MAKING A BABY RATTLE — 18th Century Style

by Fred W. Holder

Several years ago I was watching a movie, Australian I believe, where the baby in the family had died. The time period of the movie was the 1800's. The mother was putting away the baby's things and the last thing she laid in the trunk was a wooden baby rattle.

I was inspired by the brief glimpse of that rattle and had to try my hand at it. Although my memory was a bit fuzzy, I believe the rattles that I now make very closely resemble that rattle.

Anyway, my first attempts were not too great because I had never before made a loose ring. I broke a number of rings. A number of them were not too round. Some of them were real rough. If you try something enough times, pretty soon it become easier and your end product gets a little better. I always had problems with the bottom of the ring. They never were as round as I would like. Even though I wasn't real happy with these rattles, they were well accepted by my grandchildren and even a few customers.

Some time later Sorby introduced their beading tools. I ordered a full set of five of these in hopes that they would improve my beads. They did. I tried using the beading tool to make the top of the ring. This made a nice round top on my rings, but it didn't help the bottom of the rings on my baby rattles at all.

Finally, Robert Sorby introduced their Ring Cutting Tools. I immediately purchased a 1/4 inch set and a 3/ 8 inch set. I haven't used the 3/8 inch set very much, but the 1/4 inch set is just right for the baby rattles that I make. Almost immediately my loose rings took on a more complete and professional look. What do you know! The bottoms of the rings were round too! I've lost track of how many loose rings I've cut now and it gets easier all of the time. I might add, get careless and you break the ring. I still do that occasionally.

As the title says, we're going to make a baby rattle so let's chuck up a piece of wood. I've used about every type of hardwood that I get a chance at: maple, apple, cherry, walnut, yew, birch, etc. (The harder and closer grained the wood, the better the ring cutting tools work.) The rattle made during the photographic session for this article was made from a chunk of plum wood. The wood had been curing for about 10 years, so it was very dry. Slightly wet wood turn more easily, but this worked just fine. I recommend that you use slightly wet wood to make your first few baby rattles. It just works easier.

The lathe used for this project is my Teknatool Nova DVR 3000. The wood was turned round and to a size to fit the Super Nova2 chuck on my lathe, see Figure 1.

Figure 1. Here the wood has been turned round and to about 1-1/2" in diameter.

I begin by reducing the stock to about 1-1/4 to 1-1/2 inch in diameter. I never measure it but they just seem to come out about that size. I make a vee cut with the skew close to the tailstock, but far enough away so that there will not be a problem with the center hole winding up in the end of the rattle. Don't cut this vee too deep right now. Another vee is now made to the left of the first one about 5/8 inch center to center. This vee is the beginning of the recess where the rings will slide freely to rattle. Cut this a bit deeper, about 3/8 inch deep should do the job. See Figure 2.

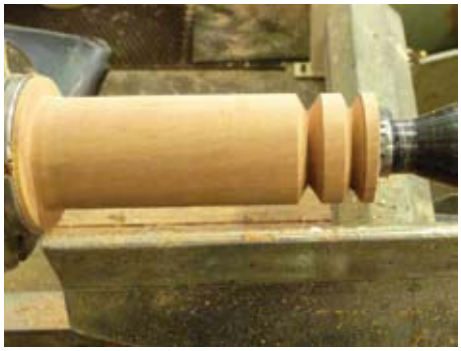

Figure 2. Two V-cuts have been made near the tailstock. The space in between the cuts will define the knob on the end for teething.

Now, take the 1/4 inch beading tool and cut a bead. The right side of the tool should just cut into your vee. I've found it works best if you gently rock the tool handle from side to side. This tool is basically a scraper so it should be tipped slightly downward also. Don't try to cut too heavily or you may break out pieces of your ring. I generally cut in with the beading tool until the

[Continued on Page 26]

Baby Rattle Continued from Page 25

ring has just cleaned up. See Figure 3. The only sharpening you need to do on the beading tool is to hone the top face. You should never grind the other parts that were ground to shape at the factory.

Figure 3. Here the top of the ring to be has been cut with the Sorby beading tool.

The skew chisel is used to widen the space on each side of the bead. You need a 3/8 to 1/2 inch wide vee on either side of the bead. I generally cut straight in on either side of the bead with the long point of the skew. It doesn't really matter which side of the bead you attack with the ring cutting tools first. I've developed the habit of cutting on the right side first and then cutting the ring loose with the left side tool. It takes a little practice to use these tools. A steady hand and a little care is all that's needed. You don't have to be a great woodturner to cut a very acceptable loose ring with these tools. The instructions that came with the ring cutting tools said you can cut rings without using the beading tool first, but I've found my rings are better when the beading tool is used to cut the top.

Figure 4. Here the ring is nearly cut loose. I finally cut the ring loose with the tool on the left side of the ring.

From the Woodcraft catalog, here are the instructions for cutting a loose ring:

(1) cut a bead with a beading tool,
(2) cut to depth beside the bead with a parting tool,
(3) use the right ring tool to cut the rear right of the ring,
(4) use the left ring tool to cut the rear left of the ring, which will also separate the ring.

Once the ring is loose, I take a 3/8 inch spindle gouge and make the recess deeper to allow the ring to float freely.

Make a second loose ring with the right hand side of the beading tool just cutting into the vee on the left side of the ring recess. (See Figure 5.) This is done in exactly the same manner as the first ring. Use the 1/ 4 inch spindle gouge to clean up and size the bottom of the ring recess. I generally cut this down to about 1/2 to 3/8 inch in diameter. Again its not critical, no need to size specifically.

Using the skew chisel, I cut a vee about 1/2 inch to the left of the ring recess and another one about one inch further to the left to define the far left dimension of the rattle, also the end of the handle. Form a bead between the handle and the ring recess. Make this bead smaller than the ring diameters, but larger than the inside diameter of the rings, you don't want them to slip off.

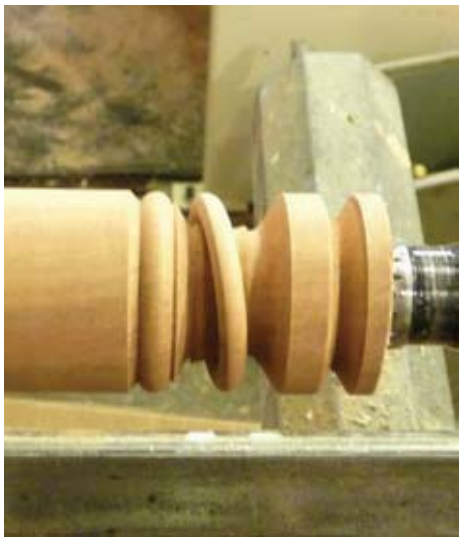

Figure 5. Starting the second loose ring.

Form the handle and put in two decorative vee cuts with the skew. At this time I cut the vee at the end of the handle down to about 1/4 inch. I then shift to the far right side and turn the piece between the first vee cut and the ring recess into a pleasing knob shape. Babies like to cut their teeth on this knob, at least my grandson used his for that purpose. Again leave about 1/4 inch of material on the right end, also. (See Figure 6.)

Now, you can sand the rattle. I generally don't go finer than 280 or 320 grit or a fine grit as some sand papers are marked. Remember, this is going into a baby's mouth and, if they are cutting teeth, it will not be smooth for very long. I personally

find them more attractive if they aren't too highly polished.

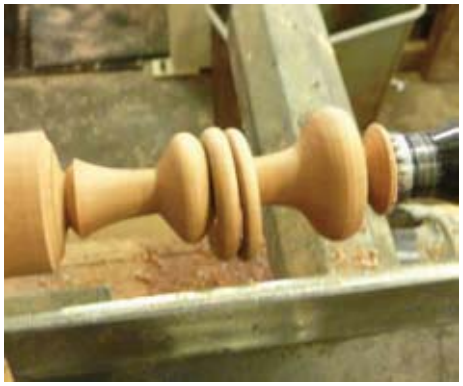

Figure 6. Here the piece is pretty much ready for sanding.

Figure 7. The Robert Sorby tools used in this project: (top to bottom) Right hand side tool, beading tool, and left hand side tool.

After I'm satisfied with the sanding job, I cut the vee's at each end down to about 1/8 inch, just enough to still hold everything together. I prefer to separate the rattle from the rest of the spindle with a knife or saw. I use a knife to pare off the excess and then hand sand to smooth each end.

Add a coat of non-toxic oil and you have a completed rattle. I used the Mahoney Walnut Oil finish, which works very well. The finished baby rattle is not too large, but it meets the minimum size requirement for baby toys.

This completes the making of the rattle, but perhaps you would like a few specifications on the Sorby tools used to make this little item. I purchased my tools from Woodcraft, but I believe several other suppliers also carry these tools. The beading tools are available in five sizes from Woodcraft: 1/8, 3/16, 1/4, 5/ 16, and 3/8 inch diameter beads. The blade length is 4-1/2 inches and the ash handles measure 6-1/2 inches in length, giving an overall tool length of about 11 inches. These tools allow the making of excellent beads with much less skill and experience required. I like them because they're faster and repeatable. A bead made with the Sorby beading tool will always be near perfect if care is used in the cutting process. The prices vary on these tools depending on size, but the set of five tools sold for $97.50 in Woodcraft's 1996 catalog. If you have problems cutting consistent quality beads, these tools should help solve your problem.

Figure 8. The finished baby rattle. Now ready to ship to my customer.

The ring cutting tools come in sets of right and left tool. For making baby rattles, I recommend the 1/4" tools. The blades are five inches long and the ash handle is 8-3/4 inches in length, making a respectably long tool. The tools come with full instructions for use. Even if you're an expert turner, I believe these ring cutting tools are a worthwhile addition to your turning tools, if for no other reason than speed. I can complete a loose ring with these tools while I'm thinking about it using only a skew chisel.

Note: In its original form, this article was published in the October 1996 issue of More Woodturning. It has been updated here.