

Micro Fence Revealed



Robin Eley *interviews*
Richard Wedler, the
founder of Micro Fence

PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY FROM RICHARD WEDLER

Richard Wedler is the founder of Micro Fence, a company that has contributed much to the woodworking industry. I was fortunate enough to have the opportunity to talk with Richard about the concept and production of a new router accessory.

AR: What prompted you to invent the Micro Fence?

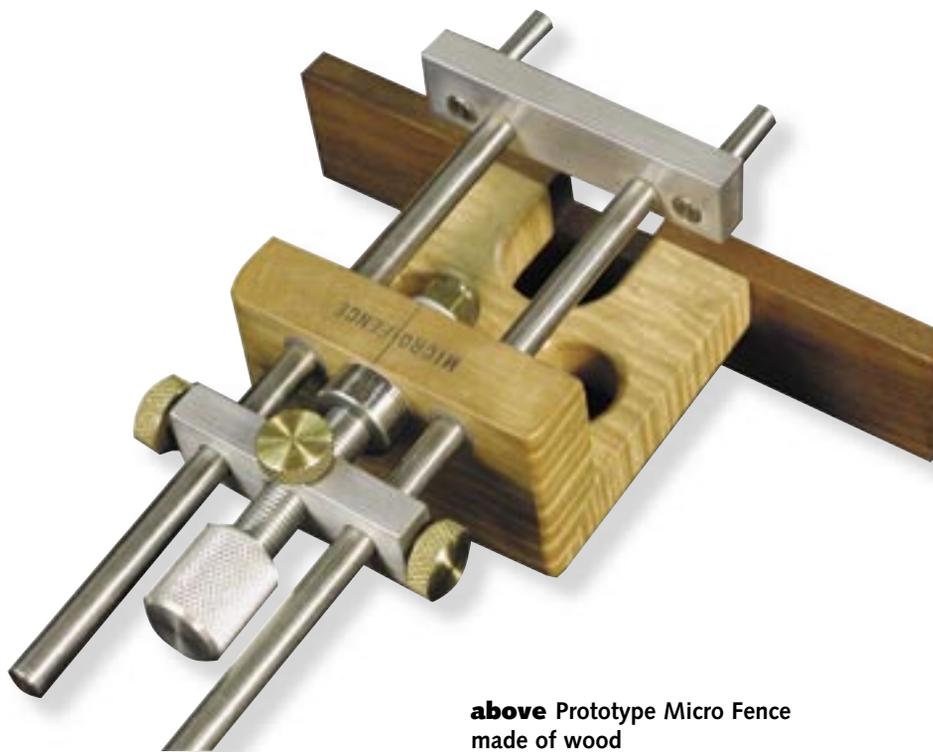
Richard: The routers that we were using at the time had edge-guides were extremely crude, no way to measure or adjust in a repeatable fashion. My father and I both had backgrounds in machine tool trade and when he moved out to California after he retired we started building several things for the shop. One of the things we wanted to improve on was the edge-guide for routers. We wanted to develop a way to measure accurately, and even our initial prototypes were an improvement from what the factories were sending out with routers. So we built and started using the first Micro Fence, actually the first ones were made from wood, and showed it to some woodworkers. We all saw the improvement that it made and got

excited about the idea of offering to others. We gradually worked our way to producing a metal Micro Fence that would be more marketable.

AR: What was involved in the process of registering a patent?

Richard: Initially you have to do a patent search, which we did through a law firm in VA. We found pertinent art, what they call prior art, showed other inventions, with other patents that had been approved for similar types of tools. Because of the expense of filing the patent with the attorney's, which was going to be \$5000 - \$6000, we found a patent agent who was a retired engineer. He

above Prototype Micro Fence made of wood



was well versed in writing patents and had done that with a company he had worked for before retiring. He constructed a patent application with 20 individual claims, and to our surprise all 20 were approved. We got a great patent with very strong coverage. The interesting thing is that a patent does you no good unless you can afford to pursue it and to defend it.

AR: How long did it take to get from concept to production?

Richard: It took about a couple of years, before we premiered the Micro Fence at the AWFS show in Anaheim in 1993, it had so much interest especially from other

manufacturers. I can remember standing at our booth and seeing the yellow shirts come down from DeWalt, blue ones from Makita, the suits from Bosch and Porter Cable. All of them were very curious about it. It was a surprise to us; we had no idea at what our position or value was. We didn't know how people would receive it. It was a pleasant surprise.

AR: What difficulties did you experience going into production?

Richard: Sure, it's a matter of cash flow, you don't just put the word out and all of a sudden you are selling billions of them. Especially at the price point we had to maintain, once we got into production. We did an initial run of 500 pieces and that meant every part in the Micro Fence had to be in quantity of 500. Some were reasonably economical and other pieces you had get in the thousands before you could see any respectable prices. We took a gamble and invested in parts to make at least 500 copies, and of course the initial stage all the specifications you write for the tolerances have to be spelled out explicitly for everything to go together accurately. We found a lot of difficulties in the beginning with the tolerances and the threads, the method of thread production, and even the material types that we used, but we got them resolved fairly quickly. In fact, they were exactly the same as when we started out, except for one dimension we had to make a bit longer.

AR: Was the cost of setting up the production of the Micro Fence more than you expected?



above Latest Micro Fence made of metal



left Richard Wedler explaining the Micro Fence at one of many woodworking shows

right Sample of Richard Wedler's skill as a woodworker



Richard: Absolutely more, you never can foresee everything that is going to come up as you go a long, the particular part was the marketing, taking out magazine ads, it is huge, print ads are exceedingly expensive, and don't produce immediate return, it produced curiosity and exposure, name recognition, but not particularly sales. The cost of production was surprising because we had to get into the cost of packaging, artwork, presentation, and literature. Just everything from top to bottom, had no idea, if I'd known, I might not have started. It is scary.

AR: Once you had your product ready how easy is it to get people to buy it?

Richard: Well, that is a tricky one and still is. Fortunately, as time goes by our reputation gets more widespread; each little Micro Fence is it's only little sale person. Once it gets in someone's hands and that person shows it to someone else there is immediate interest.

We have also been very fortunate over the years and very grateful that the press has received us so well. A level of trust had to be built with the buying public,

our price point is not low so the justification for someone to buy our product had to be explored and altered to fit various user skill levels. Professionals are generally more ready to buy the Micro Fence, as they know they are going to be using it and making money with it. Obviously, the more units that get out there the more popular it becomes, the last couple of years has been a whole lot easier than it ever was. Yeah, it is really getting to be fun.

AR: What is the best and worst experience you have had regarding inventing the Micro Fence?

Richard: The single most? That would be tough, the best thing really is the consumer response, when you go back to a show a year or two later, and people come up to you and tell you this is the best thing they ever bought, it is very rewarding. You know that you have helped them and they appreciate your effort. And in the long run, it has a compounding positive effect, so I take that positively as the best experience. Worst – having to travel so much.