



## SHARP & TO THE POINT

People Profile: Interview with Ejler Hjorth-Westh

The Hock Tools Newsletter

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Ejler Hjorth-Westh

[Ejler Hjorth-Westh](#) gave three pithy workshops at Woodworking in America last October: Chairs: Style & Substance, Working with Curves: Design & Execution, and The Nuts & Bolts of Commission Work: Business, Customer Relations, Failure and Success. As a fine furniture maker and woodworking instructor, he lives and works these issues everyday.

Hjorth-Westh works regularly on commissioned furniture in his world-class wood shop, and is a popular instructor during the school year at [College of the Redwoods Fine Furniture Program](#) – the intense, apprenticeship-like woodworking school originated by James Krenov. Plus, during summer at his own shop, Ejler teaches boat building to a select group of woodworking students who by then come with skills and woodworking techniques a perfectionist can trust. Each year these students and teacher produce a hand-crafted and seaworthy vessel that is sold to a lucky buyer.

Then, in a boat he built for himself, Ejler rows out to sea many days each week to catch salmon from the chilly Pacific waters not far from his shop. He's worked hard to create a life for himself that so many of us only dream about. And Ejler Hjorth-Westh lives that life to the max.

I've asked Ejler a few questions, just to get and pass on some insight into one of today's finest makers.

**Linda:** You are a fine furniture maker and boat builder with teaching credentials in biology received from your training in your native Denmark, graduated from College of the Redwoods Fine Woodworking program where you are now an instructor, have received numerous awards for your work, which is also included in numerous books. What is it you would like people to know about you?

**Ejler:** I'm a farm boy from the beginning and my rooting in nature and the land has never faded. I chose a teaching education more for the education than for the teaching, motivated by social curiosity and also by a search for answers. My majors are biology and religion, biology to understand the "how" and religion for the "why." I had terrific teachers. Philosophers, really. To me religion is synonymous with philosophy.

**Linda:** When and why did you decide building furniture and boats was what you wanted to do in life?

**Ejler:** Sometimes you don't choose things, they choose you. After a short stint as a school teacher in Denmark, I happened upon a boat building apprenticeship in Gualala, California back in 1982. I apprenticed for 9 months with Kenneth and Mary Mobert of Doghole Boats. That was during my "great American tour." I couldn't believe my luck and knew this was the way forward. But after having built my own first boat, the same rowboat I still use to fish the Pacific, I found no market for such things here.



Ejler with the Doghole Dorey he built in 1982; the same boat he uses today. *Note: a similar one built with students in summer 2013 is available for purchase.*

Boat building came first, driven mainly by a desire to catch and consume what the ocean has to offer, but also by the sheer beauty of wooden boats. Although a boat's form and building techniques are complex and somewhat mysterious, the joinery is very simple.

I am also fascinated with Neolithic culture and see myself born about 6000 years too late. A part of me is a hunter/gatherer with a little bit of agriculture thrown in. Mastery of tools, especially woodcraft, is a basic necessity when occupied with the basic human needs. I left the education track to immerse myself in self-reliance, closeness with nature and the skills to do that.

Linda: What do you mean, "...no market for such things here"?

Ejler: There has never really been a market for small boats, outside of, say, San Francisco Bay and Puget Sound. There are no calm, hospitable shorelines in Northern California, and very few harbors. A hundred years ago, lumber companies employed small rowboats to get around millponds and harbors, such as Noyo and Albion on the Mendocino coast.

Aside from that, there was a tradition of dory fishing in these coves, called Dogholes. I have a famous picture of Li Foo, a barber from Elk, who, along with a fishing partner, poses for a photograph with an impressive catch of rock fish, ling cod and halibut, sometime around 1900. I saw that picture on the wall of the Oasis in Elk, driving through one cold November night in 1982. I thought, "I want to be that man." He probably had his boat built somewhere locally. But as far as I know, this coast is too young and inaccessible to have established a market or "tradition" of small wooden boats.



"I want to be that man."

Linda: What came next?

Ejler: The next natural step was furniture, but that takes some serious learning. I was again lucky to live in Elk, 25 miles from James Krenov's school in Fort Bragg. I applied in 1991 and studied for 2 years there.

For me it was a leap to a new level. The aesthetics and practical approach taught at College of the Redwoods suited my aspirations, echoed what I wanted and still want: to evolve along the lines of tools, skills, patience and focus. I wanted to be able to build whatever I wanted, and to build it well. It was through CR's fine furniture program that pieces began falling into place. Working wood is what I'm good at. If I can't make a go at building custom, high-end furniture and make a living at it, then what can I really do?



*Tansu Vision; Swiss Pear, Madrone, Rosewood; 52" x 40" x 14."*



*Dining Room Set; mahogany, pear, and Zebrano*

**Linda:** What about building boats?

**Ejler:** Only lately have I taken up boat building again. As soon as the school year is over I gather up a group of grads and we build a version of my boat, the Doghole Dory. We crank it out in 3 weeks. It's a real tour de force, and we have a helluva good time!

**Linda:** I read what you wrote for [Whitethorn Hardwoods](#) about the beauty of indigenous woods wherein you said, "... exotic is simply a matter of distance..." How do you recommend woodworkers approach local and regional woods?

**Ejler:** Harvesting wood is often a big project, but it doesn't have to be. Find the people who know how it's done. They are everywhere, even in cities. They take down trees for a variety of reasons, and often would like to see the wood go to a good purpose instead to the chipper. Even small logs, like fruit wood or ornamental trees lining the street, can yield real treasures and you can mill them on the band saw. But the key is networking with the people of the trade.

**Linda:** Which are the most important tools in your shop?

**Ejler:** The essential tools in my shop are the hand planes I have made along the way. They enable me to work to the best of my ability. But a broader answer to your question is that it depends on the situation. For example, when I am doing a varnish job, the most important tool is a 75 cent foam brush.



*"One of several bevel gauges hanging on my wall, but this one is most used. Small, sweet and easy to make."*



*"A jointer plane for narrow edge joints, including band saw veneer joints. Possibly the best plane I have ever made. The hammer I use to adjust my planes. Made from hickory and soft steel. Incredibly comfortable in my hand. The thin shaft is springy, making it perfect for copper riveting in boat building."*



*"Square, Goncalo Alves. Always in my apron pocket. Light, friendly, and accurate enough."*





“When wood is a challenge to plane, this brawny fellow is the efficient solution. With a Hock iron at 90 degrees, sharpened at a steep 45, this scraper plane will flatten the most difficult of woods. Large, easy to use and keeps an edge.”



“A classic, but half size. In one hand, I have full control fitting small shoulders.”



“A compass cooper plane in zebra wood. I made this one a few years back for hollow carving oar spoons. I had bought a *Veritas* hollowing plane, but even though it's a decent tool, it was also wicked uncomfortable in the long run. This little plane is the sweetest thing to use and works just right.”

**Linda:** You produce a great many pieces, each to perfection. What are the secrets to producing fine furniture with such efficiency and how would you describe your production process?

**Ejler:** I don't really see myself that way since I know first hand that I'm quite lazy.



Victoria Chair, Italian walnut, leather.



Corner Sideboard, Swiss Pear and various marquetry woods.

But I do go out of my way to get the kind of work I really want to do, that I can't wait to sink my teeth into. If I do a big cabinet with a lot of drawers and endless dovetail work, I may want to do chairs next, or vice versa. I try to mix up my work, so I don't run out of steam. Sometimes, when I take on too big of a job to do solo, I invite colleagues or students to work with me, and we go to town! I think people like to work in my shop. It's a cozy place, with good music and stimulating conversation. It doesn't hurt that my wife Karen, who is an excellent cook, serves delicious snacks throughout the day. Her food is fabulous and people know it.



Tall Chest; Doussier. “...If I do a big cabinet with a lot of drawers and endless dovetail work...”



Potrero Dining Set; Mendocino Madrone. “...I may want to do chairs next, or vice versa.”

And finally, I make time to get out of the shop for long periods, especially in summer for fishing and gardening. It recharges me, and when the rain comes, I’m ready for the great indoors again, to log some billable hours.

Linda: Which woodworker in history would you like to speak with today and what are you reading?

Ejler: I would have a conversation with the ice-man from Turin, the late-stone-age man from 5000bc found frozen in a glacier in the Swiss/Italian Alps some years back. The things he carried and the clothes he wore were all he needed to survive in the mountains; he probably made everything himself. We would spend a night around the fire immersed in talk about his life, his day, his tools and how he learned his skills. We would eat and hopefully drink something fermented.

And, I’m reading the autobiography of a big-game hunter for the British Empire in Kenya about 1890. I’m also reading *Heavy Metal Magazine*.



Looks like one happy guy, this Ejler Hjorth-Westh who was born 6000 years too late! He’s built just about every type of piece of furniture there is to build, and beautifully. Definitely worth getting to know what he knows about woodworking.



Items found with “Otzi the Iceman,” the 5,300 year old Neolithic man discovered by German hikers near the Similaun glacier in 1991.

Thank you, Ejler Hjorth-Westh!  
- Linda at Hock Tools

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