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# Curtis Buchanan

## A study in passion and practicality

BY STEPHANIE STONE

A narrow dirt path leads you through a garden to a modest woodshop near the historic district of Jonesborough, Tennessee. The shop is small, rough-hewn board and batten, nestled among maples and hemlocks. Carolina wrens fly in and out through the open windows. The front porch, ringed by black-eyed Susans, looks over a garden of zinnias and asparagus overgrown with morning glories. Inside, Curtis Buchanan is doing what he loves—making Windsor chairs.

The shop has a come-hither feel. Friends stop by to swap stories. The neighbor's children bring a caterpillar for show and tell—work stops, sharp tools are put away, an eyeglass is produced to inspect the creature. Everything here says ease of living, utility and no pretense. The same can be said of Curtis. He has been making Windsors since the early '80s and is now regarded as one of a handful of prominent makers of that chair.

### GETTING STARTED

Before he discovered Windsors, Curtis describes himself as “a carpenter with a history degree.” He remembers looking at pictures of those chairs and thinking, “Wow, if I could just make that. I didn't know it was next to impossible to make a living at it. I didn't know it was crazy to try it,” he says. “In '83, there weren't many people making Windsors and I talked to a lot of woodworkers who discouraged me.”

But that summer, Curtis met Windsor chairmaker Dave Sawyer. “I said I wanted to make Windsor chairs. Dave was encouraging.” The next summer, Curtis spent four days with Dave in his shop in East Calais, Vermont. “He tweaked a lot of things I'd been doing.

By then, I'd built twenty Windsors but I'd never seen an original except in pictures. We're in the South in Tennessee—there're not many Windsors here, just a few transplants.”

After his visit with Dave Sawyer, Curtis went back to his shop. “The next few years I spent working 60 hours a week, trying to raise the quality of the chair, figuring out how to sell them. The goal at that point was to stay afloat and not go back to carpentry. Every day I built a chair, I was learning. Every day I built a porch, I wasn't.”

It was the mid-1980s. Curtis was living in a 750 square foot house with his wife Marilyn and two young children. He worked in an 8' x 9' shop out back that his daughter Maria called “Dad's playhouse.” Curtis recalls: “I needed a shop but had no money for rent. So I stapled cardboard inside this shed, painted it white, and ran an extension cord to power a light and a lathe. It took two years of taking orders at craft shows to feel secure enough to rent a space big enough for me and my shaving horse to be in there at the same time.”

Curtis remembers, “Dave says he didn't teach me, but he gave me the advice I needed so I wasn't reinventing the wheel and starving to death in the process. Dave also told me that eventually I wouldn't need shows to sell my work. This was hard to believe. With two young children and a wife to provide for, the pressure was on. An order here and there didn't work. Chairs had to march out of the shop on a regular basis. So I did everything from the local art-in-the-park show to finer venues such as Southern Highlands Craft Guild. I would demonstrate and Marilyn would sell. We made a good team, and by the mid-'90s

Dave's words proved to be true: shows were a thing of the past.”

With increased business, Curtis faced another critical decision—whether to take on an assistant. “One day I was driving out with dad to tend the trees (he and his father are partners in an organic Christmas tree farm), and he said, ‘It's time for you to hire someone.’ I didn't say anything. After a while, he said, ‘Well then, I guess you should go on doing what you're doing.’ And I did. I wasn't going to hire help. I didn't want to look back and say, ‘Didn't I have it good back then?’”

Curtis has spent a lot of time thinking about what he wants out of chairmaking. The way he has arranged his business fulfills an important desire for Curtis—to work in his own backyard. “I wanted my work to be an integral part of my life,” he explains. “Equally as important as, say, reading, family time, or sleep. Not something to get over with, but something that helps round out my day.” Today, he walks fifty paces from the house through the garden to his shop. Many of his decisions and practices may not make the best or most efficient business sense; he splits his own logs and takes a nap each day, for example. “But what may be good business sense might not be what I want,” he replies. “What I really like to do is make chairs start to finish, by myself, in my backyard. I figured out what I need to do to make a living, which is to make a few chairs a month. I don't need more than that. The most difficult part of making a living as a woodworker is selling your work for enough to provide for a family, but this is in direct relation to being satisfied with less.”





Curtis Buchanan uses a froe to rive out a chair back from a length of white oak.

## WINDSORS AND GREEN WOODWORKING

Curtis discovered Windsor design about the same time that he was introduced to working green wood with hand tools. He credits books by Roy Underhill (*The Woodwright's Shop*), John Alexander (*Make a Chair from a Tree*), and Drew Langsner (*Country Wood Craft*). "They introduced me to this friendly and inexpensive way to work wood. That appealed because I had no money. The technique intrigued me. I came across Windsors and realized that they were made with these tools and with this technique."

While some chairmakers debate whether the undercarriage of the original Windsors were made with green wood, Curtis says simply, "Whether or not they were made with green wood, I don't care. I use it. With Windsors, there was a break in the tradition, so we can't nail down what they did." Then he changes the subject.

"With green wood, parts are made while the wood still has a high moisture content,

so they're soft and easy to shape. Drying takes place prior to assembly, but of course parts will move continuously in response to moisture," Curtis says as he pulls a dried maple stretcher from his light bulb kiln. "Woodworkers in general treat that as a pain, something they have to pay attention to or pay the consequences. Green woodworkers use it to their advantage. In drying, this maple stretcher not only shrank, it shrank twice as much in the transverse plane as the radial. I use that property to hold the chair together—a superdried, oversized oval tenon, properly rotated and pounded into a mortise that's 5% over the ultimate moisture content makes a good tight joint without glue.

"Knowing the properties of wood allows woodworkers to pay attention to things they've never thought about before." Curtis points to a piece of oak bent in two planes for a continuous arm Windsor. "It need not be straight because it will be bent in the chair, but the long fibers must be continuous from end to end. I achieve this

by riving out a five-foot length and shaping it with a drawknife."

For riving (a rive is a controlled split), Curtis uses a froe. "Froes are the green woodworker's tablesaw—only faster and more efficient." He listens to the sound of the wood splitting and feels the resistance. He watches the run, flipping the piece over in the brake to turn the weak side up and put pressure on the strong side. The run comes back to center and two equal pieces emerge. "This froe does one more thing," he says. "It keeps me rooted in my past—it belonged to my great grandfather."

## TOOLS AND DESIGN

Curtis introduces some of his other tools, talking about each as he would an old friend. "John Alexander gave me this Spoford brace 22 years ago. I use it for most of my drilling and always look forward to the feel of its worn rosewood handles."

Pushing each tool to its maximum and using what works seem to be the operative principles. Take the scorp, for example. Generally used as a roughing out tool for carving the seat, Curtis takes it further. "A scorp is a gross shaping tool, but with experience you can do quite fine work with it." Alluding to his own tenuous beginnings at woodworking, he adds, "You take it further because you have to. Poverty is a good teacher."

Pushing the limits of a tool is practical and thrifty, but Curtis also recommends it because it pushes the limits of the user. Using the drawknife in a tricky cut that threatens to tear out, he says, "You have to do it with conviction—you can't get better if you're afraid your next move will screw it up. You can't be afraid to trash the piece and you can't be hesitant to throw it in the firewood pile once you do."

"David Pye said machine/hand tool distinction makes no sense, that craftsmanship is about risk versus certainty, not power versus hand. A plane is a chisel in a block—moving from risk to certainty. Craftsmen

### OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT—

"Birdcage Side Chair"; maple, pine, oak;  
37" x 19" x 17½".

"Fan Back Armchair"; maple, pine, oak;  
46" x 24" x 20".

"Philadelphia Writing Armchair"; maple, pine, oak;  
46" x 34" x 40".

"Wrangler Reading Chair"; maple, pine, oak;  
38" x 34" x 20".

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PHOTO BY JOSH INGLIS



are trying to get away from risk toward certainty, but great work has more risk, it's more alive. The risk inherent in hand tools is fulfilling, but there is also satisfaction in design risk. I can't draw and I don't have the patience for building models. When I design, I get an idea and go straight to the work itself. Sometimes I hit it, sometimes I don't. The risk of an uncertain outcome is part of the process I enjoy.

In his chairs, Curtis aims for a "spry" look, achieved by the depth of the turnings, the size of the foot, and how far ears and knuckles stick out. "No element should overpower. All should balance to make the chair light and airy, slightly pushed, not exaggerated. I want something that looks alive, but not too arty. Details make the difference—How much bend? How much flare? One's flat, one's contrived," he says. "I want chairs to be quiet until you start to look at them."

When Curtis talks about his aesthetic, the theme of passion and practicality comes out again. "Most of my pieces have an 18th-century spirit, but that's as much as you can say." To explain the origins of a bar stool in his kitchen, he points to Charles Santore's *The Windsor Style in America* (Running Press, 1992). The stool sports false mitered joints (duck-bills), a birdcage back, and a "bamboo" motif—legs and stretchers are turned with a protuberance at the crease to mimic bamboo. "That's real typical of how I designed my early chairs—I took elements I liked from various chairs and combined them. I'm not concerned about the history of making unless it can help me make a better chair. My influences come from anybody who's made a chair prior to the current chair I'm designing."

Designs emerge not only from his willingness to look at all historical sources, but also from his empathic relationship with people who buy his chairs. He has two designs that are named after the women who ordered them. "In the case of Patra's chair, she said, 'Design me a chair to fit my house.' Patra's house is so contemporary it's

OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM UPPER LEFT—

"Patra's Chair"; maple, tulipwood, oak;  
39" x 23" x 20".

"Sackback Settee"; maple, pine, oak; 37" x 46" x 19".

"Velda's Rocker"; walnut, butternut, hickory;  
44" x 22" x 32".

"Velda's Settee"; walnut, butternut, hickory;  
44" x 58" x 25".



At the shaving horse, trimming a tenon on a loop-back chair.

hard to find the front door. But I found influence in a sleek modern Windsor made by West Lowe. In the end, Patra had me make eight of them for her."

Along with over 40 different patterns, Patra's hangs in dusty disarray on the wall of Curtis's shop. "I made some copies back along, stored them up in the house, but they're not up-to-date. If the shop burned down, maybe it would free me up to make more new designs," he adds.

#### IN THE SHOP

Curtis uses a bandsaw to cut out the seat blank. "I certainly gravitate to hand tools," Curtis says. "It took me 10 years to bring a bandsaw into the shop." (In fact, he says that when he built the shop in 1992, he debated a long time whether he should install electricity at all.) "I used to saw out the seat with a bow saw. It's not that hard. You clamp the piece down—the saw's vertical, so you can use your whole body. But it's not quite as easy as a bandsaw."

When he thickness-planes the Windsor's seat, Curtis uses a scrub plane with a radi-

cally curved blade, then changes to a #5 jack plane with modified blade. Last, he uses a jointer plane as a smoothing plane. "I've used it for many years and I'm comfortable with it. I have smoothing planes, but not one that's tuned up at the moment—it's low priority."

As to the thickness planer in the corner: "If the seat blank fit through it, I'd have no problem using it," he says. "I'd be trading grunt work for soul work. I'm trying to have it all—less grunt, more soul...but sometimes grunt is soul."

Curtis sets to planing the seat with a #5 jackplane with modified convex blade for more wood removal. With each pass, his arms shoot rhythmically forward and back with the range of a rower...except the power stroke is forward. Working around the piece, he adjusts his feet in tiny increments.

Once the chair seat is rough-dimensioned, Curtis bores the spindle and arm support holes and carves the gutter that curves around the back. Then he sets to carving the seat, 1" deep for comfort. "Dave taught me to set the deep part back," he says,



Pounding together the undercarriage: "not for the faint of heart."

To establish the position of the deep part, he measured the width of his sit bones. To set the depth of the bowl, he drills two holes 1" deep, 3-3/8" from the gutter as a guide. Next he uses an adze to sculpt the bowl, taking out big chunks, and then a scorp and a travisher to finish. "When you're wasting away material, your arms do more," he says. "For fine tuning, you use your wrists."

"All seats carve differently—each piece of wood is different. As you carve it, you start mapping out nuances of grain change. With this piece, I know every time I passed through here with the hand plane it was

tricky, so I expect to have some difficulty when I come by there again with the scorp, and again with the smaller shaves. The difficult places can usually be taken care of by cutting at a diagonal or perpendicular to the grain. The point is to pay attention and be flexible: if you get to a tough spot, make another approach."

Flexibility is a good trait in this business. "Sometimes we equate goodness with precision. With a chair, there's a look/feel balance—those tolerances are harder to put your finger on." Curtis points to a chair back he's having trouble lining up. "The

center of the back doesn't line up with the center of the seat," he observes. "I could maybe bend one of the short spindles to shift the back or just relocate the center of the back so the center spindle looks straight. With chairmaking, it's more about 'how does it look' than 'how does it measure.' The furnituremaker doesn't use a level. The stick chairmaker doesn't use a level or a square. It's liberating to give them up."

Aesthetics aside, the most salient quality of Curtis's chairs is their level of comfort. Curtis quotes Shadrack Mace [a North Carolina chairmaker who died in 1973; for more on this history, see "Appalachian Chairmakers" by Curtis Buchanan in the June, 2001 issue of *Woodwork*] on comfort: "Ladderbacks are company chairs—you give them to people you don't want to stay long. You leave the sittin' chairs [two-slat mule-eared chairs] for friends and family."

Curtis says the hardest part of the chair for students is the seat. For the seasoned chairmaker, the hardest part, besides assembly, is a good turning. "I have to be right in the moment," he says. Curtis wants his turning angles to be sexy, but not overstated. "My beads and coves are off-center, tapers are concave; my tenons have no shoulders, and I like to make my fillets and birdbeaks sharp and crisp," he says.

Curtis uses a three-peg holding jig with V-blocks for boring stretcher mortises in the legs. "The V-block always holds the leg level and, with a mirror to the side, the angle is easy to achieve." Curtis is also experimenting with hot hide glue. The idea is to pre-size the joint with thin hide glue, sealing the endgrain of the mortise. Prior to final assembly, glue is reapplied. The result is a good glue joint on the endgrain. When the glue can overturns in the crockpot, Curtis just laughs—"We're going to forget the hide glue idea for now."

Ready to assemble the chair, Curtis remarks, "This is not a good place to make a mistake." His measurements are to the thousandths here. Tenons are superdried, then the whole mess is pounded together. "This is the whole deal right here. There's no dry run—it's not for the faint of heart."

Throughout the assembly process, there's a lively conversation with the chair, infused with humor. As Curtis wrestles and pounds the continuous arm bend onto the spindles, saying over the din, "Dave Sawyer calls this 'chairpractory.'"



Despite his breezy manner, Curtis is unrelenting in his attention to the properties of green wood and the details of construction. At week's end, he has made a Windsor that by his standards is "good enough for chairmaking."

Indeed, some of the finest Windsor chairs in the world are made in this modest wood-

shop in a backyard in a small town in Tennessee. Twenty years ago, Curtis Buchanan fell in love with Windsor design. He survived, then excelled, at chairmaking by dint of passion and practicality. It's a story of talent, hard work, and good humor. Curtis says: "They say the golden years for craftsmen are their 70s. That's the time when repetition has

honed skills to the level where they are rote. This then frees the mind up for creativity. I've got a long way to go and I'm having too much fun to stop now."

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## Honduras GreenWood Project

I AM A TRAVELER AT HEART. But I journey more widely on my shaving horse now, rarely venturing far from my shop or town. The chime of the courthouse clock. The haunting whistle of a south-bound train. These are the familiar sounds that punctuate my daily life, and they blend easily with the purposeful cadence of the drawknife in my hands.

Mounting my shaving horse one day in 1992, the rhythm of my knife gave way to the sound of traffic on Main Street passing my outstretched thumb. I momentarily rambled back in time to the Pan American highway and the bedraggled, magical countries of Central America that I had visited decades before. When I explored the hinterlands of Guatemala, Honduras and Nicaragua in the 1970s, rainforests were a part of the scenery—vast roadless tracts of land that had been there forever.

Confronting the reality of the whittled oak spindles in my lap and the intervening twenty years that had delivered me to my trade and this shop, I realized that "forever" was gone. By the 1990s tropical forests were disappearing fast. The Pan American corridor is light-years from eastern Tennessee, and the view from my horse seemed desperate and hopelessly complex. But solutions and innovation were in the wind. A young group called the Woodworkers Alliance for Rainforest Protection (WARP) was promoting value-added products and the unorthodox notion that forest dwellers might protect their own trees if they could realize a living from their rational harvest. Could greenwood chairmaking—my newfound profession—somehow play a role in this effort? WARP's founder, Scott Landis, thought so, as did Brian Boggs, a Kentucky chairmaker. Within a year Brian and I were on our way to the north coast of Honduras. GreenWood was born. [see "Old World Craft, Third World Development" by Scott Landis, *Woodwork* #52, August 1998]

The ride to the Pech village of El Carbón was as rough as the potholed roads I had traversed in my youth. But the indigenous community had a cohesive social structure, a school building with a shop, and a forest controlled by the tribe. Drawknives fit student hands like the machetes they had grown up with. We built shaving horses and a springpole lathe. The village elders led us to trees whose wood we could rive and bend. They gathered samples of bark that their ancestors had used, and we wove them into chair seats and backs.

So the seeds of chairmaking took root. Fifteen years later, the local industry we spawned is still small but thriving. Our students are now teachers and the skills continue to pass from hand to hand, as they always have. They have spread from El Carbón east to Mosquitia, west to La Ceiba and beyond. GreenWood introduced other products. Wooden pens and bowls are now turned on pole lathes. Lapstrake boats are being built to replace the more wasteful dugouts. As I write,

8,000 board feet of mahogany guitar parts from a well-managed forest are on their way to California.

The road remains bumpy. Funding is sketchy and the challenges daunting. Then there's Alexis Andrade. Two years after he learned to make chairs, his father had a logging accident that crushed his foot. At sixteen years of age, Alexis was the oldest of six children and he was able to provide for his family by selling furniture. Edwin Nolasco was eighteen when Hurricane Mitch dumped twelve feet of rain on the North Coast of Honduras. His family lost everything except a box containing Edwin's

drawknife, brace and bits. Taking shelter in a school gym, Edwin began making chairs out of downed trees and selling them on the streets of Sabá, where many of his neighbors had lost their homes or furniture.

Alexis and Edwin are not alone. Their stories have been repeated with Tonio, Omar and others. Their skills continue to improve. Their products grow more diverse. Their attitudes about themselves and about the forest have changed. And they, in turn, will change others. I know greenwood chairs won't save the rainforest, but as I resume the tempo of my shaving horse and the comforting sounds of my town beckon me home, my travels to the past and my hopes for the future are somehow a little sweeter.

—cb



PHOTO BY SCOTT LANDIS

Curtis Buchanan poses with some of his first GreenWood Project students in 1994.