

A Woodturner's Daughter

Denise DeRose

In high school, my father learned to wrestle, run, and work wood. His high school friends called him "The Rope," since he was nearly six feet tall and weighed 126 pounds soaking wet. His curly, jet-black hair and proud Italian nose were his best features. In his shop class, he made a clunky desk and an oak tool chest and discovered a passion he kept for life. After a lonely-kid stint in the Navy, he went to work as a machinist at Moffett Field.

In the 1950s, my father and his brothers farmed prunes and cherries in the Santa Clara Valley and my father kept a shop in a converted prune-drying shed. He taught me how to hammer nails into scraps of wood without splitting it. I sharpened sticks on his grinding wheel and sat in sawdust on the shop floor while he worked.

My father spoke through wood. He was more comfortable smoothing grain than his children's feelings. Although he was more likely to lay down the law than start a conversation, he and my brother David spent peaceful hours in the shop when we were teenagers. They spoke the same silence, working with serious looks on their faces, but taking great pleasure in what they did. When I ventured into the shop, the mood changed. My father, participatory with my brother, was protective of his daughter, doing things for me rather than teaching me to

do for myself, watching with palpable tension should I consider a power tool too closely.

My father's lathe was a Delta Rockwell from the 1940s with an 11" swing. When my mother decided that our 1960s California ranch house would look better with Victorian gingerbread trim, he turned more than 100 balls to grace our eaves. This was the way most of his woodturning projects sprang to life, a suggestion from my mother. "Draw it for me," he would say, and she would. There was the missing lid for a salt well, an oval frame, some lamps for our college dorm rooms, and a walnut base for the glass dome under which my mother kept her antique Santa.

He turned wearing a white lab coat from Moffett Field, closed at the neck with a clothespin, his hair covered in a pink-flowered shower cap. He bit his tongue in concentration, but moved like a dancer, back and forth between a drawing taped to the wall above his lathe and the wood under his skew. Totally tone deaf, he hummed the same tune over and over. He was so happy.

A few months after my father died, my mother handed me an envelope. "This was in your father's toolbox," she told me. The picture was yellow with age and blurry, but it was unmistakably me fifty years ago, pot bellied and in diapers, standing next to Lady, his beloved Brittany spaniel hunting dog. It was the only picture he kept in his shop.



Denise DeRose, *El Cantimplora* (The Canteen), 2008, Quilted maple, rosewood and spalted tamarind front, 9"

Denise DeRose, *Merger*, 2007, Claro walnut and English walnut graft with redheart butterfly, 20"

"Mom, I'm going to take the lathe," I told her. Seeing her worry, I said, "Don't argue with me, Mom. I'll be careful, but I'm going to take it." I had never touched that lathe before I broke it down and loaded it into my car.

In the years since that night, I have found in myself the same quiet pleasure of creating that my father knew. He kept a picture of me in his toolbox. Now I keep a picture of him in mine. ■

Denise DeRose lives in Oakland, California where she regularly tries to coax her teenage son and daughter into her shop hoping to get a start on the next generation of DeRose woodturners. The results of her efforts are currently inconclusive.



The photo from Joe DeRose's toolbox: Denise with Lady in the cherry orchard.

Joe DeRose, *Fern Table*, circa 1975, Claro walnut, 36" × 12";
Denise DeRose, classic vase, 2008, Redwood burl, 17" × 9"

