

Chairs that fit people

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DICKERSON -- Stepping into the workshop of Chris Holmgren, owner of Seneca Creek Joinery, is a bit like stepping through the back of the wardrobe into Narnia.

Only here, instead of a wintry world of white witches and talking lions, one discovers a woodworker's paradise where an intriguing symbiosis of old-world craftsmanship and the latest technology combine to produce some of Montgomery County's most unique furniture.

Well-maintained wooden hand tools straight out of a colonial re-enactment line the walls above a quaint, foot-powered lathe, which sits on the floor next to a sophisticated machine the size of a baggage cart that can cut all four sides of a piece of wood at the same time.

The air is redolent with wisps of sawdust, ghosts of projects now happily ensconced in someone's home. Light pierces the haze through an open door, illuminating a loft full of stacked raw lumber waiting to be shaped into a custom-made masterpiece.

Customization is the hallmark of Seneca Creek Joinery, set on a 147-acre farm of trees, fields and ramshackle buildings. If it can be fashioned from wood, Mr. Holmgren will happily create it, painstakingly and by hand.

"I'm willing to take on almost anything," he said. "I can do pretty much whatever the customer wants because I'm not locked into any particular method of production."

His Web site (www.woodsurgeon.com) and workshop showcase many of his products, including stools, bowls, tables, window frames and cabinets. He also has made more esoteric pieces, such as a reproduction of a 19th century flax break, used to chop flax straw when creating linen thread.

Everything has perfectly fitted joints, lovingly shaped surfaces and fine details like carefully chosen hardware or custom paint schemes.

Because of Mr. Holmgren's expertise and flexibility, building contractors bring him "oddball" projects that otherwise would require prohibitively expensive assembly line re-tooling. For example, he once manufactured cabinets in multiple depths for an uneven wall surface so the fronts formed a clean line.

He never quite knows what he will do next, and he likes it that way. "Turning out the same thing day in and day out would drive me crazy," he said. "It's the variety that I thrive on."

If he has a specialty, it is 18th century-style Windsor chairs. These chairs, which originated as stools about 1,000 years ago and arrived in this country from Europe in the 1740s, are made in Mr. Holmgren's shop to a customer's exact specifications and ergonomic requirements.

A Windsor chair's chief distinguishing characteristic is the seat, which serves as a base for both the legs and the back. This permits easy customization, including high or low backs, deep or shallow seats (conducive to slouching or sitting tall, respectively), and short or tall legs to match those of its owner.

In a manufacturing process that takes two to three months, the legs are riven or hand-split from maple or hickory logs and then air-dried before being individually turned on a lathe. Spindles and bent parts are riven from oak or hickory logs, carved green and dried before final carving and placement.



Staff photo by Logan Price

Chris Holmgren uses a draw knife to shape a block of hickory wood in the first steps of making a Windsor chair leg in his workshop in Dickerson. Mr. Holmgren makes custom Windsor chairs for customers and said "I fit chairs to people." He usually takes around two months to deliver a chair to a customer, and chairs generally cost around \$600.

Despite their old-fashioned appearance, "These aren't your grandmother's [uncomfortable] wooden chairs," Mr. Holmgren said. Nor are they at all like modern manufactured chairs, many of which derive from an ergonomic model suitable for a tall man and sacrifice comfort for appearance.

His Windsor chairs have attracted a loyal following, particularly among those who have a hard time finding a chair that fits. He has sold between 50 and 75 of them in the past 10 years and would like make more if greater demand materializes.

Mr. Holmgren first experienced the joys of woodworking in high school shop class. He promptly "got sawdust in his blood" and has since provided carpentry, remodeling and new construction work for various companies.

He also ran his own remodeling business for awhile until he decided that what he really wanted to do was make furniture -- especially Windsor chairs.

"Chairs are really cool to build, and everyone needs them," he said. After taking a class in the art of Windsor chair making, "Something inside said, 'This is it; this is what you need to do for the rest of your life.'"

Part of the attraction is 18th century history, which fascinates him because it played such a pivotal role in the country's formation.

"I would argue with Tom Brokaw and say that the pioneers are the greatest generation that ever lived," he said. "They faced even greater odds."

Although he has taken several classes, most of his training has been hands-on. His wife, Pat, helps with decorative painting and design.

As his workshop indicates, Mr. Holmgren uses a combination of old-school and cutting-edge woodworking techniques. "I'm sort of halfway between [carpenters] Norm Abram and Roy Underhill," he said.

Mr. Holmgren says some tools -- like his foot-powered lathe -- provide a better "feel" than their electricity-driven counterparts. Not to mention one split-second mistake with a machine can ruin an entire project.

He primarily uses local wood, much of it from the 40 wooded acres on his property. To save trees, he looks for those that lumber companies have already slated for firewood or mulch.

Prices run from \$125 for a small stool to \$1,700-\$2,000 for a chest. Windsor chairs cost between \$500 and \$700.

Mr. Holmgren is inspired by furniture he sees in houses, museums and elsewhere. "I think, 'Wow! I've gotta build some of those,'" he said. "There's something inside of me where I have to feed that urge to build something. There's no greater sense of satisfaction."

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