

Milling around in Davenport

By DON MILLER
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IT'S LIKE STEPPING back in time. When you walk into the old building, after turning off the Coast Highway into Davenport still believing in the here-and-now of everyday commerce, the sylvan scent of stacked lumber mingles with the sharp tang of wood glue. Pale shards of yellow sunlight suspend lazy clouds of sawdust in the still air. The structure is defined by the hum and whine of woodworking machines, before which stand several silent, intent men carefully working lengths of fine-grained lumber.

The Davenport Mill is working its old-time religion.

The mill is warehoused in a semi-refurbished old barn. Inside its sawdust-and-sepia-tinged confines, the men and the machines are busy producing wooden windows and doors to match the craftsmanship once common among early-twentieth-century artisans. Here, the specialty of the house comes in curves — sinuous mouldings, spired doors, redwood-and-pine windows shaped into coronas of careful joinery and painstaking detail.

The place obviously is not your run-of-the-mill high-tech, production-for-the-masses spindle factory.

The mill workers claim it isn't the the bottom line that counts at the Davenport Mill; rather, it's the way each line joins with other lines, each carefully sculpted piece fitted to another. This would be the woodworker's poetry — the tenon snug into the mortise, the joint then carefully sanded, and the process repeated, time and again, until the whole is much greater than its joining parts.

The mill began as a dream for two men back in 1974. One, David

ment was out of the question — it would cost as much as twenty thousand dollars for each machine.

"It took years," he remembers. He called up everybody he could think of in the Bay Area who might have such machines stowed away somewhere. When he found what he wanted, the antiquarian machines were almost always in a state of disrepair. He fixed them, added new bearings, drive belts, and motors. The machines were 50, 60, 100 years old. He became a plumber, a roofer, an electrician, any work he could find to support his habit ... and once he was ready, the world didn't beat a path to his door.

"There were a lot of woodworkers in Santa Cruz. We weren't local guys. We were searching for a product. Five years ago, I thought of it — windows. Everyone was using aluminum windows. And with the energy boom, thermal glazed wood windows took off."

"We wanted to do things right," recalls Conner. "Recapture the ethics in joinery our fathers and grandfathers had. Go in any shop today — they're stapling things together. We wanted to do something different." Conner himself does things differently — he's left the mill twice; once to work at another mill in San Francisco, later to drive a truck. Now, he says, he's back to stay.

The machines, too, seem here to stay. Cast-iron and steel, they squat on the old plank floor like dusty survivors of some battle between craftsmen and technocrats.

But this isn't a museum. Each machine is used for a precision task that will add just the right flourish to a million-dollar home in an upper-crusty Hillsborough home, or a renovated victorian in San Francisco. The mill just finished a year-long project



Conner, the other dreamer, still works there. And though they both shared an initial vision of a place which would not only recreate a turn-of-the-century mill but would actually BE such a shop (albeit, for a very end-of-the-century marketplace ...), it has been Lundberg who has guided and shaped the business into what it is today.

One gathers, talking to Lundberg, that he has nurtured this mill with the same kind of steadfastness with which his employees plane and sand each piece of oak and redwood.

A native of Santa Barbara, Lundberg, before coming to Davenport, earned a living working wood on boats. His brother had (and still has) a glass-blowing shop in Davenport. His brother's shop stood next-door to the dilapidated barn which now houses the mill. Lundberg had two thousand dollars. And a dream.

He figured that someplace, at some old, rusty mill now fallen into disuse and hard times, he'd find, pushed outside, overgrown with weeds, buried underneath broken chairs and rotting boards, the old machines which would enable him to realize his dream of a quality mill. New equip-

ment. The millwrights are working the machines — the mortiser, cutting its square holes for the waiting tenon; the hundred-year-old band saw with its wooden wheel; the smaller shaper with its sharp knives used for putting curved edges on boards; the joiner — not a person who enlists in too many organizations, but rather a machine which straightens and flattens; the planer, through the blades of which all lumber must pass; the huge drum sander — "this is one machine I'd trade for a modern one," says Lundberg, in confidence ...

"I get old-timers who come through here and their eyes light up," says Lundberg. "It's because these (the machines) are what they used." These days the machines are used to work for a select clientele. "We have a few clients who know what they want," says Jeff Peck, who's worked at the mill for five years. "They come to us with a problem. We've shown them we can do it ... in some ways they're patrons." Peck admits it often takes him a full day to carefully grind the knives used to match the patterns on old mouldings. "I enjoy curved work," says Peck, pointing to the circular templates he's just made using a router and a compass. The templates are attached to joined pieces of wood and the wood is then bandsawed and shaped.

These men are w-o-o-d-w-o-r-k-e-r-s, thank you: "I have to restrain myself from going too far," says Conner, eyeing a piece of vertical-grained redwood. Vertical-grained wood cut from an old growth tree, is, says Conner, "A stable piece of wood." It won't expand and contract like new growth wood. It is also very expensive. "I'm a perfectionist — the customer often doesn't know the difference," he says.

Now, after ten years of hard work, Lundberg's mill is very busy. It's also well-known and respected for the quality of its work and the ability of the mill to produce virtual works of art (on time) for builders and architects. But everything has its price — "We started our trade with young couples in Santa Cruz who wanted wood windows," says Lundberg. "We used to work a lot with salvage materials. It kind of eats my heart out now — we're out of the normal person's (price) range. The rich clients pay a lot more, but the satisfaction isn't the same."

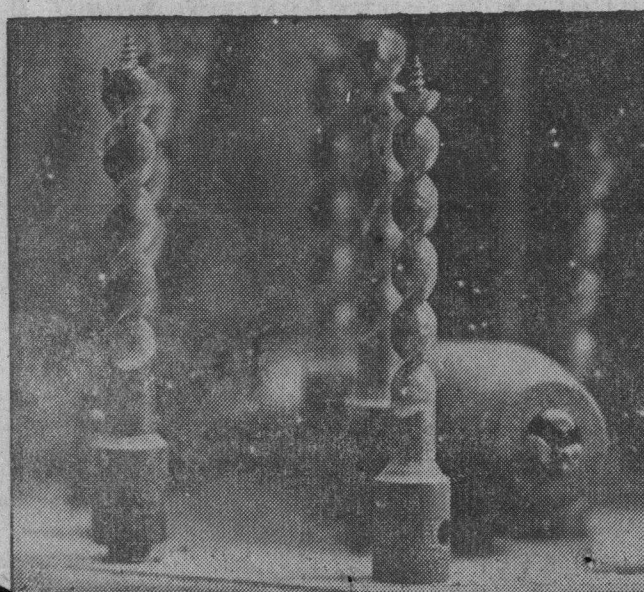
Lundberg stops to inspect an intricately-designed window. He looks serious in the sawdust-shaded mill, a man who has worked hard to get where he is. He's not apologizing. "I probably could've made a fortune making waterbeds or planter boxes — but to better our skills we had to go to the upper end — we wanted to do curved windows and we needed rich clients."

It's a tradition as old as wood-working — patrons of the arts.

Dave Lundberg shapes his future with the help of a veteran bandsaw.



Dennis Bodewitz fine tunes a measurement.



Richard Conner: thumbs up.



Jeffry Peck draws a bead on the drill press, harking back to grandad's style.



Dawn Collins has compound shavings interest.

Photos by
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