

Mastering the Art of Pen Turning

By Randy Olson



Have you ever owned a customized one-of-a-kind ink pen that is personalized just for you? If not, talk to Bill Irvine in Geff and treat yourself or a friend, relative, or employee to a unique personalized pen that they will never let out of their sight. Irvine is turning his hobby of pen making into a “nitch” business for people who want an ink pen that they simply cannot find anywhere else. It’s called pen turning because the pens are custom shaped on a lathe from a variety of raw products

Irvine started hand-crafting ink pens about 7 months ago after watching a television show and researching the fine art through videos and books. After much experimentation along with a heavy dose of trial and error, Irvine is able to produce a finished product that rivals any high quality name brand pen. “I just started acquiring various types of wood, cultured marble, acrylics, formica and a variety of items to

customize pens for people,” said Irvine. “They make great gift ideas, awards, or a special treat for yourself.”

While I interviewed Irvine for this story, he was hard at work at pen turning (shaping) a new ink pen out of a piece of Cocobolo wood from Africa. In fact, I was surprised at the variety of different wood and materials that he has in his shop waiting to be customized into a pen. How about a pen made from a solid counter top? He also has customized pens from antlers, corn cobs, pool cues and alternative ivory. In addition to the Cocobolo wood from Africa, he also has Olivewood from Bethlehem, KOA from Hawaii, as well as Speckled Cherry, Catalpa, Black Striped Ash, Honey Locust, Red Palm, Sage Brush, and others. “No two ink pens are the same,” said Irvine. “Even if I make two pens from the same type of wood, they are still uniquely different due to the look of the grain and they can also be laser engraved with the owners name or a company name.” He also showed me a pen crafted from two different types of wood that included an imbedded cross and others personalized with children’s photos and college logos.

With all the raw materials he has stacked around, you might assume that Irvine was already an accomplished wood-working craftsman before jumping into this nitch. “No, not really,” said Irvine. “In fact, I had to buy many of the woodworking tools that were needed to do this business such as a drill press, band saw, and lathe machine.”

Making customized pens is not the only art-related talent that Irvine has. Many people are familiar with his ability to work with stained glass, as well as etching and laser engraving on glass. He also does sublimations (pictures) on coffee mugs which are quite impressive. The actual name of his business is Glass Country Studio. “I might have to alter the business name a little bit with all the pen turning I do,” said Irvine. While Irvine puts out a very high-quality product, the main concern now is the marketing of the pens. He is currently researching plans for a website. “I have already sold pens to friends, relatives, and previous glass customers,” said Irvine. “Now I just need to branch out more and I believe the internet will allow me to do that.” Businesses and Corporations who wish to honor their employees, retirees, or present awards may wish to contact Irvine for personalized pens, or etched glass plaques or awards. You can reach Irvine in Geff at (618) 897-2601.



Remember the Cocobolo wood pen that I mentioned earlier in the story? After the pen was professionally shaped by Irvine, I watched as he used 12 different grades of sandpaper to finish it followed by a large variety of waxes and his own “secret polish.” Afterwards, he presented it to me and now I use it everyday at the Cooperative. It’s probably the most beautiful pen I have ever owned. The wood grain is stunning and it is smooth like glass. Electricity to the Glass Country Studio (and Pen Turning) is supplied by Wayne-White Counties Electric Cooperative. “Electricity is important for the operation of my tools,” said Irvine. “The Cooperative has provided good service to me. Anytime I have needed to call, they have always responded quickly.”