

# Home Life

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Charles Prowell glues a table together: 'I'll never make this again, even if a client wants it.'

MARY CARROLL/PRESS DEMOCRAT

## Rooted in wood

### Woodworker's a chip off the old block

By GEORGE HOWER  
Staff Writer

**S**ebastopol woodworker Charles Prowell is a dream come true for any editor of a woodworking magazine — he's not only a fine craftsman but a writer too. He can do the technical stuff ("Building a Stand-up Desk," Fine Woodworking magazine, 1989) or write about his roots ("One Woodworker's Beginnings," Woodwork magazine, 1989).

*"You want your stuff to be appreciated 200 years from now ... that's the whole point: to create designs that will still be appreciated long, long after I am gone."*

#### CHARLES PROWELL

and take my shirt off and not even worry about 1/64th of an inch," Prowell says. "I even love to dig the post holes."

"All of my friends think I'm nuts, that I could hire someone to dig them, or at least rent an auger, but I like that act of digging the post hole. Hell, if it's half an inch off center, who cares?"

Prowell owns and operates Charles Prowell Woodworks and he's following in the footsteps of his grandfather, a part-time furniture maker in Illinois,

You might say it's in the blood. His grandfather and father were woodworkers, his mother and sister are writers.

Reminiscences of his father and grandfather come just as easily as something like "I radius the inlaid corner with a 3/8-in. roundover bit and the other three corners of the leg with a 3/8-in. roundover bit."

That's when he's concerned about one-eighths or 64ths of an inch.

"Other times, though, I could be doing fences. I love to do fences. After months and months in the shop, I am dying to get out in the sun

and his father, a full-time contractor who dabbled in furniture-making when time allowed.

"I started as a young boy and have continued with the trade, uninterrupted, ever since," Prowell says.

Prowell's business card simply says "Charles Prowell Woodworks." That reflects the wide range of projects that rise up from his workbench as sawdust and chips fall on the floor.

For example, he made a play center for the Mt. Olive Lutheran Church in exchange for a year's schooling fees for his youngest son. And in 1981, when he came to California from Illinois, he made made gates, fences, arbors, rehabilitated Victorians and designed interiors in quality restaurants.

But eventually that clientele started developing a desire for furniture and he then worked on that.

"I'll go for a couple or three years working on nothing but furniture. You get caught up in these commissions and never come up for air. Then, like early this spring up to now, I've been involved with gates," Prowell said. He made several gates for one client in Ross and when neighbors saw the gates they called and asked Prowell to make gates for them. Gates are status symbols in that particular part of Ross.

Most of his commissioned work has been for people in Marin County. "I think I had maybe one or two commissions in Sonoma County and the last one was a nice one — a nine-piece bedroom set for a couple in Santa Rosa. Commissions can range from a dining room table to more. Usually what happens is I



Prowell's son, Ben, gives his dad a hand in his shop.

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## Woodworker

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get a commission on one piece, then word gets around and halfway through that piece I'll get a commission for another. I may be there four months, never knowing if that week there is the last."

When Prowell is hired to make a dining-room table or bedroom set, the customer knows he or she is getting one of a kind.

"I don't come out with a line and then make 10 of these in a row," he said. "In fact, I'll never make this again, even if a client wants it. There'll have to be some changes. That enables the client to get a peculiar piece of work and me not to go to sleep while putting it together."

Prowell knows his works will be around long after he is gone. "You want your stuff to be appreciated 200 years from now. I think that's the whole point: to create designs that will still be appreciated long, long after I am gone."

#### Prowell the writer

Prowell's literary efforts extend beyond woodworking magazines.

He has written short stories and a 700-page novel.

When he writes he may be up at 4:30 a.m., taking advantage of the peace and quiet.

"There's something about the writing of sentences," he said. "It really boiled down to writing sentences rather than worrying about what was going to happen at this point in the book or later."

"Sometimes I would spend all morning on a paragraph of four or five sentences. That was great fun. I enjoyed the unhurried idea of trying a sentence four or five different ways."

"I was writing to write. I wanted

to write a coherent story. I'm not a closet writer — I wanted to write something that people would read, but I wasn't doing a formula thing here," Prowell said.

A couple of his short stories are set in San Quentin where he worked 18 months as prison guard to pay off a student loan.

#### The family man

Prowell and his wife, Jennifer, have two sons — Ben, 4, and Sam, 7.

At this point, Prowell said, Ben seems to show more interest in woodworking than Sam.

"Sam is more of an idea man. He likes to be the boss," Prowell said. But Ben sweeps the shop, which pleases Prowell because he likes to keep it tidy. He doesn't like walking around ankle-deep in sawdust.

In fact, he could be described, as woodworkers go, as a minimalist.

"I have a lot of guys come over and they're surprised how under-tooled I am, but I have everything I need. And I do a lot of stuff by hand I used to do with tools. I like that. For every tool I move in, I have less space," he says.

"I've always had this irreverence toward tools. I am not fascinated by tools or machinery. It's expensive."

Prowell is impressed by the fact that Sonoma, Mendocino and Marin counties are "kind of a mecca for woodworkers." A lot of these guys, he adds, came out of design schools. Some attended Laney College. Some were schooled in Massachusetts. Some went to the Krevnov School in Fort Bragg.

But Prowell? He learned about woodworking by being around his grandpa and dad in grandpa's shop in Sydney, Ill.