

A Life Built on Bookmarks



This modest woodworking business thrives on efficiency and ingenuity

BY JONATHAN BINZEN

If a Newport secretary contains a waterfall of woodwork, then one of Alan Bradstreet's wooden bookmarks holds barely a droplet. Then again, it might take one person the better part of a year to build a full-bore secretary; in the same 12 months, Bradstreet, who works alone in a small shop, would have stacked up 50,000 of his handsome bookmarks.

Bradstreet, 54, moved to Maine in the 1970s and found his way into woodworking. Unlike many other woodworkers who make a modest profit designing and building magnificent furniture, he makes a comfortable living by working very small and selling very cheap—in very large numbers. The Bradstreet collection of bookmarks comprises some 130 scrollsawn designs.

It's not that Bradstreet doesn't have the same urges toward creativity and complexity as

his peers; he has just chosen to channel them differently.

Bradstreet's first decade in woodworking was spent in a 40-man factory in Auburn, Maine, that produced wooden kitchenware. He began as a laborer and worked his way up to foreman and eventually to vice president. He loved his years there and is grateful for the training. When he left in 1985, he took what he had learned and became a one-man factory.

When you visit his shop now, it is evident that Bradstreet combines the attributes of a hard-headed businessman, an enlightened foreman and a clever, untiring worker.

The boss

Bradstreet the businessman has focused on manufacturing one thing and has stripped away everything extraneous. For some years he made jewelry boxes, business-card holders and other small items, but these days he is bookmarks and nothing but.

Personal interests are purged here, too. Bradstreet is a mad collector—his house and barns are brimming with arcana, such as the eight antique, treadle-powered scrollsaws nestled together in one attic and the collection of 19th-century



Stack and slice. Bradstreet built a miniature crosscut sled for cutting the blanks to length one stack at a time. He keeps an eye out for even tiny imperfections in the wood.

shaving-razor sharpeners displayed in a bathroom. But there's no arcana in the shop. It's all business.

Bradstreet used to sell through craft fairs, but now he and his wife, Susan, who handles all of the shipping and other office work, sell exclusively wholesale. By far their largest customer is L.L. Bean, whose outlet store in nearby Freeport sells about half of what Bradstreet produces.

With silky surfaces, nicely eased edges and beautifully scrollsawn decorations, Bradstreet's bookmarks have a distinctly handmade feeling. But for efficiency's sake, he sticks to machines.

The shop itself is a machine, one designed for making small things. Not needing to accommodate sheet goods or large planks or cumbersome case pieces, the shop has no open space, just narrow



TV or not TV. Reruns of Remington Steele keep Bradstreet company as he scrollsaws the designs in his weekly quota of 1,200 bookmarks. Addressing the safety issue, he said, "I don't watch the screen while I'm sawing, but if something interesting comes on, I stop to look."



A sophisticated squeegee. Bradstreet removes excess linseed oil from bookmarks after dipping. The essential component of this high-tech squeegee? Coffee-can lids.

passageways between rows of machines cleverly arranged to achieve one purpose.

Aiming for the utmost economy of time, energy and materials, Bradstreet has bought pairs of some machines. "It's like Noah's Ark in here," he said. To avoid constant changing of sawblades, he has two identical bandsaws that stand side by side—one with an aggressive blade for rough cutting, and one with a fine-toothed blade for more delicate work; and there are two stationary drum sanders—one fitted with a balloon sanding drum, and the other with a flap wheel.

Another of Bradstreet's canny efficiencies is that his business runs on scrap. He buys offcuts from several large furniture manufacturers, greatly reducing his material costs. The scrap comes jointed and planed, saving work and further gratifying Bradstreet's Yankee love of thrift.

The foreman

Bradstreet the foreman has made the shop as pleasant as possible. The shop sits on the corner of his property in a 150-year-old building with one room on each of two floors. Windows on all

four walls fill the place with light. At 17 ft. by 21 ft., the building is not large, considering the number of machines it holds, but Bradstreet's logical layout makes the place feel cozy, not crowded.

The shop is also amazingly absent of sawdust. A central dust collector is hooked up to every machine and is supplemented by a ceiling-hung air filter.

However pleasant the surroundings may be, producing 50,000 bookmarks a year is not scintillating work. To ward off tedium, Bradstreet listens to news on the radio built into his hearing protectors. And by the scroll saw sits a small black-and-white television that is often tuned to reruns of *Star Trek* and *Remington Steele*. "I think I'd go nuts if I didn't watch TV," he said. "It's an important part of my shop."

The craftsman

For Bradstreet the worker, "It's all about discipline," he said. He sets a target every week—1,200 bookmarks is the current quota—and every week he hits it. "Then it's play time," he said. His favorite playground is the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, an hour or so away in Deer Isle, Maine. There and elsewhere in just the past four years, Bradstreet has taken some three dozen workshops—most of them a few days in

duration but some of them lasting a week or two. He's tried his hand at twig furniture, carving, found-object assemblage, turning, reed furniture and mixed media.

When Monday rolls around, Bradstreet is back in the saddle, sitting at the scroll saw beside a box full of bookmarks-in-the-making. He is proud of what he produces. "I want these bookmarks to be—bar none—the best out there," he said. And no doubt they are. But for Bradstreet the one-man factory, this is not just a craftsman's point of pride; it's an imperative of good business. A bookmark—like a Newport secretary—won't sell nearly as well if it is poorly made. □

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