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LOCAL NEWS

Man and machines

By Sally Applegate / Correspondent
Wednesday, July 23, 2003

Dick Boucher makes machines from scratch

Dick Boucher haunts the auctions, visits machine shops that are changing locations and even does a bit of swapping. What does he get in return? He gets a home workshop full of amazing machines.

On a July afternoon, he showed off his prize possession, an old milling machine two friends helped him convert to computer operation. Now he uses it to build just about any miniature railroad part he needs to use in pursuit of his lifelong hobby. As the machine went through its routine, the blue line showing its activity traced itself on the computer screen.

Boucher found the \$200,000 machine when he visited a machine shop that was moving.

"It is one of the original, first generation, punch-tape-controlled milling machines," Boucher said. "They said I could have it for free if I could move it out of their shop, so I ended up paying \$12,000 to get a \$200,000 machine.

"I move these machines myself. It keeps me thinking about *not* moving them."





Boucher expects to remain at the West Main Street home he shares with his wife Bea, and the ponderously heavy machines will remain with him.

Two of Boucher's friends from the New England Model Engineering Society, Steve Peters and Ron Ginger, helped Boucher with the electronics of converting the old milling machine to the computer age.

"They figured out the electronics," Boucher said. "I built the chassis and mounted my components. We did it just for the curiosity of the thing. The most expensive part is \$165. A similar part would be \$1,500 in a commercial machine. My software runs on the Windows platform. While the machine is working, I see the tool path on the screen. The great thing about it is, I know how to maintain it."

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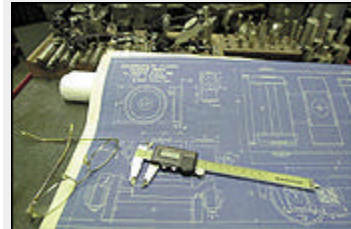
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It's the same old grind for Dick Boucher in his basement workshop on West Main Street.
(Staff photos by Toni Carolina)



A model 1840s drill press built by Dick Boucher at a scale of one inch to one foot stands near a miniature train chassis he's restoring.



Plans, calipers and specially ground glass reading devices litter Dick Boucher's workshop.



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Droids in rehab

Another machine came from an auction.

"All the small machine shops were going under, and I went to the auctions," Boucher said. "This one Monarch 10EE lathe cost \$10,000 new in 1964, and \$85,000 in 1998. I bid \$100, someone bid \$125, I bid \$150, he dropped out, and I owned the machine. It is really in very good shape, and does very accurate work for me. Monarch Machine Company in Sidney, Ohio, built it in 1941."

Boucher said all his machines have served for years in industry. Hobbyists like Boucher are going out, buying old machines, giving them tender loving care and getting them running again.

Boucher has the training to make the most of these rehabilitated machines. He started in the sheet metal department of the Haverhill Trade School on Wingate Street, graduating in 1960. After graduation he spent two years as a draftsman at Western Electric, but found it too confining. He took a toolmaker apprentice course at Western Electric, graduated in 1966, and has been working in the metal trades ever since.

Now he uses his drafting, sheet metal and machine shop experience to craft tools and make miniature railroad parts as he builds, rebuilds and repairs miniature railroad engines.

Boucher met his wife Beatrice Surrette at a dance at Lake Winnepesaukee, and "It was kind of like love at first sight. I was 19 and she was 17." The couple married four years later, and they still love to dance together, which they sometimes do at Georgetown's free Sunday concerts. They have two sons, Peter and Michael, a daughter Suzanne and two grandchildren.

Dances with devices

He studied business administration at Northeastern and Suffolk universities, and at Northern Essex, but decided it was a waste of his time.

"The jobs I could have eventually done at Western Electric, once I got my degree, paid less than what I was already earning there as a machinist," Boucher said. "I spent my whole working life at Western Electric. It was one of the best jobs in the valley for years."

Boucher worked in four separate shops during his years with the company. He built tools and dies for punch presses in one shop, and built entire machines in the second shop.

"This was more interesting," Boucher said. "We built entire machines. Things moved. Things happened. The machine design section sent us drawings, and we

The machinist looks up from his work on a replica of Boston and Maine locomotive to remind an onlooker that looking up from such work "is a good way to lose a finger."










A magnifying glass aids in polishing the brass handle of a pocket knife.



Dick Boucher makes metal make sense in his basement workshop on West Main Street.

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built the parts and the machines."

After working in the third shop building electronic test sets, he moved on to a fourth shop and built the first models of Bell Lab's new products as engineers came up with them.

"I did the drawings for the BellBoy, an early pager," Boucher said. "Motorola beat us to it. The last job I worked on was a last ditch attempt by the company to keep ahead of the competition in radio communication as fiber optics was coming in. I could get the machines to do the work we needed. I could put the engineers' thoughts right into the machines. The company gave me an award for the work I did on that job.

"I retired from Western Electric at age 48, in 1990. I left industry in a disillusioned state. It seemed like the company was falling apart. I was in one of the earlier groups to take early retirement. I left 30 years to the day I started there."

Boucher spent the next two years substitute teaching at Whittier Vocational Technical School in Haverhill during the winters.

"I taught everything - carpentry, plumbing, electrician courses, history and graphic arts," Boucher said "I wore a shirt, tie, and cardigan, and the kids called me Mr. Belvedere." Mr. Belvedere was the portly butler played on TV by Christopher Hewett.

Canobie Lake Casey

Boucher wore denim bib overalls and an engineer's cap for his summer job, running the miniature steam train at Canobie Lake Park.

"I was up there with all these young college kids who'd been handpicked for their personalities," Boucher said. "It was real therapy for me, those two years."

Boucher was ready to return to industry after that, and spent six years working at Harold Roeder's L.W. Bills Company as a machinist.

He ventured into private enterprise next, starting a machine shop in Plaistow, N.H, with two friends in 1998. One was Jerry Bretton, a longtime friend from Western Electric, and the other was Bruce Chapman, who had his own welding, fabricating shop.

"By the time we got organized, the economy collapsed," Boucher said. "There was no more work. Machine shops went under rapidly. I came home. I was the lucky one. I had a pension.

"In 2000, I looked for employment and hit low wages and age discrimination. They said I was overqualified or I would be too slow; I decided to just work around home - painting, working in the yard, chopping firewood and snow blowing."

He also plays guitar, and is the youngest member of The Strummers, a group that plays old-time and ragtime music from the 1930s and '40s.

Now he has time for his lifelong passion for miniature railroading. Boucher plays classical music and old radio shows as he uses his well-equipped machine shop to build model railroad parts and other odd miniatures, including a working miniature drill press. He built a steam engine with a real coal firebox that creates real steam to run on. He has built a narrow gage railroad work car, the Fairmont Speeder. He is building a large copper and brass railroad engine.

Boucher looked fondly around his home shop at all his bargain machines.

"That's the whole history of this room - a deal, a deal, a deal," Boucher said. "It took years to collect it, and there's some swapping that went on too."

Boucher has one final amazing machine, a full-sized backhoe. The design is by a man in Pennsylvania, and Boucher found it in an edition of Popular Mechanics.

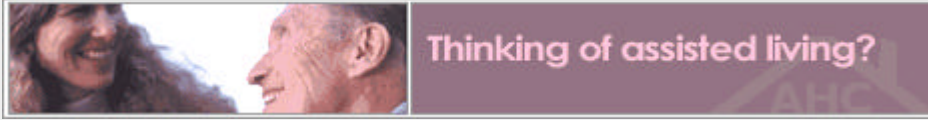
"I thought about it and thought about it, and finally sent for the plan," Boucher said. He built the large backhoe himself, and gets a lot of use out of it.

"Why do I do this?" Boucher said. "I do this because I can't hit a baseball. I can't catch a baseball. I can't hit a golf ball. So I went in this direction. It was just a total blast to build this."

His neighbor Rick Keller made a colorful decal for the backhoe, labeled DLD580EEEE. What's DLD?

"That's Dickie's Little Digger."

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