

Jimmy Carter on Woodworking



Four-poster bed. Carter built this bed out of cherry, with tapered, faceted posts.

Since I was a child, woodworking has played an important role in my life. It has given me a sense of belonging and a connection to a wide-ranging and dedicated fellowship. The feelings of continuity and timelessness that the craft has brought to me are most gratifying. I know that some of my pieces will be used for many generations in the future, and yet there is also a strong connection with the past. For instance, my most recent project was a large cabinet made of old pine boards from the

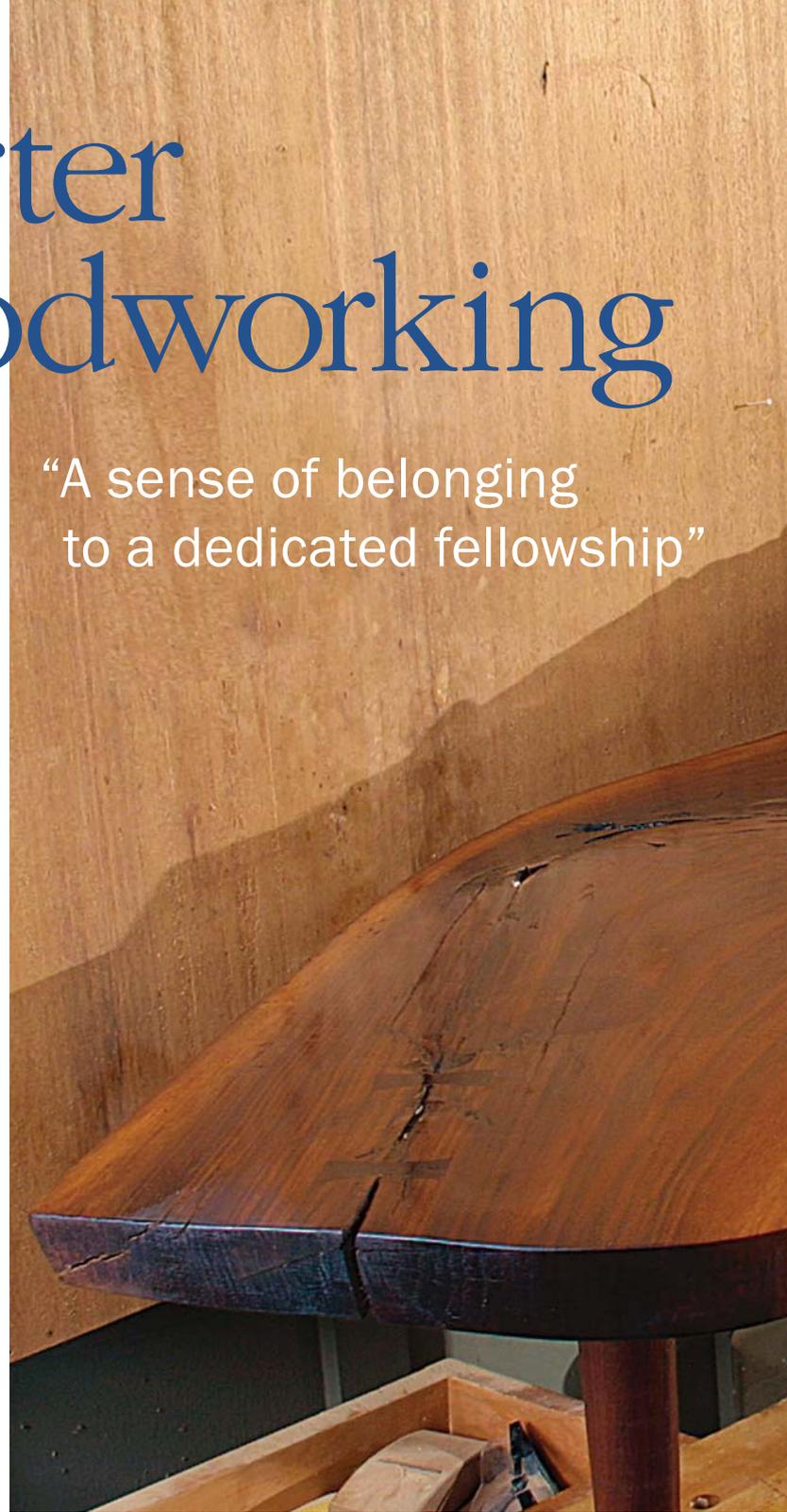


first home built, in 1833, on our family farm. Each 1¼-in.-dia. door-knob contains 75 annual growth rings, so the trees were growing when Europeans were settling in this part of the country.

The workshop as a refuge

There was a real breakthrough in my life as a cabinetmaker when I was involuntarily retired from political life after the 1980 election. As we prepared to leave Washington, cabinet officers and White House

“A sense of belonging to a dedicated fellowship”



staff had taken up a collection for my going-away present: enough to purchase a Jeep. I really didn't need or want this gift, so I dropped a gentle hint that was eventually honored. With the already collected funds, they gave me a gift certificate for woodworking tools. It has been the most enjoyable gift I've ever received.

I spent most of 1981 at home in Plains, Ga., writing a memoir of my years in the White House. I put in several solid hours of writing before and after breakfast, and each day I walked the 20 steps to my woodshop for a restful vacation, studying my back issues of *Fine Woodworking* and Tage Frid's instruction books. In those



Finishing touches. Carter puts a final coat of oil on a walnut-crotch table he recently completed.

quiet moments, I practiced dovetail and finger joints, learned ornamental carving, and became more skilled with the router, lathe, and other power tools. Over the course of that year, we acquired a log cabin in the North Georgia mountains, and I built all of its furnishings—beds, chairs, tables, benches, cabinets, stools, and even the smaller items needed in the bathrooms.

Woodworking out of necessity

I grew up on a relatively isolated farm, long before we had electricity and when all the labor was by hand or with livestock. My

father did the building and repairs, made many of our hand tools, and was a good cobbler and an expert blacksmith. As soon as I was physically able, he expected me to do my share of the work, and I was an eager student. I expanded my skills as a Future Farmer of America, and was required to make a few pieces of furniture, usually as gifts for my mother.

Later, when I was a young naval officer with a base pay of \$300 a month, it was important for my wife, Rosalynn, and me to live as inexpensively as possible, so we chose unfurnished apartments. There were fully equipped hobby shops at the large submarine



bases, staffed by qualified personnel who helped in the design of furniture and provided good advice on the types of wood, proper joints, gluing techniques, and the use of power tools. I made the necessary beds, tables, and other furniture, but the only piece we brought home from the Navy was a white oak cabinet for high-fidelity sound equipment.

When Rosalynn and I moved back to Plains, we lived in a government housing project, and I was struggling just to earn a living for our family. I can't say that I improved my woodworking skills during those years as a farmer and struggling businessman, since my only tools were a handsaw, hammer, drawknife, and an auger and bits, but I made some couches, lounge chairs, and tables that we still use every day. During this time, I became more familiar with the local woods and accumulated a good supply of lumber.

I had very little time for woodworking while we lived in the governor's mansion in Atlanta, which had no shop facilities, or immediately thereafter when I was a campaigning full-time for president.

Making pieces for pure enjoyment

As president, I used the woodshop at Camp David on weekends but had no need for furniture, so I confined my efforts to making small items as gifts, including some lathe turnings and tippet holders and reels for fly-fishing lines for family members and close friends.

Although I have built more than 100 pieces of furniture, I wish I had more time to spend in the shop. Some of the projects have been quite challenging, such as a cradle with woven straw side panels that took 120 hours to complete.

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Fun and functional. Carter built the chess table (above) and turned and carved the pieces. The cedar chest (right) features hand-cut dovetails.



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I've made several other cradles, and they have helped bribe my children into producing more grandchildren.

One of my most enjoyable projects was making a set of greenwood chairs, stools, rakes, and pitchforks from a hickory tree that I cut down near our home. I limited myself to using just tools that were available during colonial times. There is something satisfying about working on a shaving horse using the most basic equipment such as a knife, froes, adzes, hatchets, drawknives, spokeshaves, and a stovepipe for steaming and bending.

Building furniture to help others

I occasionally build items to be auctioned at annual fund raisers for The Carter Center, the human-rights organization founded by Rosalynn and me in 1982. I've contributed about a dozen pieces for this effort, including cedar chests, four-poster beds, greenwood chairs and tools, and cabinets of various designs. One year I carved a chess set, with the individual pieces housed in a maple box that Rosalynn lined with velvet. An album of self-taken photographs has accompanied each item, with my handwritten notes describing the step-by-step process, from wood selection to a final burned signature.

Because a former president made them and the provenance is indisputable, bidding is always brisk and the final prices very high, ranging from \$51,000 to more than \$200,000. The money is used to eradicate diseases in Africa and Latin America, and to help finance our efforts to improve health, increase food production, monitor elections, and negotiate peace agreements in about 65 of the poorest nations. In 2004, I contributed an oil painting of Menachem Begin, Anwar Sadat, and me at the Camp David peace ceremony. Its bid price was in the midrange of those for my furniture, so now I have two options for contributions as a craftsman.

Inspired by Sam Maloof

Rosalynn and I have been to more than 120 countries through our Carter Center work, and I've had a chance to visit a number of the most famous craftsmen in Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America. I consider myself fortunate to have a personal friendship with Sam Maloof, whom I consider to be the world's finest woodworker. His integrity and personal philosophy are demonstrated vividly in the design and beauty of his furniture, and my visits with him have always been inspirational. I've never attempted to emulate the flow-



Tools from home and abroad. Carter's collection of antique tools includes a tracing wheel (above) used for measuring the circumference of wagon wheels. This scraper plane (left) was a gift to Carter when he visited a Chinese furniture factory.

ing artistry of his work but am satisfied knowing how to build pieces with square corners and simple joints. I own one of his black-walnut rocking chairs and two pedestal tables, a double rocker of bird's-eye maple, and a remarkable zircote straight chair that he gave to Rosalynn and me when we were honored recently.

I'll continue to be an eager learner and expect woodworking to become even more important as advancing age forces me into a more sedentary life. Someday I may do a photograph album of the furniture I've built. □