the business running, keeping the books, office and shop organized.

Restoration and Conservation

The business performs a lot of restoration and conservation work on antique furniture.

"We have done thousands of upholstery and furniture restoration jobs," Rhodes said. "We have a really great client base."

Rhodes explained that conservation is saving what is original and restoration is repairing. Restoration is avoided unless totally necessary, because it can devalue an antique piece, he said.

"You don't want to take an old piece and remove anything if you don't have to," he said. "You need to save as much as you can."

Rhodes knows several museum curators and will often consult them for a second opinion on how a piece of furniture should be handled. He said he would turn down work before restoring a piece at the request of a customer when he knows it should be conserved.

The business works on many valuable pieces, some of which date back to the 1700s. The business has worked on many types of antique furniture including Chippendale, Queen Anne, William and Mary, Heppelwhite and Federal style.

Researching every individual piece is a key step to the conservation and

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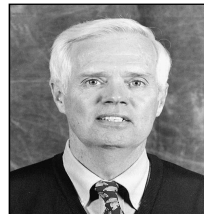
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restoration process, Rhodes said. He has an extensive library of books on colonial furniture, which he often consults. He recently wrote an article for the June 2007 issue of *Woodwork* magazine on collecting classic books as a resource guide for furniture makers.

The business works on pieces from all over the U.S. and mainly gets its business from word of mouth, Rhodes said. Some clients have been coming to the business for many years and will bring



Pictured is a tilt top table built by Frank B. Rhodes - Furniture Maker.

a piece or two a year to be fixed up.

"Two or three really good clients to build furniture for are all it really takes," he said.

Restoration jobs are hard to quote and sometimes it takes months to do a job, Rhodes said. The business charges \$83 an hour for restoration work. Upholstery work and new pieces can be quoted.

Rhodes photographs all the jobs as they progress and e-mails the photos to customers.

"People feel more involved," he said. "The photos give them a better sense of what is done."

Antique Reproductions and Original Furniture

Rhodes makes line drawings, and takes measurements and photographs of original pieces to reproduce them. In his shop he has large binders filled with pictures of furniture. Each binder contains photos of a different piece of furniture. He has detailed notes on each piece and he also frequently consults his library.

"I am at the stage of my life where I have about 30 patterns taken off of original pieces in the last four years that I want to build," he said. "People have let me take patterns off their original pieces."

When building a reproduction sometimes the business already has a client for the piece and other times a reproduction is built so the business has inventory to show potential clients. The process is lengthy and begins with selecting the wood, brass, fabrics and other materials



PHOTO BY RICHARD MCNEY

Apprentice upholsterer Diane Duke stuffs a cushion in the upholstery shop.

to use. Sometimes the reproductions are not exact because Rhodes decides to improve on the design. The business will make reproductions of original furniture that clients are auctioning.

The business is only making small numbers of reproductions, which Rhodes admits are pricey.

"My goal is to build these things someday," said Rhodes as he flipped through his collection of line drawings and photos. "I like to make new things all the time."

Rhodes also makes furniture of his own design. He built two lecterns for Washington College, one in 1998 and

another in 2006.

"You never run across the same project — hardly ever," Rhodes said. "I want to focus on building greater and greater pieces of furniture. There is so much to learn and I am constantly reading and constantly studying designs and I know the projects that I want to build. You have to connect with the right customer that wants to invest in you and your work to build a fine collection."

For information on Frank B. Rhodes — Furniture Maker, visit www.frankbrhodes.com or call 410-778-3993.

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