

# Wooden Cowboy Hat

A TEXAS TURNER TRAVELS “DOWN UNDER”  
TO FIND THE PERFECT CHAPEAU.

**F**rom the time I turned my first bowl over 40 years ago I've been captivated by the spiritual nature of creating art on the lathe. I met many talented woodturners during the '70s and '80s, when I taught woodworking in Sydney, Australia, but at the time, I didn't take the initiative to learn from them. Big mistake! Woodturning was about to experience phenomenal innovation and tremendous growth, and Australian woodturners and manufacturers were to be enormously influential. When I returned to visit Australia in 2002, the advances in techniques and equipment were so dramatic, I felt as if I was discovering woodturning for the first time.

Guilio Marcolongo is one of the Australian wood-

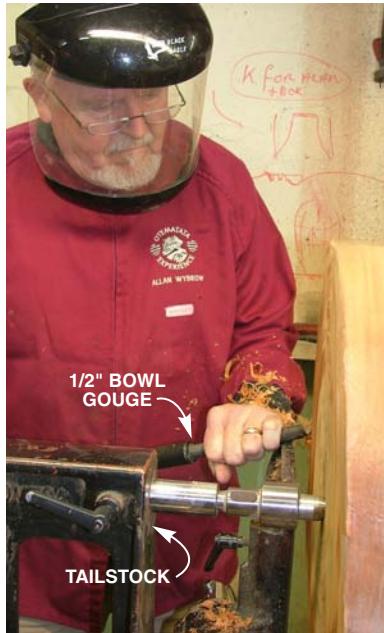
turners who inspired me and helped develop my turning skills. When I visited his shop last year, a striking wooden cowboy hat caught my eye. Being from Texas, I had to have one of my own, and without hesitation, Guilio agreed to teach me how to turn one. Guilio explained that he had learned the technique a few years earlier from JoHannes Michelson, during an American Association of Woodturners symposium at which they both were demonstrating. JoHannes, of Vermont ([www.woodhat.com](http://www.woodhat.com)), is one of America's two premier hat-turners. Chris Ramsey of Kentucky ([www.knot-head.com](http://www.knot-head.com)) is the other. This is the story of *my* hat-turning experience.



**1** My hat starts out as a green wood, 100-lb. slab of Australian Coastal Banksia, a gift from my instructor, Guilio Marcolongo. The first step is to establish the hat's crown and brim diameters.



**2** A slab of this size and weight requires a heavy-duty lathe. I attach a faceplate so I can mount the slab on the headstock. Eventually, the area around the faceplate will be hollowed out to fit over my head.



**3** I discover that "facing off" (leveling) the end of that huge hunk of wet, spinning wood takes nerves of steel. The rough, unbalanced slab requires support from the tailstock as well as the headstock.



**4** As I true the edge of the blank, I'm amazed how difficult it is to keep the gouge steady. Turning a slab of this size and mass is challenging, to say the least!



**5** This project requires razor-sharp tools, so I stop often to resharpen. I'm feeling more comfortable now, because the rough turning is completed and the blank is balanced. The brim and crown are just starting to take shape.



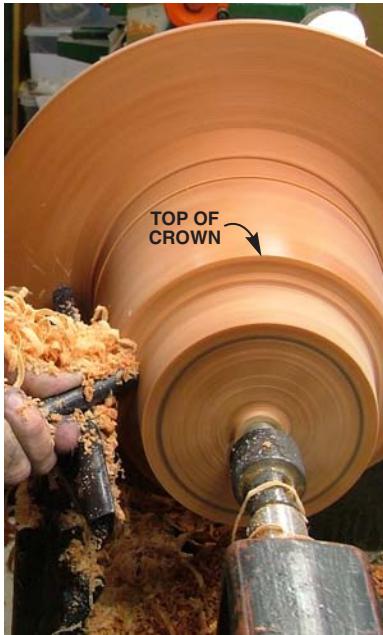
**6** Guilio measures for my hat size. Since our heads are oval, he measures the length and width of my head and applies those numbers to a hat size-calculating formula to determine the appropriate size.



**7** Now the curly shavings begin to slice off like butter. Water liberated from the green wood runs down my bowl gouge onto my arm and feet. Waterproof clothing, Guilio says, is fashionable attire for green-wood turners.



**8** Nearing the final shape, we pause to measure the crown, making allowance for the final inside size. Hat-turning may be an art, but it's an art that requires precise measuring. Specialty calipers make this task easier.



**9** After thinning the brim to 3/8 in., I establish the top of the crown and begin to turn down the waste to create a tenon. When the hat is remounted to hollow out the crown, a four-jaw chuck will grip the tenon.



**10** Once the dovetail-shaped tenon is correctly sized, I remove the tailstock support and pare away the nib. Thus far, my only turning tool has been a 1/2 in. bowl gouge with a modified fingernail grind.



**11** I switch to a rounded skew to shape the crown and smooth the transition to the brim. You can clearly see the raised hatband.



**12** Brushing on a mixture of steel wool dissolved in apple cider vinegar creates the ebonized hatband. When the ferrous-rich mixture contacts tannin in the wood, the band turns black almost immediately.



**13** A texturing wheel fitted onto a homemade handle creates a unique “woven” texture on the blackened hatband.



**14** To finish the brim and hollow the crown, the hat must be turned around and remounted, while remaining perfectly centered. The four-jaw chuck centers the top end by gripping the dovetailed tenon, Guilio explains; at the other end, a cone center mounted in the tailstock centers the faceplate.



**15** With the brim thinned to just over 1 mm, we remove the faceplate and tailstock. Wall thickness near the brim must be reduced quickly now, as the brim is starting to dry out. To keep the wood moist, we continuously spray the hat with water.



**16** Wet wood is translucent, so bright light stationed behind makes it easy to establish uniform thickness across the rim. Using a very sharp bowl gouge, I simply “turn to the color” of the desired thickness.



**17** With the rim at final thickness, I turn my attention to removing the waste from the center of the crown. I’ve returned to the 1/2 in. bowl gouge and positioned the tool rest inside the cavity for maximum support.

**18** I’ve moved the light to the side of the hat and turned the crown’s wall thickness “to color,” as before. The end result is approximately 1 mm (3/64”) thick.





TAILSTOCK CENTER

JAM CHUCK

**19** I've reoriented the hat again to finish the crown. The hat is mounted on a "jam chuck," a foam-cushioned wooden block shaped to fit inside the crown. The tailstock center presses the hat against the jam chuck.



**20** A light inside the jam chuck allows me to achieve uniform thickness while I create the outside rim and domed center of the crown's top. This is delicate work!



**21** Light sanding readies the hat for its final shaping, which is done off the lathe. When the hat is thoroughly dry, it will weigh about eight ounces, over 99 lbs. less than the original blank.



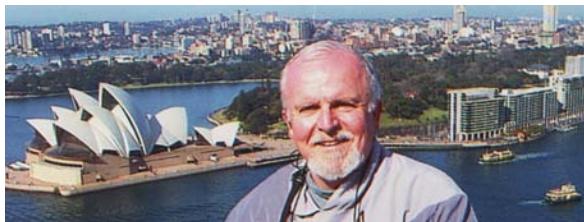
**22** Removing the finished hat from the jam chuck is harrowing. The wood has shrunk during the process and I'm afraid one wrong tap will cause irreparable damage.



**23** Tightening the threaded rod on a homemade bending jig compresses the hat into an oval shape that matches the measurements we took of my head. Our continuous re-wetting of the hat during the turning process has kept it pliable.



**24** Installing heavy rubber bands gradually bends and shapes the brim. The threaded rod has to be adjusted occasionally to maintain the correct front-to-back and side-to-side measurements. Is my head too big now?



Working with wood has taken me to many parts of the world. From the American Midwest and Southwest, to West and Central Africa, to the sunburnt Australian outback, I have been blessed to meet and study with amazing woodworkers and experience a vast array of exotic wood species. Ray Lanham [www.coeur-de-larbre.com](http://www.coeur-de-larbre.com)



**25** I can hardly believe I did it! The hat stays in the bending form until it is thoroughly dry—about 150 hours, according to Guilio. Still to come are final sanding and multiple coats of wipe-on polyurethane.