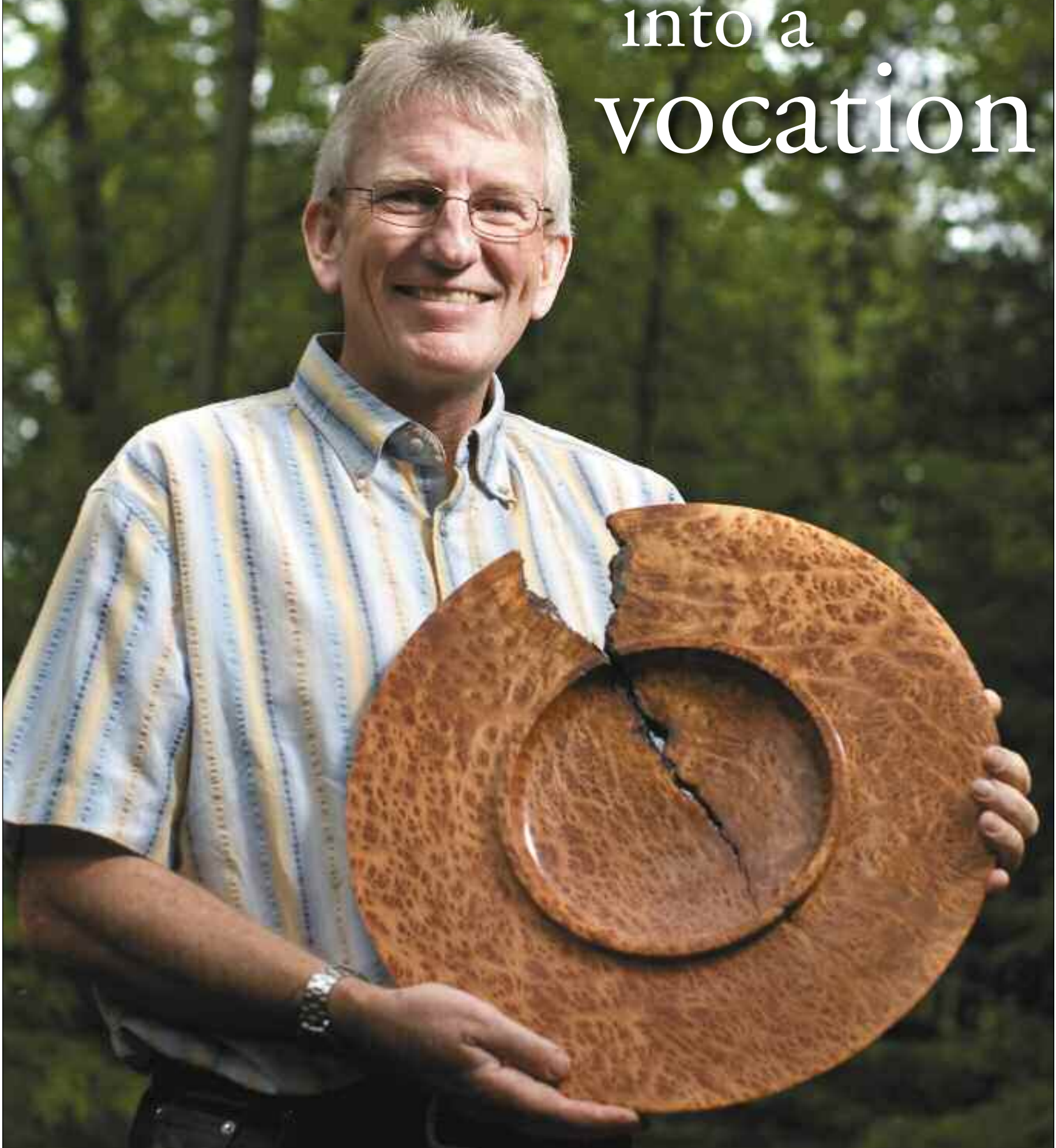


# Turning a hobby into a vocation



**Article and photographs  
by Scott Turnbull**

Some of Brian Markham's most vivid childhood memories come from regular trips to visit his grandfather's wood shop in Niagara Falls. After the long train ride from Toronto, Markham would spend hour upon hour in the shop, watching and learning as his granddad would turn rough wood on his lathe into beautiful lamps and furniture. At the age of eight, Markham made his first baseball bat, an enviable accomplishment for an eight-year-old.

Dreams of both professional baseball playing and woodturning were put aside as Markham pursued a successful career in dentistry and started a family in Georgetown. After his two sons were born, Markham decided to again try his hand at woodturning, purchasing a small lathe and setting up shop in his suburban basement.

After about 15 years of mostly puttering, Markham decided to get serious about his hobby, turning a variety of woods into functional but artistic bowls and platters. As with many endeavours, the quality of the finished product depends significantly on the equipment used, and for wood turners, the lathe that gets them salivating is the Oneway.

"It was about 10 years ago that I realized the lathe I needed was a Oneway," says Markham. "It's an absolutely amazing machine – when I got it, the ability to produce what I wanted was suddenly realized."

Manufactured in Stratford, Ont., Oneways are the Cadillacs, or better yet, the Bentleys, of lathes. Custom fitted to their users, the gargantuan machines – Markham's weighs about 1,800 pounds – are exceptional because of the lack of vibration they produce, even when rotating huge blocks of wood at high speed. For the fine work of a wood turner, the lack of vibration can mean the difference between success and failure with a delicate piece.

Although he was still a full-time dentist, the acquisition of the new lathe allowed Markham to fully explore his creativity in turning rough wood into bowls, platters and one-of-a-kind serving dishes.

"Up until that point I'd been pretty private about my work; it was mostly Christmas presents and other gifts," says Markham, explaining that his wife, Karen, was – and remains – his biggest supporter. "Although I was second-guessing myself constantly, Karen urged me to enter some work into juried art shows. When I did, I couldn't believe how well it was received."

After a gallery owner asked Markham to show his work in her space, sales took off, and Markham found himself balancing his "day job"



**Cherry salad bowls wait for finishing inside Brian Markham's shop (above). He holds one of his creations, a redwood burl platter (opposite page). A dentist by trade, Markham fell in love with turning wood and decided to devote himself to his art.**

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Brian Markham shapes a maple burl on his lathe, using a guard to support the chisel (top). He has rack upon rack of wood clamps in his shop (above).

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of dentistry with his work in his basement.

"I thought to myself, 'How much longer do I want to do dentistry when I really want to do this?'" explains Markham. "I was thinking about wood while I was in the office, and it came to a point where something had to give."

After some serious soul searching, Brian and Karen agreed that "Yes, we can do this," and put their house on the market, sold the dental practice and made plans to move to their cottage of about 20 years on Rebecca Lake, near Huntsville.

The timing was serendipitous.

Shortly after making the decision to move north, Markham was asked to participate in the inaugural season of the Artists of the Limberlost studio tour, a mid-August event that showcases the diverse work of artists along the incredibly long Limberlost Road, east of Huntsville off Highway 60.

With a house on the market in Georgetown and a household in transition, Markham realized that the only way to finish enough work for the tour was to move the 1,800-lb. lathe up to Muskoka and spend every weekend from April to August last year working in his purpose-built wood shop at the cottage.

"Having the tour ahead was a pretty big incentive," says Markham. "I tried to make seven or eight pieces each weekend, even though I had no idea if anyone was going to come."

On the morning of the studio tour, 20 minutes after the official opening, Markham was worried that he had worked so hard for nothing. Then

the cars began to trickle down the driveway.

"At one point in the day, you literally couldn't move in my shop," recounts Markham. "I remember one lady came in, saw the crowd and put the first big salad bowl she saw under her arm, walking around with it until she was ready to go. She was worried there wouldn't be anything left if she waited!"

After the somewhat frantic experience of his first tour, Markham is fully prepared for both tours he will participate in this year.

His shop, built a few years before he made the permanent move to Muskoka, functions as both workshop and gallery, and the finished pieces amidst the raw wood, sawdust and machinery give the visitor special insight into the process of creation that takes place there.

"Every piece of wood is different, and the kind I love most is burl," says Markham, explaining that burl is a growth on a side of a tree, akin to a tumour, that interrupts the regular growth pattern of a tree and results in a peculiar and uniquely figured piece of wood. "I first look at the imperfections of the burl, then incorporate them into the plan for the work."

Using either purchased burl or those he's harvested himself from trees around Rebecca Lake, Markham's favourite burls to work with are maple and redwood, but he also creates in yellow birch, oak, cherry and walnut, along with more exotic woods like bubinga, cocobolo, wenge, olive and mahogany.

First ensuring the wood is dry, a process that



Each one of Brian Markham's bowls are unique since every piece of wood is unique. He especially loves working with burls and often incorporates bark into his pieces.

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Markham holds a walnut plank which will be transformed in his wood shop.

takes at least two years, Markham then cuts it to a rough shape with a band saw. From there, the wood goes to the lathe, where Markham uses incredibly sharp chisels to give shape to the wood as it spins in place. Alternately turning the front and back of the piece by mounting the wood on the lathe with a series of special chucks, Markham realizes his planned shape bit by bit, changing the size and shape of chisel to get the shape he desires.

Because of the delicate nature of the burl wood, catastrophe is always waiting, as a misplaced chisel could suddenly destroy an impossibly delicate piece. Markham loves to use bark inclusions in his work – streaks of bark that have improbably grown through the heart of a burl – but such inclusions make the wood exceptionally fragile.

After a piece is completed and sanded to perfect smoothness on the lathe, Markham uses his own specially-blended tung oil to finish the wood and make it food safe.

“I usually apply about four to five coats, which brings out the colour and grain of the wood and protects it,” says Markham. “Even though this is a piece of art you’re holding, you can put a salad on it and present it beautifully.”

As his production and sales continue to grow, Markham says he’s confident his art will never transform into a production line, no matter how popular.

“Last year on the tour, I had someone ask if I could make six identical salad bowls for them, and I said ‘No,’” says Markham. “Later, another

guy came in and picked out six salad bowls that were all different, all one-of-a-kind. Because the wood is so different, everything I make is naturally going to be unique.”

Spending about six hours a day in his shop, Markham still finds time to relax and do “cottage things” at the lakeside spot that has become his home. Although he usually starts his day with a fresh burl at the lathe, he is also an avid cyclist, meeting regularly with a group of enthusiasts for road rides, and he says that he still gets out in the boat to fish once in a while too.

Looking back on his journey from dentist to woodworker, Markham sees echoes of his grandfather’s life. A hobbyist woodworker and full-time superintendent of parks in the Niagara region, Markham’s grandfather became a full-time woodworker after retiring, making weaving looms from scratch for residents of old age homes across Ontario.

“His hobby turned into a vocation, and I’ve repeated the cycle,” says Markham. “I think I even have that first baseball bat I ever made down in the boathouse somewhere.”

Although he still practices dentistry a few days a month in Huntsville to keep up with his original profession, Markham is irrevocably infatuated with his newfound job.

“There certainly is something in wood turning that gives me something I never found in dentistry,” says Markham. “I never lost track of time when I was in the office – in the shop a day can go by in an hour.”

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