

Turn into the Wind

By Bill Kelly

Here I am miles at sea, precariously perched 90 feet above the rolling deck of a square-rigged sailing ship, bent over the topgallant yardarm, wondering how woodturning got me into this predicament.

Photo: Volker Corell

For their volunteer efforts, 80 Glendale Woodturners and friends were the first to sail two new tall ships.

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American Association of Woodturners

Well, let me tell you the story. In early 2000, I read that two brigantines (two-masted square-rigged sailing ships) were to be built in nearby San Pedro by the Los Angeles Maritime Institute. Figuring they might use a volunteer woodturner, I contacted Captain Jim Gladson, the Institute's president.

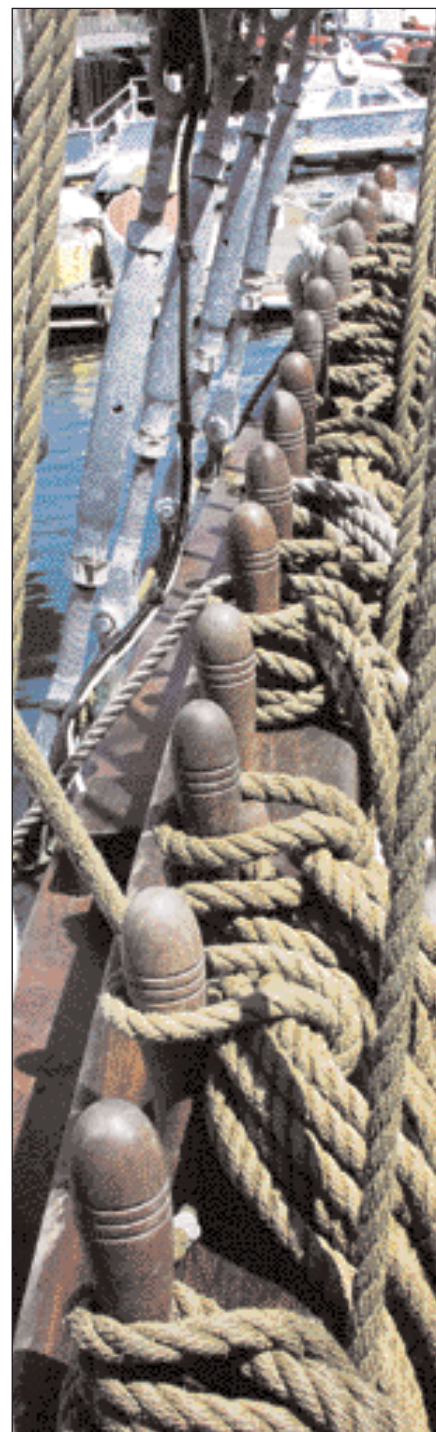
He told me how the Maritime Institute uses sail training to provide youth with real-life challenges to develop knowledge, skills and attitudes needed to live healthy, productive lives. The Institute's TopSail Youth Program is notably effective with teenagers who are not coping well with the demands of society and are at risk of dropping out of school and giving up. He added that the program has been so successful that the two tall ships then being used did not fulfill the program's needs. As a result, two new 90-foot brigantines were being built to double the Institute's fleet.

Captain Gladson showed me

the shipyard (actually the parking lot of the Los Angeles Maritime Museum), where the keels of these TopSail Youth Program ships now under construction had been laid. The keels were huge (12" x 24" x 70') timbers of purpleheart. These purpleheart timbers were cut from a 4' square by 80' long log brought up from Guiana in South America. I was amazed at the size of some of the cutoffs in the dumpster. Captain Gladson readily agreed to share these in exchange for turning belaying pins for the ships.

He came to the next Glendale Woodturners Guild meeting and made a presentation on the brigantines and the youth sailing program. I also brought some purpleheart cutoffs to distribute. The members enthusiastically voted to adopt the project. From the cutoffs, woodturners could make something for themselves and also something to donate for fund raising activities to the

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On the *Irving Johnson*, belaying pins turned by the Glendale chapter are wrapped with massive ropes.

Pins turn into pens

The Glendale Woodturners Guild turned 300 belaying pins from courbaril for the two tall ships. Chapter members used the courbaril scraps for turned pens, which were sold at the Maritime Institute's gift shop.



Maritime Institute. The organization is non-profit and funded from private sources, foundations, and corporations. The ships were built over a three-year period, culminating with their launching in April 2002 and their commissioning in April 2003. Each was custom-built using traditional ship building skills combined with modern technology for the needs of the TopSail Youth Program.

When our woodturners visited the shipyard during the construction process, I gave them a guided tour, and then lead them to the dumpster. The shipwrights were amused to see our dumpster-divers carry off armloads of tropical "scrap" hardwoods. Amusement turned to amazement when the finished turnings appeared on display. Purpleheart bowls, hollow forms, closed forms, goblets, platters, candlesticks, and so forth were in abundance. In the process, we found that after finish-sanding a piece of purpleheart, fuming it with muriatic acid produced a wonderful deep cranberry color (see *page 62*). Go easy and do this only outdoors.

As the hulls took shape, other woods appeared. South American tatabu—because of its strength—became keelson, stringers, king posts, and samson posts. Its interlocking fiber structure and figure make it delightful to turn, but one has to be careful of fisheyes when finishing this wood.

The frames (ribs) of the ships were made of laminated white oak from Wisconsin. The black

laminating adhesive in between the layers provided a nice contrast when turning these cutoffs. Many beautiful lidded boxes and hollow vessels were made from these scraps. When we produced some finished lamp bases, the Maritime Institute offered them as thank-you gifts to donors of \$2,500 or more. They

were very popular.

Boat-building materials included South American locust (courbaril) for planking, rails, belaying pins and general carpentry. Courbaril arrived from Guiana in planks 3" thick, up to 36" wide and up to 40' long. A few planks were 6" to 7" thick. It's a light brown hardwood,



Parrell beads, turned from courbaril, are shown on the main gaff throat. The beads permit the gaff to travel up and down the main mast.



Damon Siples, insert, holds one of the ten 48"-tall fife rail stanchions he turned from purpleheart. The larger photo shows two of the stanchions in use.

beautifully figured, turns easily and finishes extremely well. From this, we turned and donated bowls, goblets, and hollow forms, More than 300 belaying pins were also turned from this locust.

A few planks of kabukali were used to strengthen bulkheads. This exotic is a pinkish hardwood, quite unpopular with the shipwrights because of its unpleasant odor when being worked. The same odor appears in turning, so not too many pieces were turned from this wood!

As the final finishing began on the ships, Honduras mahogany arrived in 5"- to 6"-thick timbers, 20" to 30" wide and 30' long. These became cap rails, hatch covers, topside trim, instrument consoles and tabletops. We turned cutoffs from these timbers into candlesticks, goblets, chalices as well as plates and platters.

Other woods used in the ships



Geneva Comer, Glendale's youngest turner, presents a purpleheart chalice to Capt. Jim Gladson as Bill Kelly, center, looks on.

ITEMS TURNED FOR THE BRIGANTINE PROJECT

Product	Number Made	Wood Used
Belaying Pins	300	Courbaril
Bullseyes (3 sizes)	100	Various
Belaying pin pens	300	Various
Taffrail stanchions	60	Mahogany
Fife rail stanchions	10	Purpleheart
Plugs (up to 4")	100s	Purpleheart
Trunnels (over 1")	50	Courbaril & white oak
Parrell beads	25	Courbaril
Berth light mounts	80	Mahogany
Overhead light mounts	20	Mahogany
Binnacles	2	Mahogany
Stopwaters	10	Cypress
Tool handles (slicks)	15	Various
Ships tools (mallets, fids, etc.)	2 sets	Courbaril

were old growth Douglas fir for planks above the waterline, beams and decking; spar-grade Douglas fir for masts and spars; Sitka spruce for main gaffs and topgallant yards; and cypress for stopwaters.

During the three-year construction period, Glendale Woodturners made boat items including belaying pins, fife rail stanchions, taffrail stanchions, parrell beads, bullseyes, fairleads, lizards, light mountings and binnacles. The Institute valued these turnings at more than \$50,000. They also realized more than \$50,000 in proceeds from auctions and sales of our donated turnings. At \$50 for a day of sailing, this means that over 2,000 at-risk kids could experience a day at sea on a tall ship, courtesy of the Glendale Woodturners in-kind contributions. Every bit helps in raising the \$8 million to build these ships and the ongoing

expenses of a very worthwhile youth program.

The woodturners who lent a big hand to this brigantine project were honored last summer to be on board when both ships were under full sail for the first time. What a thrill! These 100-ton boats are truly magnificent, especially out on the open sea with all sails set and the wind propelling them along at a good clip.

Also participating in this project were neighboring chapters, the Inland Woodturners and the newly formed El Camino Woodturners Guild. Several turners have also been bitten by the sailing bug and regularly volunteer with "our kids." That's why "I'm miles at sea . . ."

*For more information go to
www.lamitopsail.org and
www.woodturners.org*

Bill Kelly of Rancho Palos Verdes, CA, is a member of the Glendale Woodturners Guild.