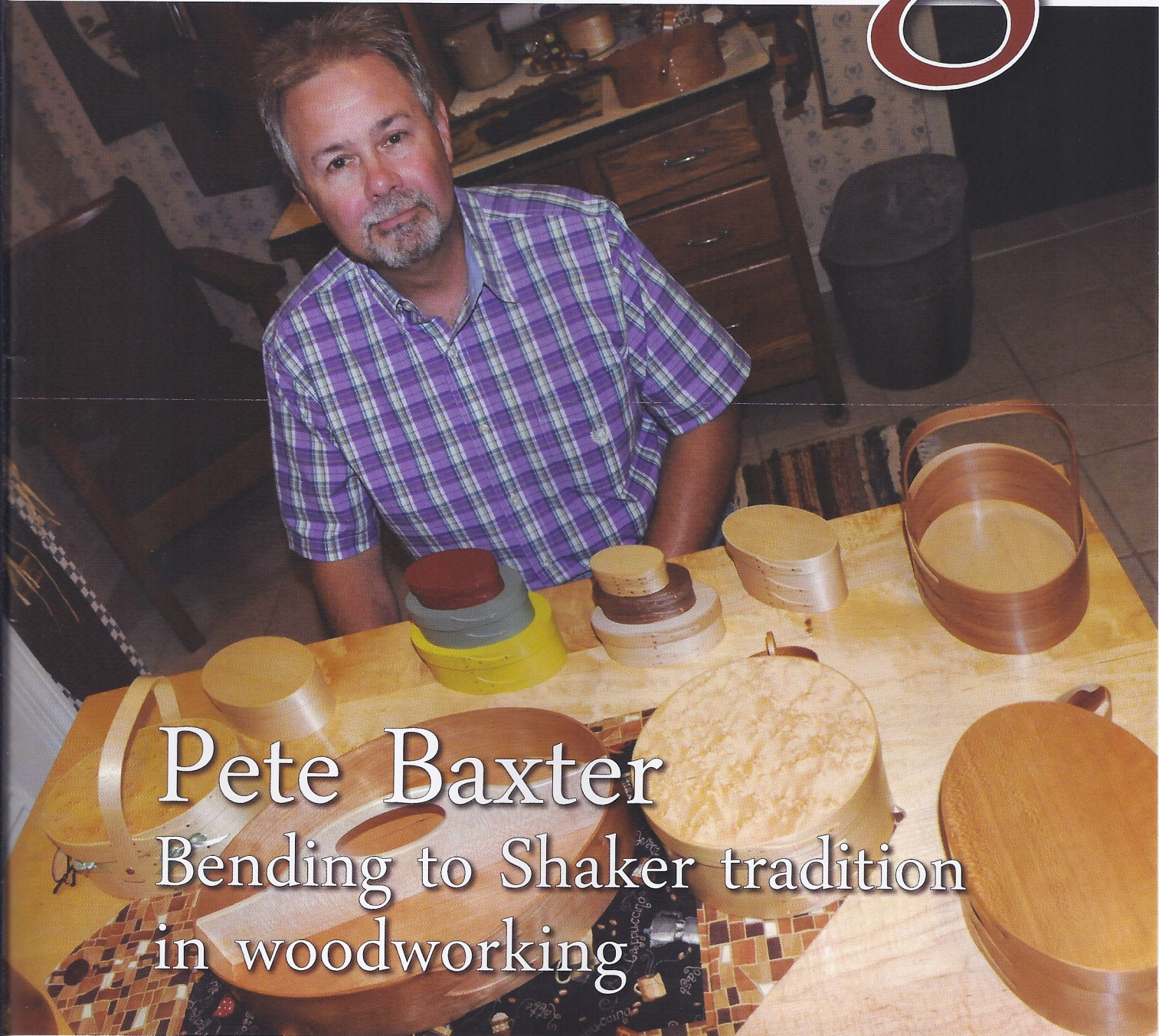


Enjoying life after 50

# Living



Pete Baxter  
Bending to Shaker tradition  
in woodworking



# contents



Pete Baxter



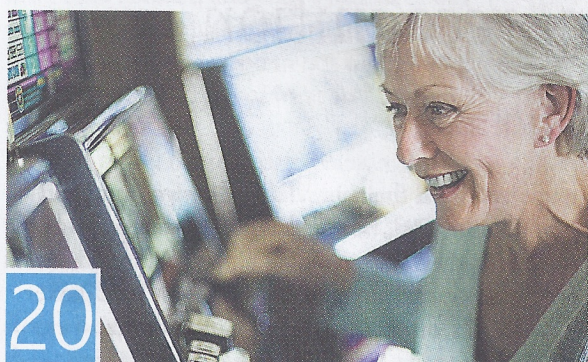
Sandy Carmichael



Barb and Bob Tabeling



Preparing for retirement



Drawn to casinos



Overcoming loneliness

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## THE TRIBUNE

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**Above:** Pete Baxter of Seymour shows one of his arch handle carriers.

**Opposite page:** Swallowtail carving on the outside of an oval box.

# Seymour craftsman receives national recognition

STORY AND PHOTOS BY ZACH SPICER

**F**or Pete Baxter, a lesson in a college class sparked a hobby and turned into a business. While attending Transylvania University in Lexington, Ky., in the early 1970s, the Seymour resident took an elective class that touched on the religious sect known as the Shakers.

"It covered a variety of Shaker life, Shaker religion, touring some of the villages," Baxter said. "It just looked at their coming to America in the 1790s. They had to depend on converts to sustain their order because men and women lived separately, and they all worked toward the good of the commune, a utopian type society."

Baxter saw some of the products that Shakers

made and liked their simplicity of design, form and function. In 1993, he decided to try to make oval boxes. He then started making other items and several years later turned it into a business, Pete Baxter Woodworks, and received recognition for his work.

Most recently, Baxter won the highest award as a traditional artisan in this year's Directory of Traditional American Crafts, and his work is featured in the August issue of *Early American Life* magazine. For the second straight year, he was recognized for his craftsmanship and dedication to preserving America's heritage arts.

"I'm very flattered to have that designation," Baxter, 60, said. "I juried in in 2012 and reapplied.



You have to reapply every year, which they want to look at the work that you do and if you maintain the quality of work.”

The first honor he received was being named an Indiana Artisan in 2011.

“It is intended to promote art and food people in our state and make people aware of the entrepreneurs,” Baxter said. “They have a juried show of artisans every year in the spring. Currently, the rules are once you are juried and accepted, you are a member.”

Baxter takes his work to a variety of shows, where he meets other artists and craftsmen, and that helped him receive another honor, Kentucky Guild of Artists and Craftsmen.

“There were a couple of people in Kentucky that approached me, and you have to live within 50 miles of the border of Kentucky (to be considered),” he said. “They were at one of the shows and said, ‘You should consider,’ so it was at their urging that I applied. I had to physically submit five different pieces to them, so I shipped them five pieces, made an application and described what I did.”

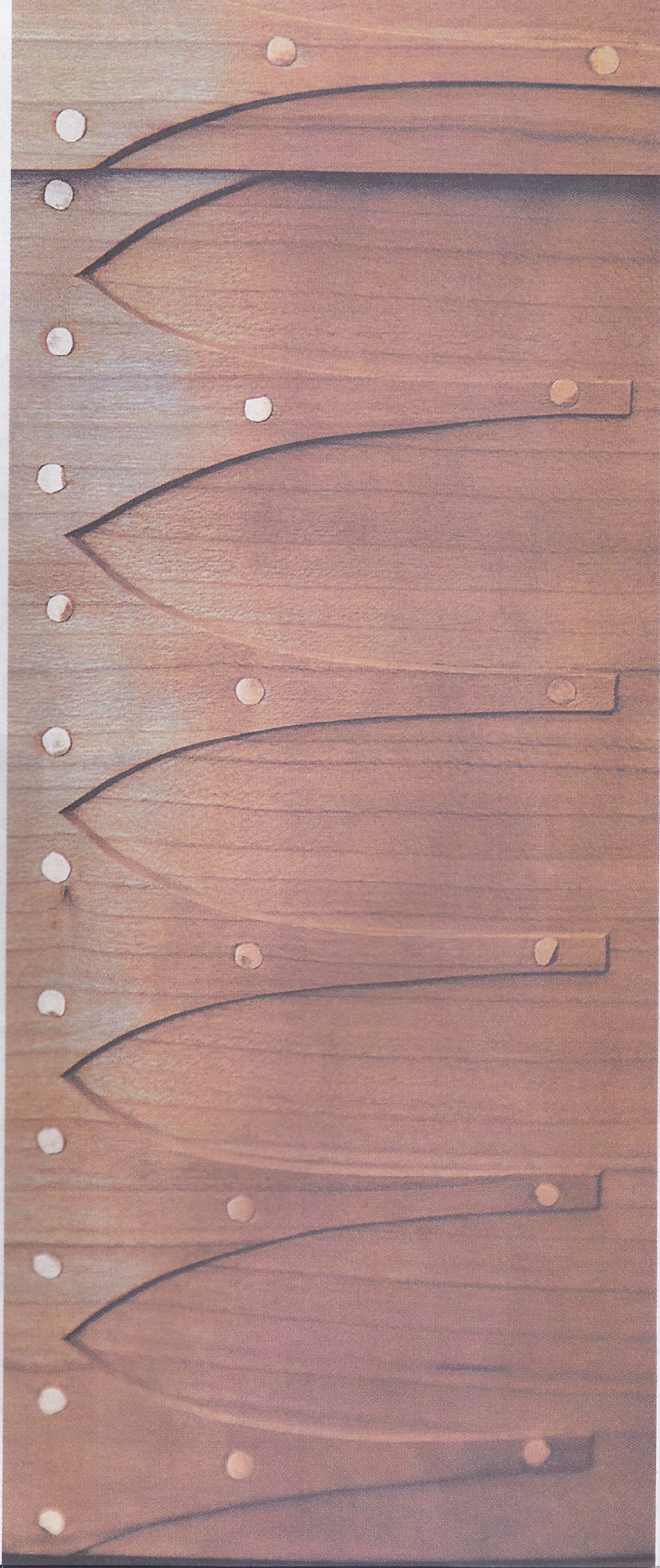
Baxter’s hobby began many years after college when he saw a bonnet handle carrier on the cover of a magazine.

“It intrigued me about bending wood,” he said. “I read the article, bought the magazine, contacted the gentleman that sells the copper tacks and things and got a little class booklet, and then I just set about self-teaching. It’s just an intriguing process when you soak the wood in hot water and it bends, and that’s kind of what still calls me to doing this.”

From there, Baxter started making boxes, which come in a variety of shapes and sizes, are made of different types of wood and serve several purposes.

“The Shakers originally made them to store all dry goods,” Baxter said. “Prior to the Industrial Revolution and metal canisters and things, these were things used in the pantry, used in the garden, used pretty much for any dry goods. They were graduated in size, so when they were empty, they rested inside one another and took up less storage space on the shelf.”

Baxter also got into making divided, arch handle and sewing carriers. On the outside





of all of the Shaker items is a swallow tail, or finger pattern.

"The Shakers were about form and function. This was a means to an end to have a finely constructed container that would be utilitarian and last for a long time," Baxter said. "They carved the area so the wood would expand and contract less and then be less likely to split. This wasn't a visual attraction to them. It was a matter of function. The copper tacks are used to prevent staining, and when things were inside the box, if they labeled them, they would have labeled it on the opposite side to the fingers and put it on the shelf."

Baxter's quarter-sawn material initially was purchased from upstate New York. But lately, he also has been doing some business with Vance Darlage, who has a lumber mill in Seymour.

"Quarter-sawing has a lot of manipulation of a log to get it cut in a certain way, and that takes time, and a lot of people that saw lumber don't want to do that," Baxter said. "It's pricy because of the amount of time you have to take to move the log and rotate it and turn it and that type of thing."

Baxter said 90 percent of his product is maple and cherry, but he also uses butternut, apple, sycamore and walnut. For the bottom of every box and some

carriers, he uses eastern white pine.

When he makes a sewing carrier, he buys veneer products from RSVP in Columbus. Also inside are a needle book, an emery-filled strawberry, a cylinder of beeswax and a tomato pin cushion.

All of the products are made in a workshop on his mother's property that was built by his grandfather. He has had the workshop for 20 years, and since retiring in 2010, he spends every day there.

"The business aspect for me didn't start until a couple of years ago," Baxter said. "All the other time, I gave away a lot of my product. That's what allowed me to perfect and become better. Excellence is equal to your tolerance for repetition, so there's a certain process that as you master the various aspects, it shows up in the finished work."

Baxter's products can be purchased at juried shows, Shaker museum gift shops in Kentucky and New York and locally at the Jackson County Visitor Center in Seymour.

When he's not at a show with his wife, Karen, Baxter fills orders for wholesale customers.

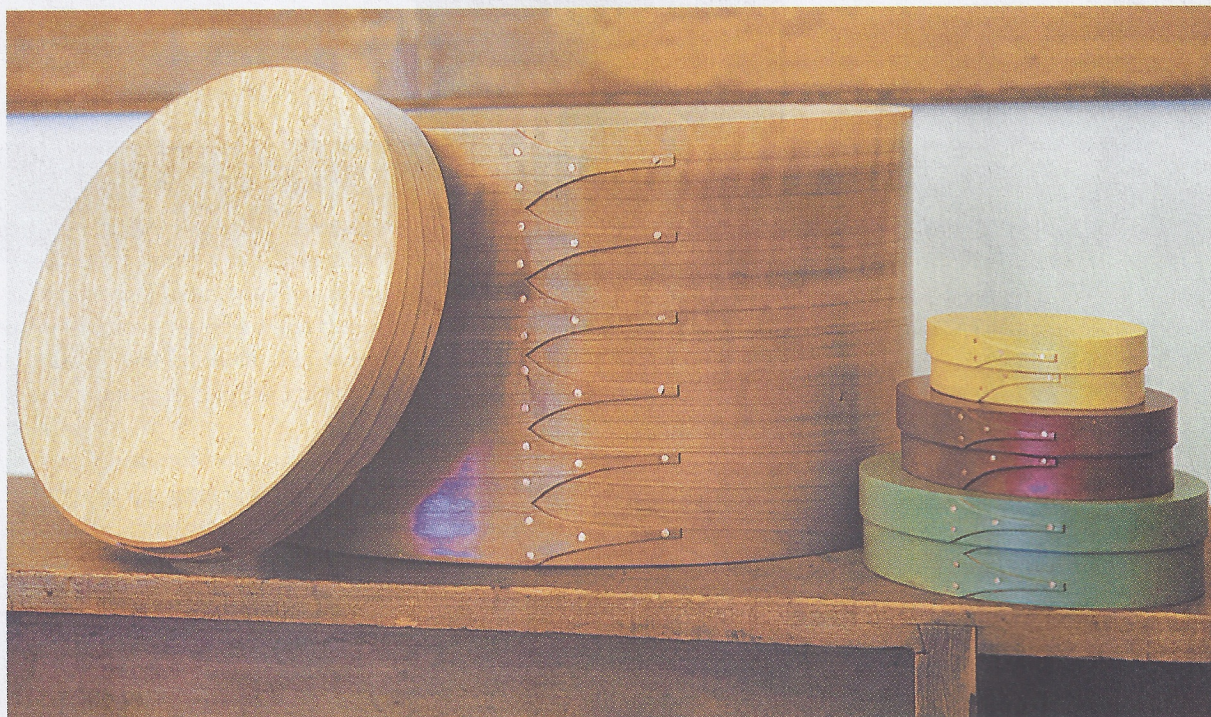
"We've met some extremely nice, friendly people,"



A swing handle sewing box includes a needle book, an emery-filled strawberry, a cylinder of beeswax and a tomato pin cushion.







he said. "I like talking with my fellow artisans. They all have their own gift and their own craft, and it's just enjoyable.

"I do a show in southwestern Indiana in New Harmony where I'll dress in period Shaker clothing and demonstrate carving the swallow tails, so that's another whole aspect that I find intriguing," he added. "I'm going to try to get accepted to the Vincennes Rendezvous Civil War re-enactment on Memorial Day next year. I'll need to acquire a period tent, but a friend at the South Union Shaker Village made me some historically accurate Shaker clothing."

Baxter also has gotten into making chairs, and that was self-taught, too.

"I have been making Shaker chairs for about 10 years, and I'm just now starting to market and find the right venue for chairs," he said. "Three of my chairs were accepted for an exhibit this fall at Hancock Shaker Village (in Massachusetts). I submitted pictures of my work and a description of how I do things and was very fortunate and flattered I was accepted for a chair and small furniture exhibit."

Baxter said he doesn't have any plans of giving up his hobby.

"I look to continue to do this because I enjoy it. I want to do it as long as I am able," he said. "One of my hopes is that one of my grandchildren might like to learn what their grandfather does and carry on and share the knowledge and the things that I've learned."

## Baxter file

**Name:** Pete Baxter

**Age:** 60

**Hometown:** Seymour

**Education:** Seymour High School, 1971; Transylvania University, bachelor of arts in history education, 1975; Indiana University Southeast, master of science in secondary education, 1980

**Employment:** Retired. Indiana Department of Education, director in the office of school transportation and emergency planning for 34 years

**Business:** Pete Baxter Woodworks

**Products:** Handmade Shaker oval boxes and carriers

**Information:** [petebaxterwoodworks.com](http://petebaxterwoodworks.com), 812-580-0002

**Family:** Wife, Karen; children, Christopher Baxter and Sara Turner