

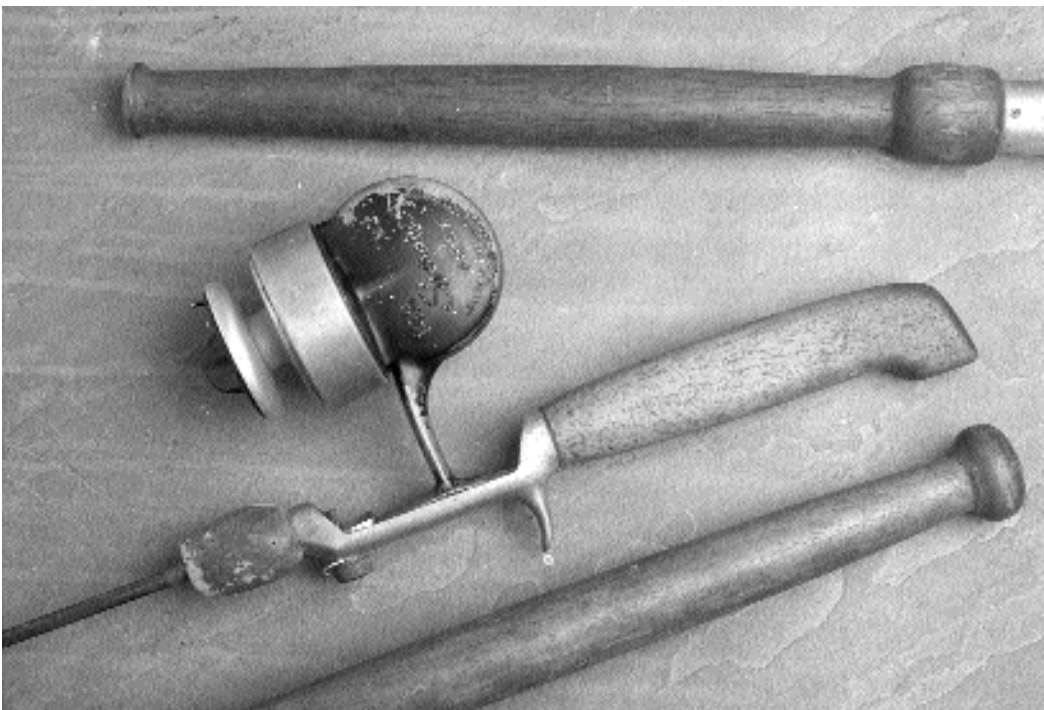
ADVENTURES WITH WOOD

creating unique handles for custom rods

Both of my grandfathers fished, my dad fished, and I fish. All three of these great men have passed away and my mother has moved out of her home. When we were clearing out the house anything that had to do with fishing, of course, my brothers insisted came my way. I got three old rods that at the time I thought

were pretty much just junk, but being “family history” I kept them.

A few years later I took up rod building and found the Rodbuilding.org site. I was impressed with the designs being created with cork handles on the photo page and the articles in RodMaker magazine on using different gasket materials in the construction of cork handles. After



story by Ray Jergensen
photos by Les Jergensen

many frustrating attempts to duplicate some of what I have seen with cork, one day I happened across these old rods and guess what? All three have wood handles. I can work with wood, I love working with wood. If they used wood to make handles for fishing rods in my Granddad’s time, why not give it a try? Thus the journey began and with time I spiced it up a bit. What if you want to do this with cork? I’ll give you the way at the end of the article.

On March 8, 2004 I posted a picture at www.rodbuilding.org's photo site of a grip I'd made quite some time earlier. It was actually a plan B grip. Neither my design critic (Wife) nor myself really liked it that well so I never posted it. My kids thought it was neat, but what do kids know? A friend of mine (Michael Abraham) saw it and commented that he liked it so I put it up. Within 24 hours it had 400 views and 20 comments, most asking, "how did you do that." I have to admit that I was amazed. I guess it says a lot about my wife and my taste!! The worst thing is that our kids got to say, "I told you so." Then Tom asked me to do an article on this and I really knew I had no taste!

First Grips

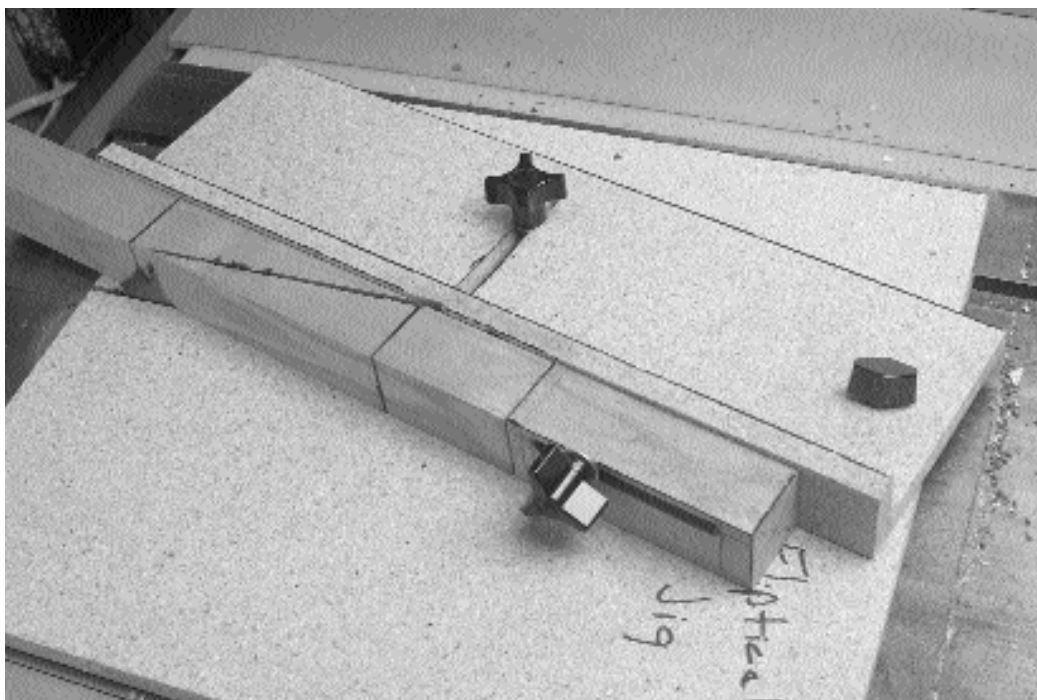
My first wood grips were solid woods, nothing fancy. I got the basics down and then started figuring out how to do the decorative things seen on the photo page and now in this magazine.

There are inherent differences in working with wood and cork. Cork comes to us rod builders as round stock which when glued together forms a cylinder. Wood comes flat. My first few attempts at this were to cut a circle and use procedures as you would with cork. These weren't too successful. So on to plan B. We have to make the wood square and then into a cylinder. Wood is also harder than cork so different tools and techniques are needed. The key to getting consistent tight joints is in the jigs that you build. My first drafts of this article had all the details of how to make these. When I got done with it I thought, "This belongs in a woodworking magazine, not rod building." So back to plan B, again. The complete plans are available for free and I'll gladly give you the details on how to get them at the end of the article.

Inlays

Any inlay that you do is just a process of laminating 2 or more pieces of material together. In a sense, our cork grips are a series of 1/2" inlays. We normally try to make small pieces look like one single piece. With wood we're working with larger pieces and therefore not as many glue joints. We start with one piece and cut it up to get the contrasts.

So how did I do the handle with the elliptical inlay? It's quite simple, in reality. When I first came up with the idea, I didn't know what it would end up looking like, for sure. It was just an experiment with some scrap stuff I had lying around. The block I used was



1&1/2" square and about 10" long. What ever this was going to turn out looking like, I figured it would look best if the trim ended a ways from each end. I built a real crude jig to hold it as I ran it through the saw at what ended up being about a 12° angle. I am now on my 4th version of this jig. The first time, I put in one contrasting piece of

wood about a 1/4" thick. From that I learned that as the glue-up proceeded and the additional pieces of wood were added, the blank actually grew, it got longer. Due to that, the starting and stopping points of the inserts weren't all the same. This is because the width of the saw blade (material removed) is less than 1/4". This isn't all bad, it gives a random pattern. If you want a consistent starting and stopping point it gets a little more involved.

The process is to make a cut at the angle you've decided on, cut the inlay strips, glue the strips and the original block together

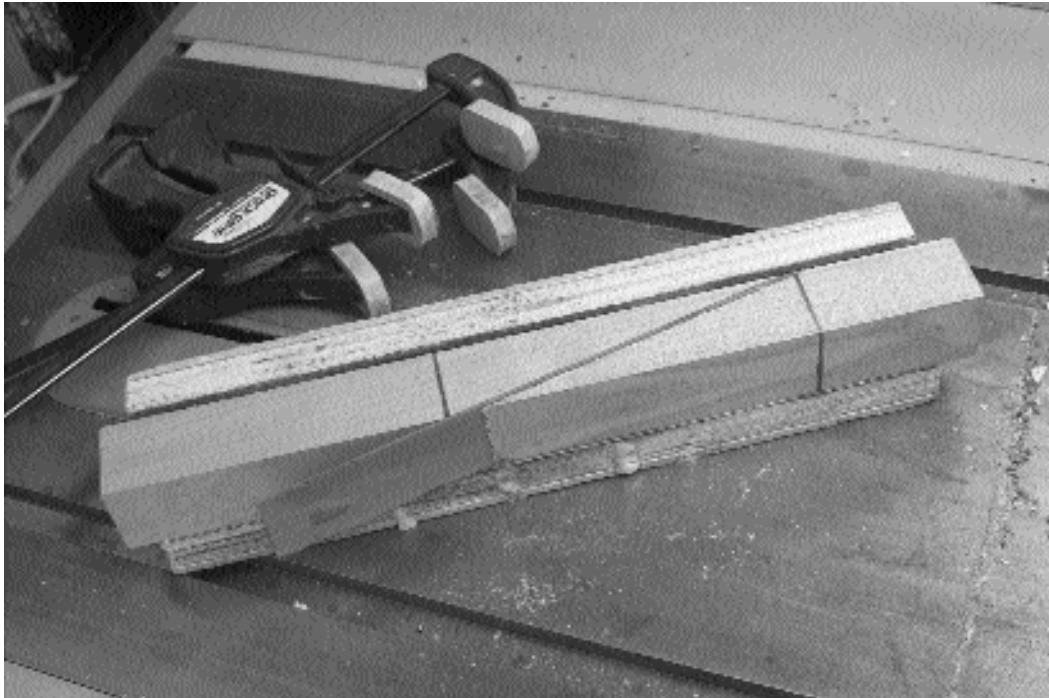
and after the glue has dried cut it all again on a different side. Repeat the process until you've cut, inserted, and glued all 4 sides of the block. What you end up with is a square block that looks pretty uninteresting.

It's when you start turning the square into a cylinder that the pattern begins to come clear. I'm not an expert wood turner by any means, but with a little practice and a little tutoring turning a cylinder is not hard.

The Tools

The tool I made my jigs for will be different than yours - you've got to build your own to get the tolerances needed for your joints, at least until someone would see a big enough market to design these jigs to be adaptable to all of the different machines out there.

Another tool that I have started to employ is the computer. Deciding which types (colors, grain, etc) of wood look good together drove me nuts. I got a computer program that allows me to change to different types of wood "virtually" on whatever element that I choose. It's much easier, cheaper, and faster to see what the final result will look like. I haven't done it yet, but the same system could be used for thread colors and combinations on wraps as well. There is a learning curve to the software and an investment of time in "changing out" the woods, but it's so much faster than actually making the piece just to find out you don't like it and making a new one.



Suitability of Wood

I've heard and read various questions about the suitability of wood when used for grips. After extensive work with wood as a material for rod grips, I've formed a few opinions which I'll now share with you.

- Wood grips are no more slippery than cork.

- Wood doesn't weigh substantially more than cork and can actually help in the balance of the rod. Just depends on how you set the rod up. Cork and graphite inserts can be incorporated to reduce weight where needed. My tests show that a wood grip with a graphite insert on a fly rod weighed 1/4 oz more than cork.

- Wood grips take no more care to keep looking "new" than cork grips. It's just that we don't keep our cork grips looking new until they look really bad.

- Wood adds a beauty and warmth that you can't get from cork or other products out there for grip materials.

- With proper care any wood grip should last as long as your rod. Here are some hints to taking care of an all or partial wood grip.

*Don't store the rod butt down in a bucket of water.

*Don't leave your rod lying in the bottom of your swamped boat.

*Don't use your rod grip as a hammer to pound on your knife while opening a can of beans because you forgot to bring an opener.

*Don't use your rod grip as kindling to get shore lunch fire started. (You may be able to salvage it, but it's questionable.)

*If it gets scratched or dinged up, a little sanding, reapply some more finish and it'll be good as new.





Cork Inlays

Ok, so now for those of you who want to try this inlay in cork. I haven't been able to figure out how to hold a round piece of stock "perfect" while I push it through the saw, so let's make it square. I'd suggest you start with a good grade of cork and glue them up on a mandrel. Make a 3 sided box out of wood that is the same length as your glue up and slightly bigger in width. Wax the inside of all of these pieces and screw them together. Let's assume your box is now 1&1/2" square, cut some pieces for end caps big enough that you will be able to screw them onto your box. Drill holes the size of your mandrel, dead center on the opening of the box, in these caps. Fill the 3 sided box about 1/3 full of body putty. Put the end caps for the box on the mandrel and push your cork assembly into the putty. Screw the caps on and fill the rest of the cavity up with more body putty. Make sure to level the top of this and if needed flatten it off after it has hardened somewhat. Once hardened take the box apart and proceed just like you would do if it were a wooden block, inserting whatever material you want for the insert. The body putty will melt away pretty quickly with a coarse grit sandpaper (36), and once it's gone, shape your cork grip as usual. I also tried this using expanding foam. It did work, but I think I'll go back to the body putty if I do another one.

Whether your grip is all wood or just has some wood elements in

it, the wood will truly set the rod off as "custom" when you're on the lake or stream. 🎣

Ray may be contacted at 1107 12th St. SE Spencer, IA 51301, 712-580-2666, or via his website at:

http://classiccustumwood.com/build_your_own.htm

Plans for the jig are available for download there. Ray will also accept e-mail inquiries at ccw@classiccustumwood.com. He says he'll be happy to send detailed instructions on how to make the jigs as well as the process to build the grip. He'll also include some pictures and measured drawings to further help.