

Millwork and Sawdust —

Dave Borek does

The blackboard reads — "Confucius say — Sawdust is a sign of prosperity."

If this is true, then prosperity must reside somewhere in Dave Borek's wood-working shop where sawdust reigns supreme, scattering off the lathe, piling up underfoot, covering tools, lodging in hair, clothes, and unprotected eyes.

And somewhere in the midst of that blizzard is Dave Borek with his wide stance, hips braced against the lathe stand to steady himself and a knife in his hands, running it along the wood post turning furiously on the lathe. He's a big man, a high school football player, curly haired and intense, channeling physical strength and concentration into the discipline of knife against wood.

He turns off the machine, slows the post with his hands, brushes the sawdust from his face, and explains that, really, the blackboard is supposed to read — "Confusion say...." And, he says, "My name is Confusion."

Well, at first glance, one might think he

has a point. Stacks of weathered gray lumber frame the yard outside the shop. Tools and furniture in need of repair, half-turned posts and large machines share the inside. Moving around is an art in itself.

There is a strategy to this confusion. The graying wood stacked outside is long leaf pine that came off a 130 year old building. The pine, itself, is probably 300 to 500 years old. It's weathered a few storms, a few drouths, and turned a lifeless gray in the process. But, give it a few minutes on the planer, and the life returns.

Dave smooths a little dust off of one of his tables — an improvisation on the theme of old German furniture. Hand rubbed with Danish oil, the table has a warm, gold glow to it, a simplicity and grace of line, and no rough edges. Dave points out the density of the wood, explaining that the long leaf pine in the yard was virgin timber when it was cut 130 years ago, and that the virgin longleaf (also called loblolly or bull pine because it can be so hard to



a few good turns

work with) is virtually unavailable now.

Today, growth is chemically induced in pines and the result is a softer wood that lacks the density of the older long leaf pine. Staring out at the faded wood in the yard, Dave calls it the last of the Mohicans.

At 30, Dave Borek is a man who lives, works, and believes with a passion, whether the passion be loblolly pine, architectural millwork, or religion and lifestyle. Friends have learned to brace themselves for the onslaught of words, ideas, explanations, arguments.

Dave is not unaware of that. "I know better than anyone that I'm hard to take," he says with a grin, but he also knows that good friends adjust. And as for that intense pride — he's good at what he does.

What he does is called architectural millwork. All it takes is a jaunt down Sixth Street in Austin to some of the renovated bars and restaurants or a visit to Hyde Park and a peek into some of the gracious old homes to understand what architectural millwork is: the tall, imposing columns, the elegant stairways with their graceful balustrades, the warm glow of aged pine and brass at the Fish Market.

The architectural millworker restores old wood and structural pieces in a building to their historically correct dimensions and appearance, or if pieces are needed that are not there any more, he recreates them from old wood.

"I have devoted most of my life to my work," says Dave, "I love my wood work very, very much." It is a passion he traveled quite a way to find.

Raised in Orlando, Florida, Dave grew up among palm trees, golf courses and eccentric, successful relatives. They people his speech and his references like groundwork for a more personal dream. The standards for taste and beauty that he carries into his profession stem from the homes of his family — the uncle on the East Coast, inventor of the tapless beer keg valve; or the cousin, a golf champion who taught Dave the essentials of hitting the ball in a straight line to the desired destination.

As a child, Dave shimmied up and down palm trees in search of wayward golf balls and bulldozed his way across high school football fields. He went to vocational school while still in high school to learn to be a mechanic. Always able with his hands, he started playing with wood at an early age. "When I started messing with wood," he says, "I was about 10 or 11. I just played around with it. I fell in love with the wood lathe later on."

The wood lathe, he points out, is no tool for a child to start out on. He first learned to respect it when he saw a film on the accidents common in the woodworking field. "I think it's appropriate for every young person that gets into woodwork to be familiar with the dangers involved in this equipment. Shoot, you've got to have respect for the machinery. The way I look at it is — it cuts wood so easily, and wood is

so hard." He spreads his big hand out in front of him and allows that he likes to look at it with all the fingers intact.

Dave left Orlando after high school and the death of his mother from cancer. He planned to cover 35 states, but only made it to about 20. In 1974, on his way back from hiking the Grand Canyon, he stopped off in Austin and decided that was home. Ten years later, he is an avowed Texan. "It's the only state," he says with fervor. "The rest of 'em are not really here. It's like the song says — 'It's a Texas state of mind.' It's a good place to love. It loves you back."

The first two weeks in Austin depleted his money reserve and started a period of odd jobs as pipe fitter for weathermatic lawnsprinklers, carpet layer, tile layer, furniture finisher, and the list goes on. Somewhere down that list, Dave found time to do some trimwork. Already fascinated with wood, he saved the money to buy a van, nail gun, and compressor, and drove into Hyde Park with his mobile shop to try his hand at being a remodeling carpenter.

"I just walked up to several of those houses and said — 'Hey, do you have any parts you need made that no one else will make?'" He made it clear that he was looking for more than just run of the mill carpentry, and he landed a few jobs.

With some training under his belt, he hired on as a contractor with his own tools for Architectural Restoration, Incorporated. The first building they sent him to work on was Threadgills, where he did many of the architectural turnings for the restaurant and bar.

That was the beginning of a long line of restaurants and bars, and the start of an innocuous habit that turned on him in the end. The woodworkers would generate sawdust all day long in the bars, then wet their throats in the same bars in the afternoons and evenings to wash down the sawdust. A lot of woodworking jokes and tall tales got passed around, and a lot of alcohol was downed. "What was once casual," says Dave, "turned into a habitual drinking bout."

For Dave, drinking only emphasized his natural ebullience and intensity, so that if the straight side of him comes on strong, the drunk side was enough to knock people across the room. Realizing that drinking was wasting his time and energy, Dave gave it up.

Two weeks later, he drove past the Wooten House on 19th and Rio Grande. It had just been bought and was being restored to house an alcohol rehabilitation program. Dave knocked on the front door and asked if they could use a few architectural turnings. As it turned out, they could. Dave quit Architectural Restoration, Inc., and set up business on his own, with his first project being the Wooten House. It was no small project.

"That was real interesting," he says. "I had to do three-dimensional carvings of

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Greek Revival Capitols on top of columns." The capitols, which decorate the columns on the east side of the building, were all hand-carved, representing a whole new area of woodwork for Dave.

During most of his work on the Wooten House, Dave lived in Oak Hill. He had saved some money and was thinking of moving out of the city when he drove through Wimberley one day. Intrigued with the town, he stopped at a realtor's, and rented a house the same day. The last two capitols of the Wooten House were carved in Wimberley.

Dave figures his projects in Austin number over 60, including The Headers East Club (for non-members only) on Sixth Street, Palm Square on First and IH 35 across from the San Jacinto Building, the furniture in the Hawkeye Restaurant, and a doctor's office in the Park St. David's Tower that has cherry wood doors, gold plated Italian hardware and a marble bathroom. Dave emphasizes that he not only makes, but installs the woodwork.

Among his projects, Dave includes the salad bar at Wimberley's Cypress Creek Cafe, using wood that came off the floor of the old San Jacinto Building.

Old wood is Dave's signature. It holds a glow that newer wood cannot match, and finding the old wood is not always easy. When Dave found the station house for the MKT freight line, a building that had been standing in downtown Austin since the city was founded, he knew he had a treasure. He bought the building, tore it down, salvaging the long leaf pine, and put an ad in the newspaper to sell 100 year old pine and hand hewn beams.

The ad netted him a few connections and some even better friendships. Don Carr called first, wanting to look at the wood. In talking to Don, Dave mentioned that he needed a shop to store the wood and to work out of. Don suggested that he call the Rehmet brothers who had a recently vacated building behind their office. To-

day, Dave has a place to stack his weathered lumber and some spacious buildings out of which he works. He also counts the Rehmet's as good friends.

Another crucial friendship and working relationship emerged from the ad Dave put in the paper. A friend of his and fellow woodworker, Donald Perry, saw the ad and suggested that Dave might like to meet his boss, H. A. Connors, owner of the Farmer's Gin in San Marcos, and restaurants such as Pelicans Wharf and Captain Boomers in Austin.

Dave describes Connors as a "freak on long leaf pine," and attributes much of the recent interest in the restoration of the wood to Connors. He met Connors at the Farmer's Gin and soon started work for him on the Fish Market in Austin, a glorious rendering of faceted glass, aged wood, and brass.

For all the words Dave can fit into his conversations, maybe half of them these days, voice an appreciation for the people he counts as friends. "I would be nowhere without friends," he says. "I think I'm real lucky to have made it to Wimberley and to be straight. I'm real thankful for the friends I've made here and the acquaintances."

Drinking, he explains, was not a problem that went away easily. He gave it up before he found the Wooten House, but as work progressed, he slowly turned back to it, thinking he could handle it in measured amounts. The only problem, he figures, was that he lost track of the measures.

What followed was debt and the kind of personality changes that he looks back on now with real regret. But, as with most subjects, Dave is very candid about the situation, tying it into his life as a lesson that had to be worked through before he could get on with more important matters.

To break himself of the habit, he started attending Palmers Drug Abuse (PDAP) sessions, and the result is a chemically free lifestyle that he finds much easier to live with. "Abusing one's straight time,"

he says, "brings you down to a level that's a little below the concrete. Since I went to PDAP six months ago, my life has been filled with nothing but adventure. I get slapped with positive stuff all the time."

With a clear head came more energy for working and a return the basic religion with which he had been raised. It rests easily and generously behind his words of appreciation for a new lifestyle.

Currently Dave has enough work lined up that he is training people to help him. He mentions, in particular, the restoration of the Robinson-Macken House on Rio Grande in Austin. Theme Chancellor is helping him build the dormers for the arched windows on the house. Then, there's the phone call that came this week for work on the newest Lone Star Cafe in Austin.

The exuberance for the work is there. It straddles a kind of cocky assurance and heartfelt gratitude — unlikely bed partners, but charming. Their dynamics create a wide breadth of vision. Dave can outdream most of us outloud, and it takes a dream to accomplish one.

Part of that dream is stacked in gray piles in the yard outside the shop. That wood, the last of the Mohicans, came from the 130 year old freight storage building on the Houston-Galveston railroad, and there seems to be enough there to add a fine glow to almost any building Dave decides to put it in.

But architectural fixtures are only part of his interest. Part of his shop houses some tables and chairs. The tables, he built and hopes to display in galleries, restaurants, and magazines for potential customers. The chairs were built by the Browder brothers, woodworkers from Blue, Texas, who found Dave one day "out of the blue," he says, winning at his own pun.

The chairs are plain, sturdy furniture, with seats of black haired cowhide. To demonstrate their strength, Dave sets one on its back legs and steps on the rung, rocking it back and forth, the kind of thing everyone's mother admonishes them not to do for fear of breaking the furniture

the chair holds his weight.

They are called Jackson chairs and hold a special significance to this area because they were first designed and built by the family of Amanda Jackson Wimberley, Pleasant Wimberley's wife. The chairs are made by fitting green wood into seasoned wood, involving a shrinking and drying process that eliminates the need for nails or glue. Dave has agreed to do the turnings for the chairs, and the Browder brothers will assemble them.

They are, says Dave, durable, functional, and expensive. The kind of millwork he does may be described a lot of ways, but it cannot be called cheap. Part of the cost is the wood, itself, but most of it is the attention to detail, the historical and technical accuracy of the turnings.

"I work with people who have money," says Dave, "but the prerequisite is not that they have money, but that they have taste and know what they want." He says that people who want quality woodwork, but can't afford it should save until they can, rather than settling for work that has been done incorrectly. "That's the bottom line. If you want something, you should wait for it to be the way you want it. That's true in anything — friendships, materials."

Meanwhile the lathe keeps spinning, and Dave keeps honing the knives to a sharper point. What all that energy seems to burn for is some kind of quest for perfection. Work fascinates him — "If you turn one time," he gestures to the lathe, "you want to turn again, the results are so rewarding. You can go to the wood lathe, put wood in it, and shape free form whatever you want. It's an art form." And it's a form that teaches him something new every time he approaches it.

But the quest for perfection goes beyond the simplicity or intricacy of the wood. Each day has a new turn to it, and right now, Dave counts the turns he takes as good ones. "I think the worst thing in my life right now is I swear a little and I can't get enough work out." He shrugs and grins — "I just say, let the chips fly off the lathe, and one good turn deserves