

# Minnesota Woodturners

## A S S O C I A T I O N

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IN ASSOCIATION WITH THE AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF WOODTURNERS



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**CAROLE MAGNUSON**

Well, we're heading into our fall season. We have three general meetings, one professional demonstrator and the Holiday party lined up for the rest of the year.

We look forward to all of you checking out the details of these events on the website and in the newsletter. Details, hopefully, will be out early and accurately so that we can all plan accordingly.

You may have noticed a change in the format of our "blast" communication to all our members. We have tried to refocus the vast majority of communication to save the "blast" capability to only those items of timely importance. We would appreciate it if you would look to the newsletter, website and website forum for your primary sources of information.

You will be able to find dates, times and places of our meetings, professional demonstrators and hands on events in the newsletter and on the website. Items of broader interest, such as information from the AAW, from local vendors, and functions/invitations of other clubs will be published on the forum.

We will continue to blast out a meeting reminder notification one week prior to the event, as well as things that have a short time frame that have merit to our general membership. We will keep these notices short and to the point.

As you can see, the blast

capability has been redirected to a central email box within the Minnesota Woodturners' Association. That address is mwablast@mnwoodturners.com. This is the address that you should use if you want anything sent out to the general membership.

You also received an email giving you instructions in how to access the forum if you don't have access now. There is also good instruction on the website about how to register. We would encourage you to check it out when you have a minute.

On a new topic...this week I went over to the AAW and met Linda Tacke, the interim executive director. I wanted to introduce us to her and convey our good wishes. I shared with her that we were very anxious to hear about plans for the Symposium in 2011 and look forward to developing our role as the sponsoring "local chapter". She is a very kind and gracious woman. She brings outstanding experience as a transitional leader in the non-profit arena. There is a professional search firm involved in finding a new executive director. That will take time to find just the right person to do the job. In the meantime, we look forward to the 2011 symposium and I look forward to hearing how we can make our volunteer role in that event a true success for everyone. We hope that many of you will reserve time in 2011 to volunteer at the symposium. Thanks to all of you that participated in the picnic. We look forward to our first general meeting after our "summer break". Carole

# SMOKING POTS

## *Fire clouds and other signs of the ancients*

PHIL BRENNION

The Pueblo Indians of the Southwest have made pottery for over two thousand years. Tempered in open fires, many fine examples of this durable, low-fired pottery still exist today. Closely viewed, one of these ancient Pueblo pots conjures thoughts of times past when communal families shared these vessels as one of the central tools of their existence.

Prehistoric Southwest pottery forms offer the woodturner many wonderful opportunities to create unique and timeless pieces in wood. The forms can be found in reference books or studied in exhibits and museums. One of my favorite books is *Historic Pueblo Indian Pottery* by Francis Harlow.

These ancient Pueblo pots wonderfully blend utility and art. In addition, their patinas seem to emit the strongest feeling of time. The subtle earth tones, which include many shades of reds and browns along with the marks of fire spread across the surface, emit that remarkable feel. Many pots also exhibit fire clouds giving evidence to the primitive methods in which the pots were fired. Fire clouds, like the ones shown above, appear as either dark or light blotches on the vessel's surface. These attractive imperfections are formed when the surface of the vessel touches another vessel or a supporting stone while the pots are being engulfed in the smoke and heat of a fire.

Until now, that same ancient patina - complete with fire clouds - has been difficult, if not impossible to emulate in wood. But I recently started experimenting with methods that would give my pre-historic style vessels that ancient look. I found that some of the same methods that Pueblo Indians used centuries ago for firing their pottery can actually be



A group of the author's cottonwood vessels exhibiting the subtle fire cloud pattern and other textures created by flame and smoke.

adapted to create that ancient patina on certain types of wood.

To produce this time-honored coloration on my vessels, I start by turning my bowls from a light-colored wood. Due to its availability in our area, north central Arizona, I usually use cottonwood, but sycamore, ash and box elder also work for this method.

Using light-colored woods allows me to better control the coloration of the vessel's surface. Fire clouds can also be more dramatic on the surface of these lighter woods. I'm able to see the effects of smoke to the lighter wood more quickly and accurately than if I were using darker woods.

I turn the walls of my vessels quite thick, about  $\frac{3}{8}$ -in. Much of the ancient Pueblo pottery had a wall thickness in this range. In addition, this thickness reduces the chances that my turnings will crack during the smoking or smudging process. I try to produce a surface with a minimum of

tool marks by making light cuts with a gouge or shear-scraping with a round-nose scraper. I sand any remaining marks from the surface, usually starting with 120 grit, but never proceeding above 180 grit. I don't want the pores of the wood closed too tightly, or the smoke may not color deep enough into the wood. With the vessel turned and the sanding complete, I'm now ready to start the coloring process.

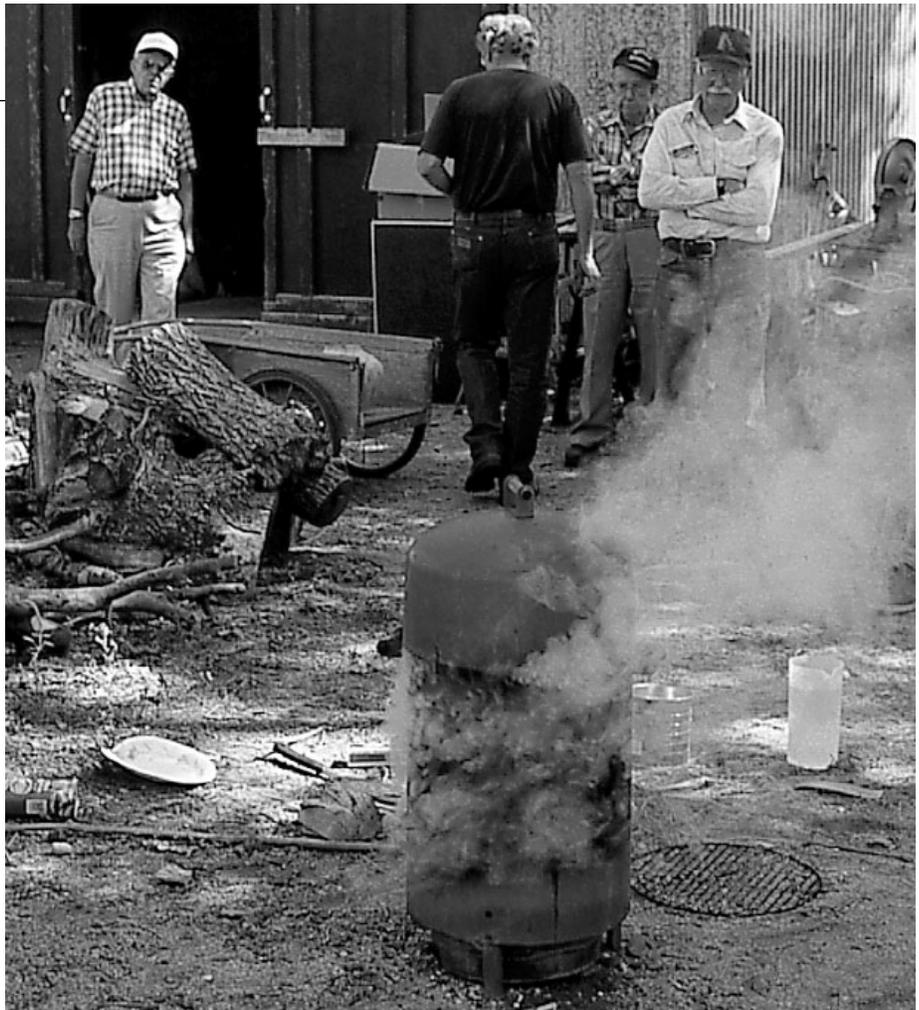
I use a vertical, barrel-type smoker, the kind used for smoking meats and fish. These three-legged cylinders stand about three feet tall and are available at most stores that sell grills and outdoor accessories. The smokers come with two trays, one for holding wood or charcoal for the fuel, and a secondary tray which holds the soaked chips. Grates that are placed above these give easy access to whatever is being smoked. This easy access is a must, because stopping the process by immediately removing the

vessel from the smoke becomes critical to achieving optimum color effect.

I build a fire in the bottom tray using a few pounds of scrap wood from my shop. In the second tray, I place a mixture of one half woodchips that I've soaked in water overnight and one half wood slurry I make the slurry by pouring water into a bucket of sawdust or fine shavings until it has the consistency of oatmeal. I use the sawdust and fine shavings generated from turning the bowl. When the fire in the fuel tray burns down a little, I place the tray with the chips and slurry mixture a few inches above it. There are tabs inside the smoker that hold each tray in place. About 10 inches above the second tray I place the grate that comes with the smoker. This will hold the rocks and my pot. When the wet chips and slurry start to burn, a dense smoke will appear. This may take 10 or 15 minutes, depending upon how wet the mixture is. The intensity of the smoke depends upon such factors as the amount of heat, the type of chips, and the amount of moisture present within the sawdust and soaked chips.

Trial and error are the best way of learning how to regulate the smoke as well as the heat. Since I might have to add fuel to the fire to keep it going, I keep a pitcher of water handy, should the fire become too intense. If this happens, I quench the fire with a little water by pouring it down the inside of the smoker into the fuel tray. I cool it down; I don't put the fire out. Creating a lot of smoke with minimal heat is important, since too much heat may crack even the thickest of bowls. I do my smoking in a very open area, well away from my house and shop. To protect my hands while working in and around the smoker, I wear welding gloves. I use all the normal precautions one would employ while working with a smoker. A safety pamphlet comes with most smokers.

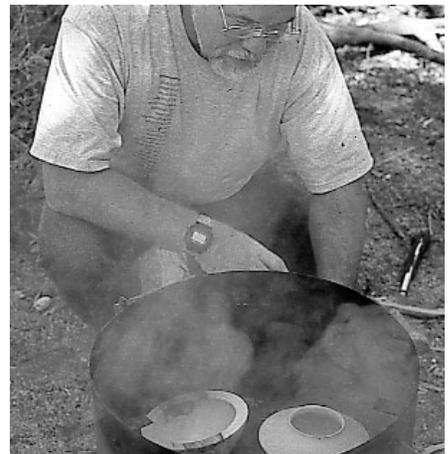
Once an obvious stream of smoke



Cooking up some pots, above, with the Prescott Area Woodturners AAW chapter. At right, AAW member Wayne Wolfe feeds the smoker. Below right, large cottonwood vessel being smoked

starts to appear, I place a few lava rocks, the kind used in a gas barbecue, on the grate. These rocks will support the vessel and help form the fire clouds where they touch the pot's surface. I set my vessel's bottom down on the rocks as shown at right, and put the cover on the smoker. The size of the smoker will dictate how many pots can be smoked at once. The average size smoker (about 14-in. diameter) will accommodate one 12-in. or about three 5-in. vessels.

Once the smoker is smoking steadily for a couple of minutes with the pot inside, I'm ready to add dry-powdered horse or cow manure to the top tray (the one with the slurry.) The manure I use has been aged at





least a year; it's bone dry (the consistency of sawdust) and has no offensive smell. Manure is still used today as one of the main components for firing black Pueblo pottery, most notably the San Ildefonso and Santa Clara types.

When the smoke is coming out steadily around the top of the smoker, I know that the sawdust and soaked chips are starting to burn and it's time to add the manure. I take the top off the smoker and make sure there are no visible flames coming from the fuel tray. Now, I carefully shake the dry manure down the sides of the bowls and through the grate into the smoker tray, to mix with the wet chips and sawdust. A large coffee can about three fourths full is about how much I use. You can shake it from the can easily. I don't worry if a little of the powdered manure gets on the surface of the pots. It can add some interesting effects during the smoking. With the manure added, I put the smoker lid back on and watch the smoke bellow out. I check the pot every few minutes by taking the top off the smoker, as shown on the previous page. It's easy to over-color the pot, as the dense smoke quickly darkens the wood. Once the manure has been added, the smoking process usually takes no more than about 25 minutes. I'm careful not to move the pot until I've attained the desired color. If the pot shifts on the rocks, I might not create the "fire clouds."

When I'm ready to remove the pot from the smoker, I take great care not to touch the surface to avoid smudging the color. To accomplish this, I insert a strong stick into the vessel's

Pine needles, left, are stuffed into a turned pot and then lit, above center. The flames and later the smoke left after the flames die down transform the cottonwood vessel, etching it with delicate patterns and an ancient looking patina.

The finished vessel is shown at right, before being sprayed with Krylon Clear finish to protect the piece and enhance the look of the fire textures.

mouth, usually a two foot branch, about 1-in. diameter is perfect. Then I carefully lift the smoked vessel off the grate and place it on a board to cool. This is the same method the Pueblo Indians have been using for centuries to remove their pots from their kiln fires.

When the vessel has cooled for at least an hour, I'm ready to protect the smoked surface with Krylon Matte Finish. This clear finish is available in a spray can from most art supply stores. It is a clear spray coating used to protect artwork, like pastel drawings, from smudging. Using the stick to lift the pots, I then hold the can of Krylon about 12 inches from the vessel and apply two or three coats over the entire surface. I apply enough coats of Krylon on the surface to reduce the smoke odor and allow the finish to be burnished without marring the patina. This usually takes three or four coats. There will always be a slight smoke odor to the pot, but it seems to dissipate over time.

I don't sand or do anything to the pot's surface between coats of Krylon. When the matte finish is dry, the surface should be smudge-proof. I then lightly burnish the pot with 4/0 steel



wool.

My final step in producing these ancient-looking turnings is to smudge or blacken the interior of the pots. Again, I use a method Native Americans found successful centuries ago to fire their pottery. I completely fill the interior of my pot with pine needles. Packing them in somewhat firmly, I light the pine needles on fire and allow them to burn and char the inside of the vessel as shown above. The flames can be quite intimidating but the fire burns quickly and will usually not crack the pot. After the pine needles have completely burned out (which only takes a couple of minutes), I shake out any loose residue (a little compressed air works wonders) and allow the interior to cool. A final few coats of Krylon on the inside of the vessel seals my smudged pot.

Using this process has allowed me to give collectors bowls with a little bit more of the past.

*Phil Brennon has sculpted and turned wood for galleries for the past 16 years from his farm in Chino Valley, AZ. Before woodturning he built custom furniture.*

# 2010 MWA Picnic



Pictures were submitted by: Todd Williams

## Briefs...

\*\*A new barrel of wood sealer has arrived and going fast. You can get it from Larry McPeck, 763-757-3143, or Bob Jensen 763-587-5600. It is still \$10.00 a gallon.

\*\*The next club meeting has been moved from Sept. 7 to Sept. 14th.

\*\*Carole Magnuson has met with the Minneapolis Park Board in an attempt to obtain part of "The Burr Oak Tree" that is being taken down. If she is successful you will be hearing more on the subject.

\*\*Minnetonka Rockler Woodworking and Hardware is having a customer appreciation sale on Saturday August 21. They will be handing out flyers at the store with coupons for 25% off one item, 15% off in-stock power tools, 10% off ordered power tools, and 25% off all lumber and turning stock. These are only good at the Minnetonka/Ridgedale locations and only on Saturday 8/21/2010.

\*\*The Courage Center is sponsoring a silent auction as part of their 2010 Celebration of Courage. They are looking for donations from us for inclusion in that auction. See the MWABlast of 8/15/10 for more info or contact John Haug.



This is food for turners. A pork tenderloin sandwich I had in Ames Iowa a few months back while visiting my daughter and her family.

## 10 Ideas to Improve Your Woodturning Skills....

1. Turn off the TV and start a project in your shop.
2. Improve your sharpening skills. Ask an experienced club member to work with you or get an instructional video about sharpening.
3. Learn about finishes. You can do this by reading the label on different kinds of finishes for sale at the hardware store. Purchase a few kinds of finish and work with them on sample pieces of wood. When you complete a turning you'll know what options you have for a finish.
4. Use the wood you have. Most of us have a "stockpile" of wood in our shops. Select a piece and get to work. Sometimes I hesitate to use a special piece of wood because I lack confidence and don't want to destroy it. Over the years I've learned this attitude is a mistake. If I ruin a piece of wood I probably have learned something in the process. Plus, I have lots of other wood to start over with.
5. Work in your shop with the idea that you will learn something during each work session. This means your shop time goal is to be a better turner. Satisfaction and improvement should be your main goal, not project results.
6. Look at what is around you for project ideas. Rolling pins, hair clips, salad bowls, jewelry, knobs, tool handles, tops, furniture, baseball bats, fishing lures, etc. Find a turned shape you like and try to copy that shape. Think about what you can do to improve that shape to make it more functional or pleasing to the eye.
7. Go to a club meeting with the intention of meeting several other turners. Gather with these new friends to share ideas and information. Our club is full of skilled turners who want to share information.
8. Make something for show and tell and bring it to the next meeting. Get feedback about it from club members. Accept constructive criticism about your project with an open mind. It's a quick way to improve the quality of what you turn.
9. Practice safety in your shop. Wear a dust mask when you are turning. Wear an organic vapor mask when you are working with wood finishes. To learn more about masks go to the hardware store and read the instructions that are packaged with these products. Always wear eye protection.
10. At the next meeting introduce yourself to club leaders. Volunteer your help to them. Come early to help set-up. Stay late to help clean-up. Write something for the Club newsletter. Offer topic ideas for club meetings. Bring wood for the wood raffle.

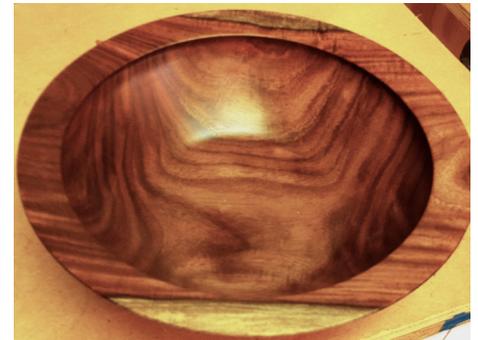
Stay Sharp, TIM HEIL

A Special Thanks To.....

The AAW and **Phil Brennon** for use of the article on smoking Pots.



**Spike Carlsen** for the very interesting excerpt from his book, *In Quest of the World's Most Expensive Board Foot*. Spike is a Stillwater resident.



**Linda Farber**, AAW office Administrator and MWA member Par Excellence for providing us with outstanding content.



# Making Scratch Awls



On most Saturdays a group of us get together at Bob Jensen's shop and go to breakfast at Key's on University Avenue. We usually return to Bob's and talk about turning and other world problems. On July 21st we made scratch awls, following an Alan Lacer article in American Woodworker. It was truly a fun time.

We each brought 1/8", 3/16", and 1/4" drill rod. We cut the metal to length, shaped it, hardened it and tempered it.

Ken Schwichtenberg actually turned handles. The rest of us have that little duty yet.



# Turning Natural Edge Bowls

On Friday June 21st there was a hands-on session turning natural edge bowls. It was a full session and everyone had a great time of it.



*As an experiment I embedded a movie on this page....will it play for you???*

## Getting to know your parting tools

Parting tools are made in two types; diamond and narrow kerf. The diamond is in the top of the photo, narrow kerf is in the center, and a sharpened table knife to work as a parting tool is shown at the bottom of the photo.

The diamond parting tool is wider at the sides and is diamond shaped when viewed head on, this provides clearance when making deeper cuts. The narrow kerf parting tools work great and I highly recommend them! The one shown in the photo is a “Stott” and I no longer see them available. However, Sorby, Henry Taylor, and Crown narrow kerf parting tools are in the craft supplies catalog.

These tools are 1/16” wide and come in handy when you want to make a parting cut without losing too much matching grain, such as lidded boxes.

Table knives can be ground to serve as parting tools, the heavier older knives will tend to have better steel and be more durable. These would work best on small turnings for light cuts. Use the bigger diamond tool for larger turnings and deeper cuts. Old knives can easily be found at garage sales or thrift stores.



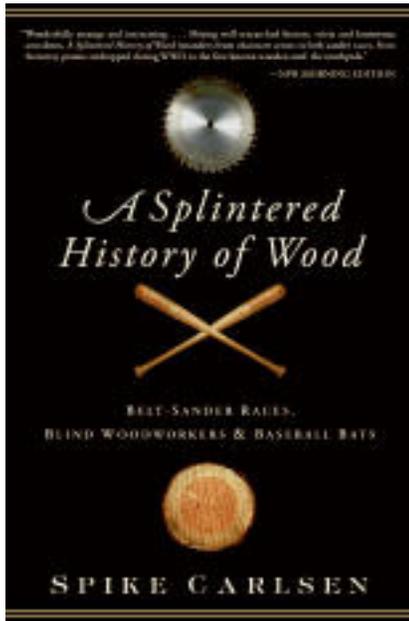
The parting tool may be used for cutting grooves, shoulders, tenons, or for parting off. I find they work best when cutting shoulders by taking tiny bites with the corner of the tool and a final very light cut with the width of the cutting edge.

On spindle work the tool should be presented above center and then raise the handle to cut deeper, on end grain all cuts must be made with the tool horizontal and the cutting edge on center of the turning or a catch will result. The tool is held with the long edge down as shown in the photo. These tools are very easy to sharpen and should be touched up frequently. You will notice I have ground a smaller bevel on the bottom of the tool, this gives the cutting edge more support. Do not attempt to cut turnings in half using parting tools, cut partially through and when you hear the pitch change (which is vibration starting to develop) stop the lathe and finish the cut with a small pull saw, a hack saw works too. By doing this you will prevent the fibers from ripping out at the very center of the turning, don't forget to keep the tool rest close for maximum support!

Questions? Comments?  
WoodmanMN@aol.com  
Or 651-437-2302

## Gallery....





# IN QUEST OF THE WORLD'S MOST EXPEN- SIVE BOARD FOOT

By Spike Carlsen

*This article is an excerpt from A Splintered History of Wood: Belt Sander Races, Blind Woodworkers and Baseball Bats, published by HarperCollins; ISBN 978-0061373572; hard cover (\$24.95) and paperback (\$15.99). Available at at Barnes & Noble, independent bookstores, Amazon.com and other online retailers. More information at [www.asplinteredhistoryofwood.com](http://www.asplinteredhistoryofwood.com)*

Hardwood lumber in the U.S. and Canada is sold by the board foot—a theoretical piece of wood, one inch thick, 12 inches wide and 12 inches long. The boards at your local lumber supplier may be any thickness, size or shape, but when it comes time to tally up how much wood is stacked in the back of your truck or tied to the roof of your car, the formula is: thickness x width (in inches) x length (in feet) divided by 12. That number is next multiplied by the cost per board foot of the wood you've selected; a price that can range anywhere from under a dollar for pine up to—well, just what is the upper limit? I went to find out.

If you're in search of the world's most expensive board foot of lumber, you start at the top; you talk to the King of Cocobolo. But when you locate him, you don't find an exotic, velvet-clad man from some remote Central American country. You find a guy in blue jeans, tennis shoes and a ratty sweater by the name of Mitch Talcove in a dusty shop in Carlsbad, California. His company, Tropical Exotic Hardwoods, has been importing hardwoods from Mexico and other parts of the world since the 70s, and after all these years he still admits, "Just when you think you've seen it all, something will come in hidden in a containerful of logs and you'll think 'Oh my god, nature is messing with my head again.'"

His namesake wood—Cocobolo—is a majestic wood, with the heartwood ranging in color from an imperial

orange to a royal red, and a strength that rules the charts in nearly every category. It's put to majestic uses; often turned, carved, sculpted and inlaid. Much of it winds up as cutlery handles since its density makes it capable of standing up to nearly all forms of culinary abuse, and its natural oiliness allows it to be soaked, washed and rinsed eternally without losing its regal stature.

The King of Cocobolo handles more than cocobolo. Talcove explains that some woods he carries, like snake-wood and pink ivory, are rare, exotic and expensive, but they are commercially available. The rarest woods are those for which there's no regular source; woods like Chittamwood or Smoketree burl from the Deep South which often grows interwoven among granite boulders and must sometimes be dynamited out. "You never know when it's going to be available," says Mitch. "It's a gemstone wood." A gemstone that can cost \$35 per pound.

His most expensive piece of wood? Today it's a slab of true Cuban Mahogany that's 2 inches thick, two feet wide and 12 feet long endowed with a mesmerizing ribbon grain. The tree was uprooted when Hurricane Hugo hit the Carribean. The King of Cocobolo has turned down \$10,000; slightly over \$200 per board foot. If you want it, expect to pay a king's ransom.

There are other kings in the world of exotic lumber, and Sam Talarico of Talarico Hardwoods in Mohton, Pennsyl-

vania is one of them. On his website's, "Wood Porn" section he explains his passion: "There is nothing to compare with the feeling and excitement of opening up a highly figured log and seeing what's inside. We do this every year and I want to share some of these intense moments and very special figured lumber with all my loyal customers and all of you out there are simply turned on by great wood. We choose to call it WOOD PORN which it certainly is to those of us that get the fever when looking at fantastic wood." Scroll through the photos and you find impossible woods: A slab of curly English Walnut the size of a school bus, Volkswagen-size crotches cut from Cairo walnut, a 400 year old English Oak log that's 30 feet long and clear.

He specializes in woods from England, Scotland, France, Germany, Russia, and other parts of Western Europe. He travels, sleuthing out the most spectacular logs, buying them, fumigating them as required by law, wrangling with the myriads of regulations and paperwork before shipping them via container to his yard. Sam is the master of ceremonies when it comes to opening each log, personally studying, plotting and marking each before committing it to the saw; he compares the process to cutting diamonds. He uses a restored Dolmar saw he found in the weeds behind a sawmill in England. It's a gigantic band saw-affair, powered by hydraulics and a

Continued on Page 12

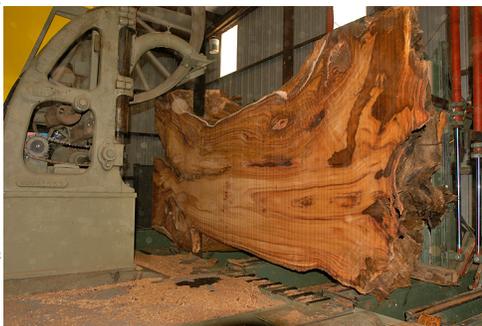
diesel engine capable of cutting slabs up to 8 feet in diameter.

After 35 years in the business, Sam knows exactly which trees are diamonds in the rough and which are saw blade killers. He avoids those growing along fencerows or in backyards that are



more likely to contain nails, horseshoes, metal posts and cement. “One time I found an entire axle from an old wagon inside a log,” he relates. “Someone must have leaned it against a tree two hundred years ago and the tree grew around it.”

He’s “Lumberman to the Stars,” having supplied lumber for furniture built for Tom Hanks, Rene Russo, Charles Schwab and others whose names he can’t reveal due to non-disclosure agreements he’s had to sign. He reminisces about “the perfect oak log” he found in West Virginia in the 70s; four feet in diameter, 60 growth rings per inch, flawless. “Thirty years later and people still talk about that lumber; it was absolutely perfect.” And what’s the rarest, most expensive board foot of wood in Sam’s vault? It’s the highly figured wood from a curly English walnut log he purchased through a Mennonite farmer several years ago. The price tag: \$250 per board foot.



I wind down my search by chatting with Rick Hearne of Hearne Hardwoods. There may be more expensive wood somewhere, but when you find the guy who’s hauled Koa logs from the jungles of Hawaii using helicopters, cut 700 year old burr oak from

England’s Sherwood Forest and stocks over 1 million board feet of lumber ranging from African Anegre to Guatemalan Ziricote, you figure the end of the quest must at least be near.

Hearne stocks Amboyna Burl; a wood that’s given its name not by the tree it comes from, but rather by the cancer that infects the tree. The burl grows only on Padauk and Narra trees. “If you were to talk to exotic wood dealers around the world, this would be on the short list of the five most exotic woods in the world.” His largest specimen—a 275 pound, 3-1/2 inch thick slab, 42 inches by 48

inches—will set you back \$110 per board foot or a total of 5 grand, but still not close to his most expensive offering.

His ancient bog oak—a wood that’s chocolate on the outside and sunburst on the inside—is another rare offering. In the 1800s a reservoir in Austria was built and the area was flooded. Five years ago they drained the reservoir and while dredging it deeper, found white oak trees that have since been carbon-dated by the University of Salzburg as being 4500 to 5000 years old. Buying one is a game of chance. You tell them how many you want, they bring in a crane and you buy whatever emerges. Rick has never been disappointed.

Hearne knows about big. At the time we spoke, he was awaiting delivery of a slab of Sapele wood from Africa, 5 feet wide, 25 feet long and 3 inches thick for a client in need of a rather large table.

He bemoans that good saw logs are increasingly difficult to find in the U.S. Few large-scale efforts, public or private, are being made to replant cherry, walnut and other hardwoods for the woodworkers who will be crafting fine furniture 200 years from now.

“But,” Hearne explains “in Germany, they don’t talk about managing a forest, they talk about building a forest. One forest there has been managed since 1720. Trees are harvested on 300-year cycles which means 1/300th of a forest is cut per year. North American plans are based more on 30 to 60 year cycles.”

Logging in Europe is not without its hazards. In areas where trench warfare raged during World War One, the mills carry shrapnel insurance. “A single piece of hardened shrapnel in the mild steel rollers of your bandsaw mill will totally destroy them,” Hearne says. Along the same lines, he talks of a walnut tree he cut in Westchester, Pennsylvania. “It was out in the middle of a woodlot with no fences around and no reason for anyone to drive a nail into it. But it turns out a previous owner had owned a 50 caliber machine gun and used the tree for target practice. The tree was absolutely loaded with 50 caliber bullets.” Bullets that didn’t help his saw any.

When asked if he’s a woodworker himself, Hearne explains that he’s an okay woodworker, but with customers like Sam Krenov, Sam Maloof and Wendell Castle—superstars of the woodworking world—he’s surely hesitant to call himself a great one.

So what’s the most expensive board foot of wood this “okay woodworker” carries? Rosewood burl; \$350 a board foot. At that price, wood to make a one-inch thick top for a standard 3 foot by 3 foot card table would sit at \$3150.



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**First Class**