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How to make oyster tongs

by BRICE STUMP The Daily Times of Salisbury BIVALVE, Md. (AP) — When Wilbur Turner Messick Jr. enters the door of his Texas Road store, he makes history. He may be the only man in the country to continue a unique family business started in 1859. His ancestors, undertakers, tessari and cabinet makers, since before the Civil War, began to make oyster germs at least until 1859. When his father, Wilbur, died in 2008. It's a job unlike any other. I heard someone in North Carolina makes them, but it's just a rumor, he said. Someone down in Florida a few years ago bought some of ours to copy, but never heard of it again. So I think this is goin's last job.' Messick is now the last man in the country to make oyster wooden knobs. In a rambling two-story wooden building, where men in the family downstairs made wooden coffins - which the women finished with fabric upstairs - tong shafts were made on these pages. Some tools used to make coffins have also cut and shaped powerful, slender pine shafts from oysters. Sometimes called widow chopsticks due to the physical toll they take on aquatic tension with wooden panes that can be 35 meters plus long. With iron, toothy pliers at the base, the water man opens a pair of shafts and scrapes about a third of the bushel oysters, sometimes just shells, and pulls its catch to the surface. Any kind of oyster is hard work, but this is for a young man, Messick said. The problem is, there aren't many young men working on oyster land in the Chesapeake Bay with hand pliers. We sold some in 2008 and then they (DNR) closed everything (oyster farms) in the bay that tongers use. Since then, I haven't sold any germs. I got a really nice timber in 2009. I'm on hold, he said. I'm makin' 'em now and stockpilin' so when they don't open the tongin' basis, I'll have some tong shafts assembled for the guys. I'm working on things here, ready for work if anyone comes, he said. Then there is another problem: no one comes to the store. After the place was occupied by customers who showed up at the store in cars, pickups or boats. I used to deliver some by trailer in southern Maryland and my Uncle Corney took some to the West Coast in his boat, he said. Back then, things flourished in the oyster business, the '70s and '80s. The last big order we had, years ago, was from New Jersey. The man ordered about \$6,000 a shaft. It was pretty good until the last 20 years. It wasn't much now. There wasn't much really means dry bone. He only sold two pairs in a year. And then there are piles of finished axles. Messick estimates there are 300 pairs ready to go, in case business grows again. I don't sell them that much because they last that long, he said. Treated correctly, kept out of time in the off-season, not abused, can last for 20 years or more. He from years of experience which makes a good set of axle pliers: balance, weight, flexibility and feeling. There is no written guarantee, but following the ethics of the old way of doing business on the East Coast, Messick said he would fix or replace any breakage pliers due to product failure, but not abuse - forever. I have enough experience with axle pliers to say what my fault is for making them. I'll replace anything bad. I like to send them well. I don't want any problems, replace anything bad. Another perk, if pliers need tuning, Messick will tighten the boards, at no charge. These panes are tools and have a purpose and work the way they were made. You don't need any modification, he said. Just like his ancestors from 1859. I'm partially disabled. It's workin' water for about 35 years, oysters' and crabbin', and now they have arthritis pretty bad. I have a heart condition, too. I'm fine for about four hours now. Arthritis also limits his life on the water. He thinks he's the only Messick who's been a water man and the beneficiary of the clichéd oysters made in the store. He has two pairs of his used pliers stored upstairs, made by his late father. Upstairs, the shafts are finished, and almost finished, are everywhere. The floor is covered with wooden panes. Piles of neatly stacked axles are located on the floor, against the wall, on counters and racks. Up until about 1950, we made only one type of shaft. These are the ones straight in a 'new style', he said, holding the finished pair. The old-style ones had thieves in them. We call them 'lap shafts.' The new ones are the ones that have an eel pot in the shape of a head on 'em. I learned through my dad how to hang heads on them. Downstairs are piles of wood spices, chips and scrubs. The spicy scent of pine oil, which releases a router, saw blade and planner, flows from centuries-old wood. On the floor of the store, all but hidden in piles of scrubs and shavings are amber nodules of hard pine juice, resin that leaked from complex timber during the hottest days of summer. Coin-sized curiosities are sometimes clear, Messick said, but more often coated with sawdust, making them fuzzy. He was holding a lump of hardened, fragrant juice. This was made maybe 250 years ago, he said, slowly rolling it between the rough thumb and forefinger. Once the warm lifeblood of southern pine created a strong tree now dipped in the cold waters of the Chesapeake Bay. My father wanted to buy some wood, but we couldn't find decent lumber. After he died, a guy down south called me and said that tornadoes had knocked down a lot of yellow-hearted pines of the southern longleaf on government land; anything I can sell downed or dead standing trees. The man said that what he managed to get was 200-300 years old, so I bought 7,000 records. Longleaf trees required years and more to make tong shafts with. Younger things shoot when you do that. Over the years people have tried to use oak and ash, but the problem is when you use them, they are too fragile and crack. The heart pine will give way under pressure, give a lot, but oak and ash will not, he said. Woodworkers crave expensive ancient pine for the heart is strength and beauty. Nevertheless, his strength and hardness command respect. You have to be very careful when you run them through the shapes because there's some bad debris flying out of that thing. I got them to go into my hands, and dad took them in my arms and stuff. You have to wear a coat and a face mask, he said. He knows all about grain, twisting and bending. You can't make pliers out of axles with knotted things, he said. The hardest part is takin' board, watching it and seeing what you can get out of it. Not every board makes a grade. I'd say from 1,000 feet of lumber, you might be lucky to get 700 feet to make a vent of the shaft. I wanted inches thick, 8-inch wide panels, 18 feet long, but eventually I got 6-inch boards, 16 feet long, Messick said. When the smallest patches have to be made, he uses epoxy, fine pylon and, of course, a coffee grinder. A Walmart coffee grinder can take a coarse pylon and makes it okay. The grinder may be the latest piece of equipment in the store. Like his father, uncle and grandfather, Messick relies on a monster of routers to ease the corners of shafts. The machine is a 75- or more-year-old shaper that can also be transformed into a planner and circular saw. It's getting old, and teddy bears are bad at it. I try to start it when it's cold. I can't start it for long because when it heats up, the fat flies out of it. As he spoke, Messick opened several folding wooden chairs, heavy from wood dust, that were propped up against one wall. They probably haven't been used since the funeral in the '30s, he said. That's because the store was once the center of the Messick family funeral home business. There are even a few bottles of embalming liquid tucked into the side wall woodwork that probably dates back to the 1920s. As raindrops, to the sounds of small hailstones, fell on the rusty tin roof in the water symphony, Messick talked about the right season to be in the store, making shafts. It's too cold to be here in winter, working. My father and uncle (the late Cornelius Corney Messick who died in 2005) worked here in the summer. It was so hot up there, he took my breath. I like to do it in spring or autumn, he said as he pushed the side of his shoe through a pile of shavings. It's a distinctive set. Formatting and rough from the pane takes place down. Then long columns are taken outside and reeled on the weather side of the building, near the second-floor door. Once up, Messick pulls them out, one by one, lining them under the oson shafts waiting to be installed and joined. It's like his father and uncle did the job, and before them, too. his grandfather and great-grandfather. In those early days, people moved wooden coffins the same way between finishing floors. And in the days not so long ago, he said, Messick undertakers embalmed at the back of the first floor, where the skeleton of Messick's wooden work boat is formed. The small room was also his parents' home for a year, when they married in 1956. At the store, Messick works while listening to National Public Radio on Salisbury University's WSCL station. yes, he confessed, he likes classical music. When he speaks, his voice is measured and clear. His diction and tone are so fine that one might think he's a professional radio announcer. He has a golden voice made for storytelling. The old building needs a good name. It could be uncomfortably lonely, such large rooms without talking. It is often quiet, very quiet, when even the softest whistle of the wind blowing through the wooden siding commands attention. Yet when Messick speaks, the store becomes a sound studio, with its surprisingly dark acoustics. There are other sounds that look like they're right for an aging building. There is cutting shaved wood, drills, hammers on metal, wood-eating sandpaper, clacking axles on wooded floors and racks as they are moved. Messick drives home copper rivets to provide four brass plates joining a pair of axles. They're really copper brake rivets, he said. My dad and uncle ordered brass plates for thousands, in barrels, he explained. Now it's cheaper to buy brass things inches wide and make your own plates. There are a lot more contractions (involved), but I have plenty of time. There are several workstations in the store, make-do stops where pine plank becomes waterman's artwork, his tool shop. To move some longer shafts back and forth at his nearly 40-foot workplace, he uses rollers that once carried coffins. There are even two small trap door windows, on each side of the building, that can be opened to allow the axles to slide outside when there is not enough space to work on the bench. Although the last in the family to make shafts, each new couple is burned with a logo, Messick Bros., as the late Cornelius Corney and Wilbur Messick. There are centuries-old pieces of the past that can be found in the shadow of horns and walls. I still find things that belonged to them. It makes me stop and think. These things had my ancestors' hands on them. I've worked with them a lot. I get a kind of belongin' feelin' from that when I deal with these things, like I belong in this business, he said. Just before he died, my dad taught me everything he could. He wrote down a lot, left me a lot of notes. I would love to teach my son David, 27, how to make germinations, he said. He's working hard right now, he doesn't have much time. Maybe one day he will. Maybe my grandson Brandon, 10, will learn. He's a little young, but I'd like to get him going early. to that. There's still a lot of play in it right now. With 300 pairs of panes stacked and waiting to be sold, Messick is waiting for buyers. They say the oysters are in the hand. I hope so, because I can sell some of these shafts. I love doing this. Business isn't very good. I sold a couple last year to a guy from St. Mary's County. Business was really good here 100 years ago. They sellin'em dozens at one point. A pair of 16-foot shafts back around 1905 was \$7, now they're \$175. Some people think that tongin' is more at bay, a thing of the past, something's not going to happen again. But I have people waiting for the governor to open up areas to be rehomed in. Watermen are just waiting to buy germinations, he said. We have a pretty good reputation, which is considered the best pliers in the bay, but they are also the only ones in the bay, he said laughing. As long as someone tongin', I'll make a tong shaft. Someone's going to buy them one day, maybe. Information from: The Daily Times of Salisbury, Md. www.delmarvanow.com (Copyright 2012 by The Associated Press. All rights reserved.) Booked.)

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