

'TIS THE SEASON

An Easy-to-turn Snowman Ornament

NICK COOK

WITH THE HOLIDAY SEASON upon us, many start thinking about handmade ornaments or decorations.

The possibilities are endless: bells to trees, hollow vessels to miniature birdhouses, snowmen and everything in between. Some of my ornaments are very complicated, but this snowman is very simple. Almost anyone can make it with a little practice and patience. It is also an excellent project to help develop your skills with the skew.

Stock and weight

Weight is a major factor when making ornaments. In fact, the local "Festival of Trees" has restricted ornaments to a maximum of only 2½ ounces. Choose your stock carefully or downsize the ornament to keep the weight down.

I have selected basswood for this snowman ornament. It is both light in weight and in color, so you won't have to paint it. Basswood is also very easy to turn as long as your tools are sharp. Walnut or most any other dark



A flurry of traditional-style ornaments from the turner's shop. The author's decorative paint technique on the snowman also enlivens the pine-tree stoppers.

wood will work well for the top hat.

As a production item that I make to sell, I have found it more productive to make these snowmen two at a time between centers. It saves both time and material, even if you aren't going to sell them. Plus, you can't ever have too many ornaments. I start

with ¾-stock and cut it into squares approximately 1¾ x 1¾-in. Before cutting to length, I set the bandsaw table to 45° and saw the corners from the material. The resulting 8-sided or octagonal shapes are faster and easier to turn. With the bandsaw reset to square, I use a sliding table to cut the basswood stock to 8-in. lengths. The blanks are now ready to turn.

The walnut stock is prepared in the same manner. The final blanks should be about 1½-in. square by 4-to-6-in. long. Even smaller scraps and off-fall from other projects will work fine.

Turning the bodies

I use a ½-in. mini-spur drive and a cup-shaped live center to turn most small-to-medium-sized spindles. This is an ideal combination for these snowmen ornaments.

Mount the blank between centers and position the tool rest just below the centerline. It should be parallel to the stock and about ⅛ in. from the corners. Always rotate the stock by hand to ensure clearance all around before turning the lathe on.



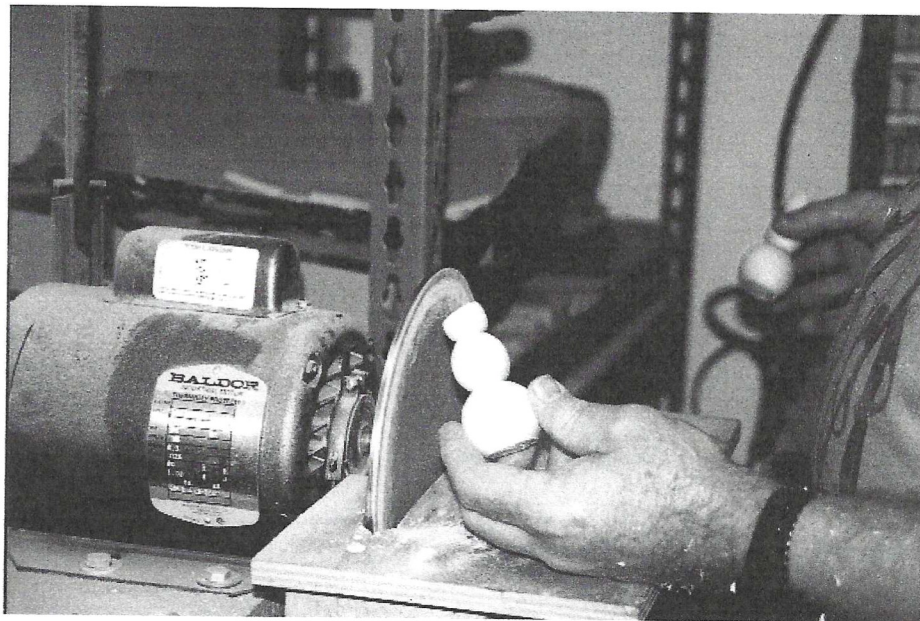
To speed production, Cook turns two snowmen at a time with the blank between centers. The two units are bandsawn apart after being sanded.

Set the lathe speed at approximately 2000 RPM and start the machine. You can use a large roughing gouge at first, if you like, but a large skew is a better choice. I prefer the 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ -in. oval skew. Using this tool on a wood as soft as basswood is not only fun, but it also helps to build confidence and skill with the skew.

Rough turn the blank to a cylinder as large as you can keep it. Measure and mark the blank to lay out the two snowmen. I use a marking gauge or layout tool for marking the three sections of each snowman. This tool is simple to make and will save a lot of time, especially if you are making multiples. I set the tool for the following dimensions. I leave the bottom of the ornament full diameter x 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ -in. long. The middle section is about 1-in.-dia. x 1 $\frac{1}{8}$ -in.-long and the head is $\frac{3}{4}$ -in.-dia. and $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. long.

The gauge is made from a small piece of scrap lumber approximately 10-in.-long and two-to-three-in. wide. Measure and mark the gauge where you will make cuts in the turning blank. Use small brads nailed into the edge of the gauge and cut off the heads with wire cutters to leave sharp ends on the brads. You may need to tap the ends of the brads to make them the same length for marking the blank. You are ready to mark the basswood blank.

I use a $\frac{3}{8}$ -in. bedan tool to cut about half way through the material at the center of the blank to separate the two ornaments. With layout lines in place, I use either the $\frac{3}{8}$ -in. bedan or $\frac{3}{8}$ -in. parting tool with a turning gate attached to rough down the center section of each snowman to approximately 1 $\frac{1}{8}$ in. Next turn down the outer ends of each to $\frac{3}{4}$ -in.-dia. You can use a separate parting tool with another turning gate or just use the same one and turn down past the gate to approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. You should now have two halves cut to three different diameters each.



After the snowmen are sawn apart, angle the top of each on a sander, so the hat will sit at a festive angle.

Now comes the fun part, turning the three segments into beads. This is where you learn to use the skew. I prefer the $\frac{3}{8}$ -in. round skew for this, but most any style of skew will work. The round profile makes rolling a bead very easy. First take the long point of the skew and cut straight down the side of each segment. Then make a second cut at each point to produce a half of a "V". This will give you room to roll each of the beads. You may or may not want to mark the center of each bead with a pencil line. This can help in making each of the beads uniform.

Lay the flat of the bevel on the centerline and roll the skew in each direction to produce a well-rounded bead of each segment. Take care not to get in a hurry. Several lighter cuts work much better than trying to take it in one heavier cut. It will also help in building your confidence.

Once all six beads have been turned and the intersections are crisp "V's", you are ready to sand the surface. Clean cuts on basswood should allow you to sand with 180-or-220-grit sandpaper. Anything heavier will

leave scratches. Use a small parting tool to cut down each end of the blank and at the center. Remove the blank from the lathe and finish cutting with the bandsaw or a handsaw.

With the two ornaments separated, you can now sand the ends of each. Use a belt or disk sander with 60-or-80-grit sandpaper to sand the bottom of each piece flat. Sand the top or head of each snowman at a slight angle to make his hat tip to one side.

Turning the top hat

Place the walnut blank in a scroll chuck. Use a skew or gouge to rough the blank to a cylinder approximately 1-in.-dia. Trim the exposed end of the blank to a slight dome with a skew or small spindle gouge. Measure back about 1 in. and make a parting cut with a thin parting tool about half way through the blank. Use a small skew to shape the top hat and brim. Sand with 180-grit sandpaper and part off the top hat. Use the belt or disk sander to make the bottom of the hat flat. The hat is ready to attach to the basswood snowman. Use a drop or two of Cyanoacrylate glue and



The author can turn a series of hats from a single block held in a chuck. Above, he prepares to catch a hat as he slices it free.

carefully center the hat on the head of the snowman. It is now ready for the finishing touches.

Finishing the ornament

Once assembled, spray the ornament with a clear sanding sealer before applying any other decoration.

This will keep any additional finish from bleeding into the wood. Next I add the scarf. I use $\frac{1}{8}$ - or $\frac{3}{16}$ -in. satin ribbon available from most any fabric or craft supply store. I like dark green and red. I cut it into lengths of about 4-to-5-in. to make it easier to tie and handle. Any shorter and it is almost

impossible to work with. I tie the ribbon around the neck of the snowman and put a drop of CA glue on the knot to keep it from coming apart. I then cut off the excess ribbon with scissors and tack the ends down with tacky glue. It is also available in fabric and craft stores. Apply it to the ribbon with the end of a toothpick to avoid getting too much. Allow the tacky glue to set before proceeding.

After the tacky glue is dry, you may now work on the buttons, eyes, nose and mouth. I use Puff paint for all but the mouth. It too is available in fabric and craft stores in most any color. It is polymer paint and comes in an applicator bottle. Simply cut the tip and it is ready to apply. Squeeze the bottle with tip at the point you wish to leave a dot and pull the tip up from the surface. It will leave a small lump of paint. Black works well for eyes, buttons and even the nose if you like. Orange is a good choice if you want the nose to look like a carrot. You can use the same paint to decorate wine stoppers and other projects.

For the mouth, I use an indelible fine tip magic marker such as the Sharpie. Four or five dots in an arch gives the snowman a big smile. Put the ornaments aside to allow to dry before proceeding. After the paint has dried, I apply a coat of clear satin lacquer to seal the final product.

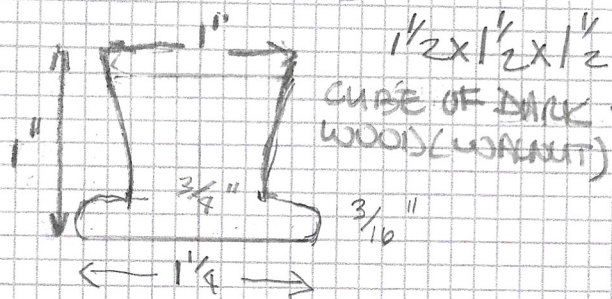
The only thing left is a screw eye for hanging the ornament. I use tiny silver or brass colored eyes. I drill a pilot hole at the drill press to make sure it goes in straight. Make sure you center the hole on the body of the ornament and not the top hat since it is at an angle. This would cause the ornament to hang at an angle. These make great stocking stuffers, tree ornaments or decorations of holiday packages. Happy Holidays.

Nick Cook is a writer, teacher and professional turner in Marietta, GA. Photos by Cathy Wike-Cook

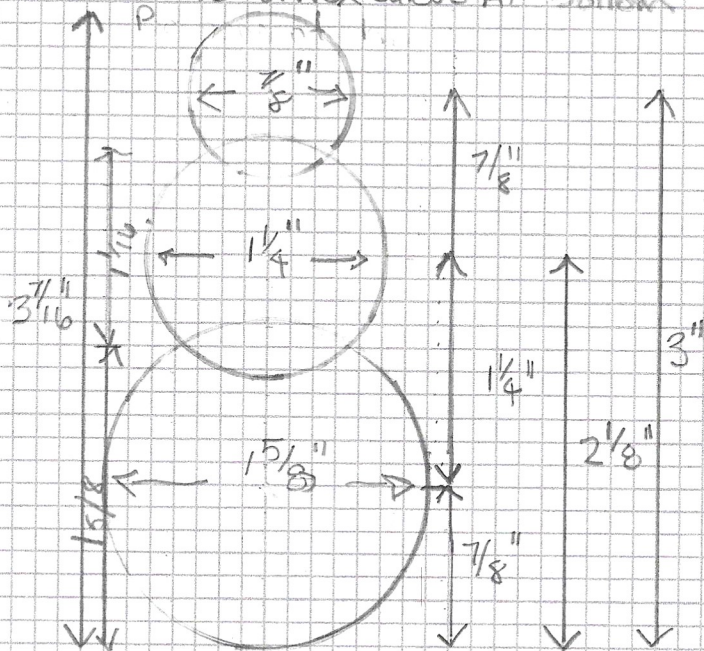


Buttons, eyes, nose and mouth are created with polymer paint which dries proud of the surface. Other accents can be added with permanent markers.

CHRISTMAS SNOWMAN I

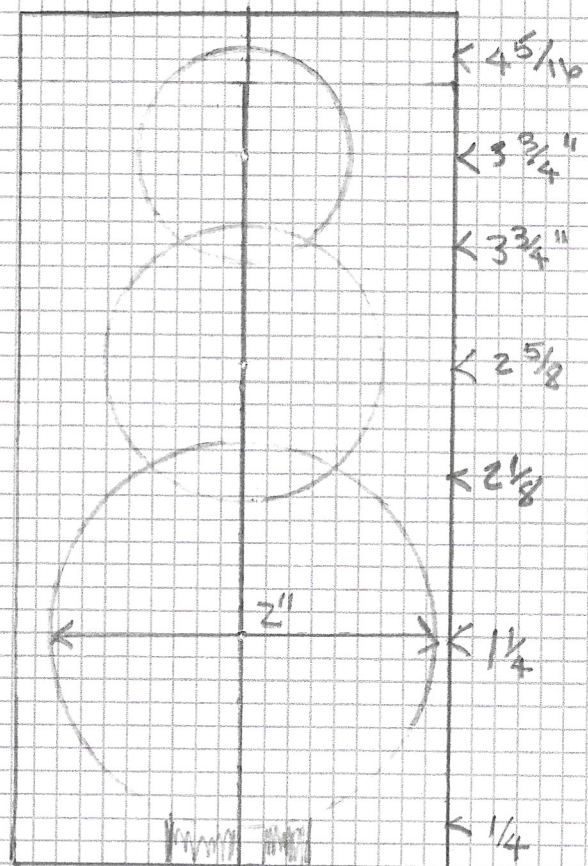
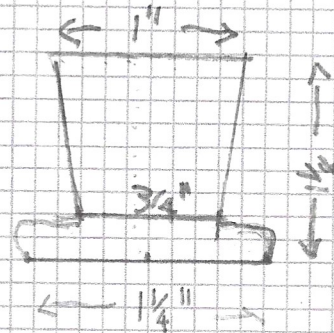


- (1) TURN PROFILE AS SHOWN
- (2) DRILL 1/16" HOLE FOR EYELET
- (3) PART OFF W/ PARTING TOOL, LEAVE CONVEX CURVE AT BOTTOM



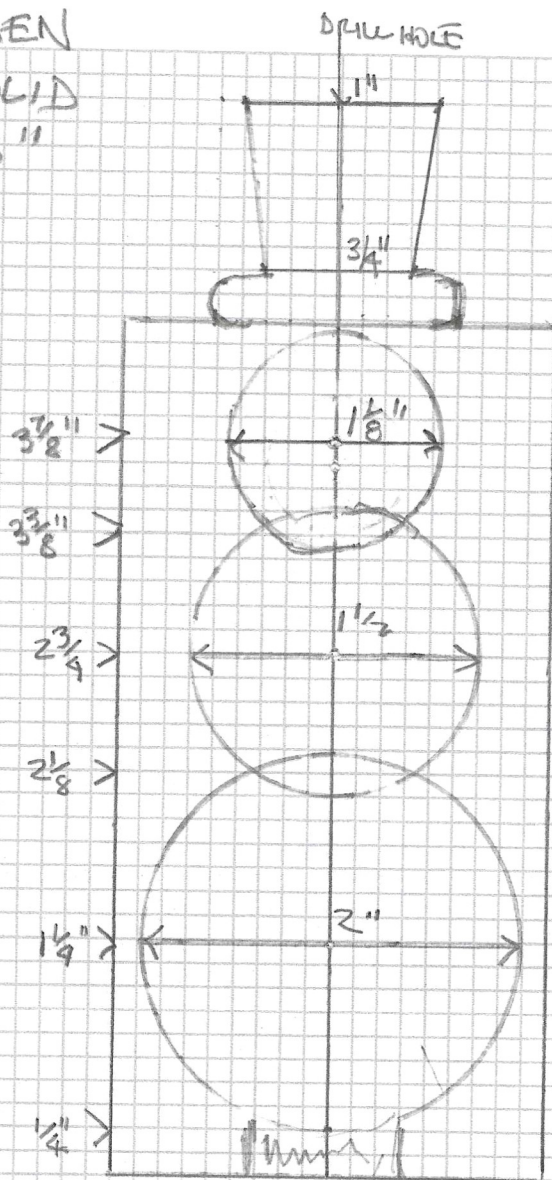
- (1) 2" x 2" x 4" (POPULAR/BASSWOOD)
- (2) TURN TO CYLINDER WITH DOVETAIL FOR CLIP (CAN USE LIVE CENTER)
- (3) PARTING TOOL TO DIAMETER OF EACH BALL
- (4) TURN EACH BALL ROUND (SPINDLE GAUGE, SKEW)
- (5) PART OFF; OR JUST SAND BOTTOM FLAT ON DISK SANDER
- (6) SAND TOP BALL FLAT FOR HAT
- (7) SPRAY PAINT WHITE / DECORATE FACE & SHIRT

CHRISTMAS SNOWMAN II (SLIGHTLY BIGGER) VERSION OF I



2 1/8 x 2 1/8 x 4 1/2

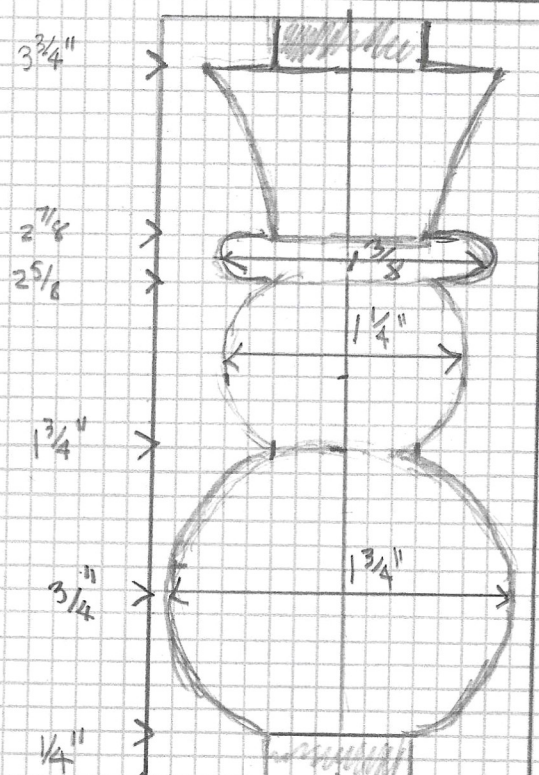
2 SNOWMEN FROM SOLID "BLOCKS"



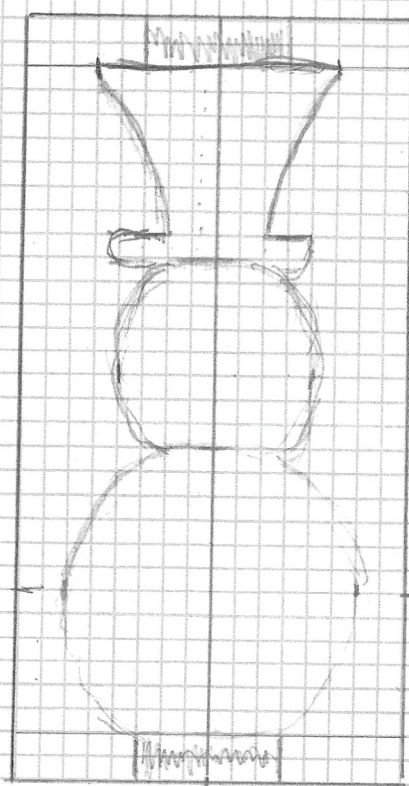
HAT $1\frac{1}{2} \times 1\frac{1}{2} \times 1\frac{1}{2}$
Body $2\frac{1}{8} \times 2\frac{1}{8} \times 4$

HAT + BODY GLUED
BEFORE TURNING

TURN TO DIMENSIONS
WITH SPINDLE GAUGE
CLEAN UP BEIM & TOP
OF HAT WITH A SKEW



2x2x4



2x2x4