



On becoming a craftsman

How Scott Farmer's growing custom woodworking business took shape

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY NANCY PIERCE

This is the story of a carpenter who learned to trust what agitated at the back of his mind and refused to let go.

Scott Farmer had always loved wood.

Tagging along with his father, a construction worker, the little boy was in charge of picking debris off the floor so the stilt-wearing drywall installers wouldn't trip. He hoarded the small wood pieces, took them home and built stuff. As a teen, he helped install cabinets.

After graduating from School of Art and Design at East Carolina University in 1989, he took a job installing laminate countertops. When the mass-produced cabinets didn't fit the counters perfectly, he stayed up nights rebuilding the cabinets to fit.

As a niche construction worker, Farmer saw corners cut in the interest of efficiency. The compromises were mostly harmless and the customers never knew. But he knew, and that knowledge unsettled him.

But he was good with cabinets, and soon he was running the company's custom division. In 1998, he went out on his own, as GSF Woodworking.

When business stalled during the recession, Farmer went back to school for AutoCAD (3D computerized design) certification and he spent downtime playing around making furniture.

But when homebuilding picked up again, he signed on with a large state-of-the-art cabinet company in Salisbury where he used cutting-edge design software to run computer-driven cutting and assembly tools.

One could assume that was an exciting career move. "I would say it was challenging," he said. "Technology is a great tool to refine the process to make exactly the same item over and over again." He paused, then: "But there was a disconnect..."

He couldn't describe it, exactly, nor could he shake the feeling that something was amiss.

It had to do with what the wood *wanted from him* instead of the other way around.

Driving around his native Gaston and Lincoln counties, Farmer started noticing discarded "urban wood": tree trunks, root balls and limbs from development sites and utility easements. The wood had always been there, piled on the sides of the road, but now he was seeing its beauty, its potential.

He tossed the best pieces into the back of his truck to take home – wild black cherry, walnut and maple trunks with large burls, huge knots where branches joined the trunk along with insect and disease-damaged wood. He gave his phone number to tree-cutting crews. Random people called and sent texts, alerting him to fallen-tree sightings.

It felt a bit crazy. Actually it felt a lot crazy. But he couldn't stand the thought of those trees going into a landfill.

Then one dank Saturday about five years ago

Top of an end table made of wild cherry



Scott Farmer uses a small axe to roughly shape a wild cherry burl into a bowl

he was channel surfing and happened on a PBS documentary that changed his life. It was about George Nakashima, the Japanese-American architect who learned from a master tea-house builder in a World War II Idaho internment camp to apply discipline, patience and a drive to perfection in all aspects of construction. After his release, Nakashima spent his career as an architect-woodworker, espousing the belief that trees yearn to live again as furniture, to serve man with beauty, strength and stability, and to have artistic worth forever.

Nakashima had articulated what Farmer had been unable to put into words. And it didn't sound a bit crazy.

The next summer, Farmer sent himself to Penland School of Crafts in the North Carolina mountains, where he discovered more people who talked and felt that way about wood. And these same people were selling hand-crafted furniture and getting a pretty good price.



A Craftsman cherry breakfast table and two small benches (\$3,640) in the Gaston County Art Guild's Art on Main gallery.

at home



This bar table (\$400) in the Gaston County Art Guild's Art on Main gallery features a "live edge" with insect track patterns.



Gene and Jackie Radford of Gastonia commissioned this 8-foot cherry table (12-foot with the leaf) for their dining room.

Today, Farmer works mostly alone in a small shop on a 2-acre Denver home place he shares with his wife, Kim, and their child. As GSF Woodworking, he still designs and builds very high-end custom cabinets from bought wood.

But 60% of his output is rustic furniture made from either found, local or reclaimed wood.

His reclaimed stash includes floor boards from the historic Loray Mill in Gastonia.

Farmer's tables, chairs and benches appear in art galleries as well as in his customer's

homes. The work is characterized by unique grain patterns, inlaid dovetails and "live edges" – edges purposely left rough to reveal organic patterns caused by insects or disease.

"I strive to control the process from start to finish. I find the tree. I prepare and dry the wood, I hand-sketch the boards, and I think on what this particular wood brings to mind," he said. "Then I release what's already inside it. I help the wood become what the wood wants to be."

On the day of this interview, Farmer had

just finished a Muskoka Lakes style chair made from lightning-struck red oak he recovered from a York County cattle farm. The indestructible \$485-per-gallon automotive Corvette finish ensures the chair will withstand the elements for at least a decade on his customer's Lake Norman boat dock.

But what really excites Farmer is the interesting grain pattern on the arm of the chair: "Three limbs came out of one knot here, so the grain takes off in three different directions."



Farmer shows the tight, heart pine pattern of the floor planks he recovered from the historic Loray Mill in Gastonia when the building was converted to apartments.



Farmer made this shelf bar for the recreation room of Trey and Lisa Hendricks' Davidson home. It features dovetail inlays and live edges.

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He dries his rescued wood in a solar kiln he built using re-purposed materials, including discarded double-pane patio doors. It's a very slow process, lasting two years for some wood. Commercial high-volume, fast gas-fired and microwave wood dryers can burst the wood, causing spider-like cracks and ruining its character.

Last summer, Farmer was at Penland again, studying steam bending of wood, when he and Kim learned they were expecting their first child. He came home with an unfinished swing

rocker, “an organic form, almost like a womb, or a ship – a rib-like vessel.”

Today, it hangs in his warehouse, a few finishing touches away from being his daughter Willow's first birthday present – if he gets time. His cabinets have always been in high demand, but now the hand-made rustic furniture is too.

Lake Norman area real-estate consultant and former state senator Robert Davis and his wife, Carol, recently purchased a 130-acre horse farm near Maiden. To honor the history of the land, they'll reclaim and use the old barn and

outbuilding's weathered wood to furnish the home and equestrian facility they're building there.

The Davises asked around to find the best craftsman to trust with this project. “We heard just one name: Scott Farmer,” Robert Davis said.

As Farmer absorbs that he's landed a major commission doing exactly what he loves, his mind is already planning and designing. His hands are busy too, using a small axe to roughly shape a wild cherry burl that wants to be a bowl. ■