

# Alumnus restores memories and brings history to life

By Shirley Bolinaga

Three years ago, Joseph MacPhail, Jr., Class of 1968, chucked his pin-stripes and power ties for jeans and a flannel shirt topped by a long, gray carpenter's apron. Overnight, he was transformed from a bank vice president into a cabinetmaker.

Gone were his days of worrying about big-buck commercial loans bound by legal agreements that often ran to 50 pages. Instead, he'd wake up at night thinking about a better way to make a wooden joint.

Today the 46-year-old Chesapeake man spends his days in a large blue steel building in Portsmouth's West Norfolk industrial district, serenaded by the noisy compressors running at a shipyard across the street.

As he works, he often wears a cap advertising Joseph's Cabinet Shop Ltd., "specializing in reproduction furniture." A folding wooden ruler pokes out of a back pocket. And he loves it.

"I'm happy," he said. "I'm enjoying the heck out of this."

MacPhail, who lives in the Tyre Neck Point neighborhood in Western Branch, turns out everything from reproductions of antique tea tables to modern entertainment centers.

Antique planes and other old hand tools in his shop share space with modern power saws and routers. A stack of green cherry and walnut wood lies curing in one corner.

Pieces in various stages of completion are scattered about. A 9-foot-tall antique grandfather's clock, which

MacPhail restored for a Portsmouth customer is similar to the one he restored for Chowan which now stands in the Chowan Office of Development.

For the clock, a solid walnut model from the early 1800s, MacPhail made new finials, new rosettes and three new feet to match the one remaining original.

A solid walnut reproduction of a Hepplewhite sideboard waits to be finished. It will bear a price tag of about \$2,500.

A thick photo album boasts of past MacPhail projects: his mother's mahogany silver chest; a computer table for a wheelchair-bound pupil; the raised-panel newel post on his home stairway; an altar and table for a Baptist church; cabinets for Tidewater Regional Transit; and antique table he also restored for his alma mater, Chowan College. He also has contributed many hours of his time to Chowan by serving as president of the Alumni Association.

MacPhail certainly didn't set out to do this kind of work. His ambition had always been to be a banker.

"But when we got married, I found out how much furniture cost," he said. When he and his wife, Nancy, began furniture hunting, "The more I looked, the more I said, 'I can do that.'"

It turned out that he could.

As a Civil War buff, he had made a couple of muskets in high school and a wooden key holder in a junior high shop class. That was the sum of his woodworking experience.



But he bought a Sears table saw and "just started doing it. You read books, and you say, 'Gosh, there must be a better way to do this.' And you just sort of build on it over the years. For 15 years, I made furniture for the house and did things around houses we lived in. And it just came. The more you do, the more you learn."

Now he can copy just about any piece. Sometimes he starts with a mental sketch of pieces he sees at auctions or in homes. Other times he works from photos in magazines or books.

Take the Hepplewhite secretary in the living room of the MacPhails' house. Like countless other tourists who have ambled through Mount Vernon, MacPhail admired George Washington's elegant roll-top desk.

But unlike most other admirers, he went home and made his own.

"They wouldn't let him take pictures in there," his wife recalled, "so he bought the booklet."

From a photo in the booklet, he was able to build a version of the desk, making a few minor changes and adding the MacPhail family crest. He gave it to his son, Tom, now 16.

The dark mahogany desk is decorated with tiny strips of inlaid white holly. The glass doors on its bookcase top are inset with a decorative pattern of mahogany mullions, involving many curved pieces.

"He had to cut pieces and kind of shape them in like a puzzle," Nancy MacPhail recalled.

He worked on it evenings for about

18 months, whenever he could snatch an hour or two. His wife considers it his top masterpiece so far.

The MacPhail house is full of pieces he has made. Daughter Katie, now 12, asked him eight years ago to make her a bed "with a hump." He turned out a carved four-poster with a "humped" canopy.

He has built items for all his children—who also include Joe III, 17 and Tom's twin, Dave.

During the years MacPhail was getting better at woodworking, he was also advancing in his chosen profession.

"Banking was good to me," he said.

So many new regulations affected commercial lending that he began to feel he was losing the personal side of banking, he said.

He began thinking about turning his avocation into a business.

While in banking, he always enjoyed working with cabinetmakers and other craftsmen. "I learned that a lot of cabinetmakers are great cabinetmakers but they don't know how to handle their business," he said. He knew he could handle the business side.

He conferred with Nancy about leaving his steady job.

"Her attitude was basically, 'If you think you are going to be happy . . .'" She said, 'you've got the talent—go ahead and do it.'"

"Finally, I just held my breath and said, I guess I'll go do it."

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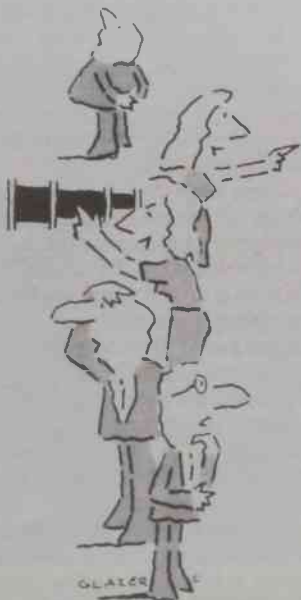
## Alumni: Whereabouts Unknown

Finding a former classmate can be just like looking for the proverbial "needle in a haystack," but not anymore. Soon an impressive directory of our great Alumni Directory, scheduled for release in July/August 1992, will be the most up to date and complete reference on over 9,000 Chowan College alumni ever compiled! This comprehensive volume will include current name, address and phone number, academic data, plus business information (if applicable), bound into a classic, library-quality edition.

The Alumni Association has con-

tracted the prestigious Bernard C. Harris Publishing Company, Inc. to produce our Directory. Harris will soon begin researching and compiling information to be printed in the Directory by mailing a questionnaire to each alumna/us. (If you prefer not to be listed in the Directory, please contact the Alumni Office in writing as soon as possible.)

The new Chowan College Alumni Directory will soon make finding a Chowan alumni as easy as opening a book. Look for more details on the project in future issues.



Joe refinishes furniture for others and to furnish his own house, which is full of antiques.