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American Association of Woodturners

The Oliver Machine Company

Muscle machines from 1903 to 1999
By Alan Lacer



Are you looking for a lathe with a little more oomph than your midi lathe? Maybe the 62-foot Oliver 18-A pictured above would fill the bill. Or perhaps you could drop a towering Oliver faceplate lathe—capable of 100"-diameter work—into your basement shop before turning your next bowl.

If you remember life before personal computers and VCRs, perhaps you even turned at an Oliver lathe in your high school shop. The familiar Oliver logo was once the dominant player in millwork shops, trade schools, and industrial technology shops across the U.S.

So reliable were its products that it was said that the biggest problem the Oliver sales force faced was selling a second Oliver machine: Oliver tools just kept running. In fact, George Paes, an Oliver district salesman and AAW member, remembers a light-hearted offer: A bonus awaited him if he could find a paint that would dissolve an Oliver machine after 20 years of service.

Consider these industry-leading features from Oliver:

- Gargantuan lathes weighing up to a rock-steady 5 tons (Model 22AC)
- A telescoping bed lathe (Model 26AC) that slid from 8½ feet between centers when closed, and opened up to 16 feet
- An 8"-portable lathe, a forerunner to today's popular small lathes
- Premium Timken tapered roller bearings
- In 1904, introduction of an electronic four-speed lathe
- Mechanical variable speed changes with pulley diameters (introduced before 1920)
- Infinitely variable AC system that allowed any speed between 600 and 3600 rpm, available in the 1920s.

Midwest roots

Oliver Company had a storied history in Grand Rapids, MI. Its roots go back to 1890 when Joe Oliver started making miter trimmers under the American Machinery Co. name. In 1903, the name was changed to "Oliver" to avoid confusion with the American Wood Working Machinery Co. of Rochester, NY.

In its hey day, Oliver produced diverse products including electric glue pots, planer/jointer knives and safety heads (to replace the square heads that were the norm), shapers, tablesaws, jointers, tenoners, mortisers, sanders, jig saws, grinders, handscrew clamps, and vises. The Oliver catalog listed metal lathes, metal spinning lathes, and of course, wood lathes of all types.

By 1994, the company estimated it had produced over 150,000 machines, with at least half that number still in use on a weekly basis. At one time Oliver had branch offices in New York City, Chicago, St. Louis, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Seattle, Salt Lake City, Denver, and Phoenix. Overseas offices included Manchester, England, and Paris, France.

This company and its products were not just aimed at standard or low-tech operations. It once designed and built a computer-controlled wood lathe to turn large patterns for missile nose cones. Oliver even designed and delivered a specialty bandsaw to