

A One-of-a-kind Plating Shop That Specializes In Restoring All Kinds of Metal Antiques

In a world of fast-paced, high-volume finishing, a plating shop in a suburb of Chicago has taken a different approach and found its niche in restoring and refinishing all kinds of antique items made of metal. From restoring door hardware to some of the finest antique lamps, Al Bar Wilmette Platers, Wilmette, IL, is one of the few finishers that serves a diverse group of customers who want to preserve some of the past.

Owner Greg Bettenhausen, who took over the shop from his father, Lee, calls the establishment a “boutique finishing” jobshop. The skills that are preserved there are just as unique as the items that are re-finished.

Wilmette, IL, a suburb of Chicago, is mostly a community with a small-town atmosphere where a lot of professionals live with their families. Established in the 1800s, the community claims a large number of nice older homes. Most of the homes have been, are being, or will be restored by owners. That's where Al Bar Wilmette Platers, located in the middle of this suburb, does its magic for restoring antique hardware and accessories. Although a lot of the refinishing work is done for local homes and businesses, the specialty jobshop, which is one of the top two or three in the U.S. doing this type of plating, receives work from all over the nation. The customer base of the business ranges from New Jersey to Florida, and from the east coast to the west coast.

Al Bar Wilmette Platers itself has a history dating back to the 1800s. Two shops merged—one called Al Bar Platers



Restoring metal antiques is an art. Each item is carefully taken apart. A hand drawing of each piece of the item is made showing where the piece fits when re-assembled.



The shop keeps one of the largest inventories of antique door hardware in the world. These parts are used for restoring older homes.

and another called Wilmette Finishing Labs—so the owners combined the two names. The shop made several moves through the years, and made a transition from a main stream jobshop to a boutique plating shop.

Lee Bettenhausen bought the shop more than 25 years ago. When he decided to retire two years ago, his son Greg was the natural choice to take over the business.



Like everything else in the production area of the plating shop, pretreatment is accomplished by hand. Each piece is treated separately, depending on the type of metal and the type of finish it will receive.



Silver plating antique items such as these is a specialty of the refinishing business at Al Bar Wilmette Platers.

Keeping Family Together

Greg grew up in his father's plating shop. The business has 14 employees, and a number of them have known Greg since he was a child. He considers the staff a family. “Most have worked at the shop for a long time,” Greg said. “They were a part of my family then, so it's a special relationship that I enjoy with all of them.” This relationship makes the working atmosphere at the shop more informal and relaxed. A steady stream of local customers drop off or pick up items to be refinished. The familiar greetings and relaxed talk among the staff and customers enhances the small-town feeling that exists in this specialty finishing shop.

Types of Finishes

Items restored at the shop range from door hardware (a large percentage of the



Greg Bettenhausen, left, and Jim Lindsay, P&SF technical editor, inspect an antique silver candelabrum. Much of the shop's work includes silver plating.



Father and son, Lee (left) and Greg Bettenhausen of Al Bar Wilmette Platers. Lee recently retired and Greg took over ownership of the specialty jobshop.



Greg Bettenhausen holds his daughter, Abigail. She often spends time at the shop just like he did as a child.

business), to lamps and chandeliers. Most items must be taken apart, because different metals and different finishes are treated separately. As items are taken apart, a drawing is made of each part showing where and how each one fits the assembly. When all of the parts have been restored, the item is re-assembled using the drawing as a guide. "It can be tedious," Greg said, "but it works." Some parts are machined to replace worn parts. Sometimes parts require replacing and have to be duplicated. The creative staff usually finds a way to get the job done.

"If it's made of metal, we can probably finish it," said Lee Bettenhausen, who is an expert on metals found in this segment of the plating business. "We finish anything, except aluminum. If we find parts made of aluminum, those are sent out for processing."

Greg says that all plating at the shop is done by hand to customize the finish. The company processes a lot of hardware from the 1800s and early 1900s. Finishes offered include gold, silver, brass, bronze, copper and nickel. The shop also specializes in antique, satin and brush finishes.

Although the shop offers a variety of finishes, silver plating is the finish used

most for restoring household items. Antique candle holders, lighting fixtures, flatware, and tea sets are all examples of items that require a silver finish. Older items are usually easier to work with, and produce a better finish, according to Greg. Newer items sometimes are not easy to refinish because they are made of lesser quality materials. Often, the finishes on these items will require a combination of finishing processes.

The shop also refinishes a lot of hardware for pianos. Some of the work, Greg says, requires carefully hand wiring each screw for finishing.

One of the high-end restoration finishing projects currently underway at the shop is a 1926 Indy car. The trim is mostly nickel-plated, a practice that was common in that era.

Pre-treating Parts For Refinishing

Pre-plate work is accomplished by hand. Different methods are used on various parts, depending on the metal. All metals, however, are treated alike in one way, Greg said. They all are cleaned meticulously prior to plating.



One of the most important areas of refinishing is the buffing and polishing section. This is still considered an art, and long-time employee, James, is one of the industry's best.



The company keeps an extensive inventory of antique lighting fixtures, such as these.

Buffing and polishing is probably the most important function in restoring antique items. "Good buffers and polishers are considered real artists in this aspect of plating," Greg said. "We have some of the best working here. As a matter of fact, one of our long-time employees is probably one of the best in the nation."

Waste Treatment

The shop uses very little water, but it does operate a continuous water treatment system on line that treats three gal/min before discharging to the local POTW. The system is monitored constantly for pH levels and metal content. The shop routinely works with local environmental regulators to ensure it meets or exceeds compliance.

Preparing for the Future

Al Bar Wilmette Platers has grown over the years. A major expansion a few years ago included the installation of a retail department where the public can search for and buy old items that have been purchased and restored for resale. Items in this department include light fixtures, chandeliers, flatware and unique candle holders.

Greg hopes to keep expanding his restoration business. "The restoration market for remodeling older homes, or refinishing family heirlooms, is a growing market," he said. "We're one of a few finishers in the nation that does this kind of work. We can handle jobs from anywhere. Most customers just package up the items and send them to us. When they get them back, they look like new."

Greg thinks that the business can be expanded by offering the service through other shops that do not provide it. "We hope to work with platers all over the country that have customers who need our services," he said. "We're easy to find. Just log onto www.albarwilmette.com." **P&SF**