DON OETJEN  
By Bill Ringle

To most of us a burl probably is a repugnant growth on a tree, a kind of arboreal wart. But to Don Oetjen burls are opportunities to create exquisite and fascinating objects. For he’s a wood turner, one of a band who, with a chain saw, a lathe and gouges, turn out gorgeous, vases, bowls, plates, ornaments and any number of other things. They get their name because they fashion works of art by turning a piece of wood on a rapidly rotating lathe. When a burl occurs it enhances the work by providing a unique design.

Don begins with only a chunk, up to 16 inches in diameter. As it whirrs, the turner uses the gouge (Don has had about 50) to shape it to whatever intriguing designs or forms his imagination suggests. Usually – but not always - he starts with a notion of what he’ll fashion (though some brother turners say that the innate character of a piece of wood dictates the way their creations will turn out, Don says, “The concept that ‘the wood speaks to me’ is one that I don’t understand”). However, he does determine, immediately when he starts to turn, whether a piece will be, for example, a vase or a bowl, a platter, or something else.”

He likes to cite what he says in an adage among sculptors: “To carve a duck, you cut away everything that doesn’t look like a duck and you’ll come up with a duck.”

As he works here at the Pines (where he’s lived since 1993), Don takes pains to avoid a wrong cut which can doom a whole promising piece of work. “That very first cut with the chain saw is important.

“The difference between this and making pottery is that if potters mess up early-on they can use the clay to start over... Make a mistake in wood and all you can do is throw it away, or work it into a smaller object.”

Burls are relatively rare, so that most of the pieces Don turns out rely on the natural beauty of the wood – its grain, whorls (bird’s-eye maple, for example) and tone. Knots can add interest if they’re firm. Besides maple, his favorite woods are dogwood, cherry and, he says, “I’ve had some pecan that was very good.” He made a handsome dish of locust from the Davidson College campus. He also values Manzanita root from the West and Mountain Laurel from our own North Carolina. Seasoned wood is OK, but “for turning you don’t need to start with dry wood.” His views on oak are harsh: “It’s awful, stringy,” and ditto for hickory.

In the “how-can he possibly have done it?” category, visitors find vases and bowls that have been hollowed out to follow the outside contours. Some of the smallest pieces (a tiny cowboy hat and a vase, for instance) seem, at casual inspection, to be eggshell-thin. “No,” Oetjen corrects. “They’re about 1/32nd of an inch”
For connoisseurs a mark of a vase’s quality is if it’s smooth inside and uniform all the way down. “One of the most difficult achievements,” he says, “is to make the bottom smooth.”

Before 1988, when he retired as general manager of a 300-employee company that produced metal insulation for nuclear power plants, Oetjen hadn’t been a turner. With his new leisure he didn’t play golf nor want to be idle, so he took up making small articulated wooden toys, -- models of such things as autos or dogs.

“But each required scores of parts and three to four months to fabricate, so I decided to do something that made a finished product in a shorter time.” To learn the fine points of turning he took a course at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in Gatlinburg, Tennessee. And fellow turners, he's found, have been generous in sharing techniques.

Sources of suitable wood vary. At Sanford, N. C., where the Oetjens lived pre-Pines, “there were two golf courses where they were always taking down trees. So I had access to a whole bunch of wood. And you establish yourself with those people who take down trees and sometimes buy wood, even from Canada.”

On those rare occasions when work goes awry, Don can often salvage smaller pieces from it. When a vase was unsuccessful he made from the remains a handsome sculpture of a boat, with wooden sails unfurled.

He used to turn out roughly 100 pieces a year and worked about six hours on weekdays. Now he’s down to about an hour a day. “I got tired of working with those big blocks of wood and wrestling with chain saws. Now I just do little pieces, like Christmas ornaments.”

From pieces sold at the Pines he’s donated half the proceeds -- over $1,000 he guesses -- to the Residents' Association.