

September 2011

I grew up in Jamaica Plain, on South St near Forest Hills. Around the age of 12 a friend and I attended a woodworking course at the Eliot School. I remember it was Fall, because many of the boys were building crèches as their main project, working hard to finish them in time for Christmas. Every Saturday morning my friend and I would walk up South St to the Monument and down Eliot to the old yellow schoolhouse, greeted by the wonderful aromas of wood and sawdust and the nurturing energy and enthusiasm of the teachers.

I completed two projects that Fall ~ a small pine footstool and a half-round, 3-legged table. The footstool was a very simple design, probably 5 pieces of wood in total, all held together with counter-sunk nails and shellacked with a clear stain. The table was much more involved. Not a single nail was used! The 3 legs were routed to form dado joints to hold the bottom shelf in place, while two rails, given some very simple curves with a jigsaw, were fitted together to form a 'T' and then connected to the tops of the 3 legs, and to the underside of the tabletop itself, using wooden dowels and carpenter's glue.

I still vividly remember using a carpenter's pencil and compass to draw 2 concentric half-circles, about a half inch apart, on the piece of wood that would become the tabletop. I cut along the outer half-circle with a band saw to get the general shape of the tabletop, then anchored the piece in one of the big workbench vises while I used an assortment of wood planes, metal rasps and sheets of sandpaper to give the tabletop a smooth rounded edge by working back methodically from the cut line to the inner half-circle pencil line. Once the glue was dry and the entire table had been sufficiently sanded, and all sawdust removed using tack cloths, I applied several coats of stain with long steady strokes.

The teachers gently and patiently guided me through every step ~ praising my work, letting me make some mistakes, and I'm sure secretly correcting some of the larger ones for me before I showed up the following week to continue my work. It was an entirely wonderful experience, and I was absolutely beaming with pride as I carried my two works of art home after the final Saturday session of the course.

I'm 52 years old now, which makes my two pieces of furniture around 40, and they are both still alive and quite well. In fact they are not just stored away in some dusty attic as fond keepsakes, but are in active service on a daily basis. My parents still have both pieces ~ the footstool sits on their kitchen floor at the base of the sink and is employed to reach glasses and dishes on the top shelves of cabinets, while the table sits just inside a living room window, the phone and a potted plant on top and a knick-knack of some sort on the bottom shelf.

The depth of details I've been able to recall about that Fall in relating this story are proof, I think, of just how profound and wonderful and cherished an experience that course at the Eliot School was for me.

- Brian Roake

