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Making an Antique-style Baby Rattle

by Fred 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. This inspired me to make one with a similar antique look.

I've used about every type of hardwood for these rattles, but I find that the harder and closer-grained the wood, the better the ring cutting tools work. The rattle I made for this article was made from a chunk of plum wood and I used the Robert Sorby 1/4-inch set of ring cutting tools. The wood had been curing for about ten years, so it was very dry. I recommend that you use a slightly more wet wood to make your first few baby rattles--it turns easier. I used my Teknatool Nova DVR 3000 lathe. The wood was turned round and sized 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 “V” 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 “V” too deep right now. Another “V” is now made to the left of the first one about 5/8-inch center to center. This “V” 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 “V”. 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 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.

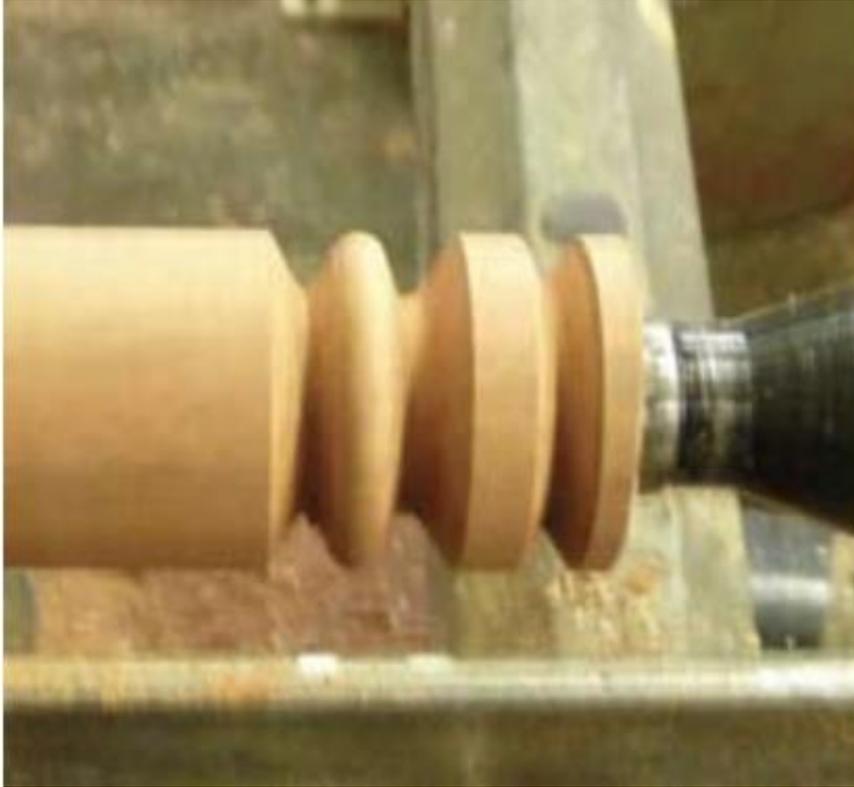


Figure 3. Here the top of the ring-to-be has been cut with the Sorby beading tool.

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 "V" 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.

Here are the instructions for cutting a loose ring (taken from the Woodcraft catalog):

(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 "V" 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 it's not critical, no need to size specifically.

Using the skew chisel, I cut a "V" 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 "V" cuts with the skew. At this time I cut the "V" 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 “V” 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 ¼-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. 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.

After I’m satisfied with the sanding job, I cut the V’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.



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

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.



Figure 8. The finished baby rattle.