

Reclaiming American Chestnut: www.amnews.com

Artisan creates with extinct wood

By JENNIFER BRUMMETT
jenb@amnews.com
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Tom Nichols knew there had been an American Chestnut blight, once upon a time, at the turn of the 20th century. Being asked to create cabinets out of the little-found wood 10 years ago prompted him to learn even more about it.

Nichols, of Somerset, will bring the works he creates from reclaimed American Chestnut wood to the Constitution Square Arts Fest this weekend. He took time out of his woodworking schedule to answer some questions about his craft:

A-M: How long have you been a woodworker?

TN: I am 68 years young. My grandfather and father were both in the lumber business. I was very fortunate that my dad would often take me to work with him. I can recall riding around the store on a tricycle, trying to help wait on customers. I was probably 5 or 6 then. I'm sure I was little or no help then - (I was) probably in the way. By my pre-teen years, I believe I did contribute some help.

A-M: Why did you become a woodworker? What led to your interest in woodworking?

TN: I decided to go to Eastern Kentucky University and major in industrial arts. I earned a Bachelor of Science degree in industrial arts and a master of arts degree in industrial education. I taught Industrial Arts. Then, it included woodworking and other shop courses. Unfortunately, most of these kinds of courses have been replaced by "technology" in the public schools for about 10 years.

At that point, I felt like I was not going to be able to support and educate my family on what a teacher salary was in those days. I chose to go down a multi-faceted path developing some property and also working in the furniture business, cabinet making, and owning some small businesses.

In 1994, I was seriously injured in a truck wreck. I had to retire early. I eventually recovered to a point where I could do woodworking on a craft and hobby level in my backyard workshop.

A-M: Why did you become particularly interested in chestnut wood?

TN: Though I was aware of the American Chestnut blight, I didn't get into it much until someone asked me to build them kitchen cabinets out of some chestnut lumber they had reclaimed from an old house on their family farm. This was about 10 years ago. It was a great experience that sort of pushed me off the edge, to where probably in 75 percent or more of my woodworking I use American Chestnut wood. I have obtained this wood by searching out and reclaiming American Chestnut wood that was used in old buildings.

A-M: Have there been any advances in re-establishing the American Chestnut tree?

About 28 years ago, the American Chestnut Foundation was formed for the purpose of re-establishing the American Chestnut tree, which had been wiped out by a fungus blight that was accidentally brought to America in a Japanese Chestnut tree. This happened in 1904. By the 1930s, there were an estimated 4 billion standing dead American Chestnut trees. Then worms started eating this wood, and thus, what is now known as "wormy" chestnut, was formed.

The American Chestnut Foundation is getting close to re-establishing the American Chestnut tree. While some chestnuts are now being harvested, it will be many years before there will be trees big enough to harvest lumber.

In-depth information is available from the American Chestnut Foundation Web site (www.acf.org). Several of the items I make are sold from this Web site, with a portion of the sales going to the continuing research.

A-M: Characterize chestnut wood. What's it like to work with? What are the challenges working with it?

TN: In its day of abundance, American Chestnut wood was used for many things, from fences to fine furniture. It is a hard wood with grain that is similar to oak and ash. The color can vary from light brown to dark brown. Part of the reason for variance in color is the soil in which the tree grew, and now, in the reclaimed wood, what exposure it has had to the elements. For example I have reclaimed some wood from inside a house that is light in color and has no worm holes. I have also reclaimed some from barns that is very dark and full of worm holes. The variety in looks from one piece of the wood to another is one of the things that makes American Chestnut wood so fascinating.

The first challenge is finding and reclaiming the wood. Then, since it is used, there is a great deal of waste from damaged and split boards. A typical retail price for this wood is now about \$18 per board foot.

A-M: What will you be bringing to the Constitution Square Arts Fest to sell? Will you be demonstrating your craft while at the festival?

TN: For the Fest, the largest item I can bring will be a quilt rack. There will be Christmas ornaments, key chains, ceiling fan pulls, yo-yos, tic-tac-toe games, desk pens, neck ties, lazy susan condiment trays, salt and pepper shakers, pie boxes, tea boxes and much more. Probably the most popular item is picture frames. I take special order items.

I may have a small scroll saw and wood turning lathe, but the experience that I have had at a crafts fest is that there is little time (and space) for demonstrations.

IF YOU GO

Constitution Square Arts Fest 9 a.m.-9 p.m. Friday and Saturday 11 a.m.-5 p.m. Sunday
Constitution Square State Historic Site
Information: Julie Wagner, info@constitutionsquareartsfest.org or (859) 236-1909

Tom Nichols of Somerset creates a variety of items from American Chestnut. He will have his wares for sale at the Constitution Square Arts Fest Friday through Sunday. (Photo submitted)

