
Finding The Wood

TEXT AND PHOTO BY MICHAEL CULLEN

Working wood has been a part of me for almost as long as I can remember. Yes, I have always enjoyed making things from wood, but really, I was equally drawn to the beauty hidden just beneath the rough exterior. There has always been something about the material itself—the colors, the smell, the patterns, whole galaxies of grain swirls and knots—that I would escape into, get lost in, while sanding up a stick or a small board that nobody else wanted. I loved seeing how the grain and color would begin to surface with sanding and then finally, with the addition of finish, how it would come forth in all its glory.

Years after these formative experiences, I went to furnituremaking school and learned how to correctly work wood; I came to understand which woods were suited for fine furniture and which ones were not. Things like unruly grains and knots—woods not on the “preferred list”—became verboten. And, even though this new approach ran counter to my earlier experiences with wood, I found myself attracted—the rules made sense, and besides, they worked. I adopted the philosophy without further hesitation.

After completing my training, I began using wood more like a manufactured material than something that had a prior life in the forest. My approach became “neat-and-tidy,” and so did my furniture. Good wood was graded and it came from a lumberyard. I was looking for those predictable characteristics: vertical grains, even color, good work-ability, and so on.

Then things changed. I move across the country to northern California and started meeting woodworkers who were doing

things differently. These new colleagues and friends were finding trees not on the “preferred list” and were milling them into lumber. At first I joked about “how much per cord” they were selling their wood for and they would respond with remarks about the antiseptic, lifeless qualities in my wood. But in reality, it wasn’t a matter of not liking their wood; on the contrary, I found much of this new wood very attractive. The problem was that I just wasn’t convinced about how suitable it was for fine furniture-



making. I was still married to what I learned about working wood in school.

And then, perhaps from curiosity, I began to experiment with these alternative woods: I turned some eucalyptus pulls for my tool chest and made a set of small boxes from Pacific yew. Still later, I made a chair out of elm (locally harvested after a wind-storm), and then some benches from some reclaimed redwood, a dining table from a large slab of claro walnut, and on and on. All of a sudden, I was making a lot of furniture from this “unruly wood.” No, I didn’t stop using more commercially available wood, but I definitely was drawn to this alternative material; there was no doubt that its beauty rekindled in me my earlier experiences with wood. My furniture-making skills proved that I could work this wood and get successful results. In a sense, I was coming full circle—well, almost.

Late last year, a friend of mine invited

several of us to accompany him to look for and harvest a fairly obscure wood called mountain mahogany (*Cercocarpus ledifolius*). Initially, I saw this as an interesting adventure and a chance to spend some time with friends. But, after returning home with some of the wood we had gathered on the mountain, I looked at those gnarly, dense trunks with just enough of the richly-colored heartwood showing at the ends, and I found myself anxious and excited to get down to the

workshop to begin the process of making lumber. I had been told that mountain mahogany was difficult to dry, so I decided on a strategy of bandsawing some into planks (1” thick); some I left in “half logs” to be used for future turnings; and the rest, I sawed into green veneers, using

Dan Stalzer’s method described in “The Ray Plane Desk,” *Woodwork* #69.

Two months have passed since the wood was first harvested. The 4/4 stock is stickered and drying with no sign of checking or twisting; the veneer is free of any defect and is 95% dry, if not more. Looking at the wood makes me think about the future. This mountain mahogany will become part of a project: perhaps handles for a dresser, maybe the interior of a box—who knows? All I know is I went out onto a mountainside with friends to find and harvest this wood, I returned to my workshop to mill it on the bandsaw, and someday I will make something from it. Now, that is exciting.

Michael Cullen is a furnituremaker and teacher; his shop is in Petaluma, California.