



Antique Hardwoods

Imagine how astonishingly beautiful it must have been, every year prior 1950, to see the tree tops of the Blue Ridge Mountains, in summertime, completely covered by a snow-like canopy of white blossoms from the American chestnut tree. Now there are no such blossoms. Though it once outnumbered all other species of hardwood in U.S. forests combined—stretching down across some 200 million acres from Maine to northern Florida—the American chestnut is virtually non-existent today. Western North Carolina, at one time, boasted the third largest concentration of chestnut trees in North America. Sadly, a lethal fungus called blight, which first came into New York harbor on a single Asian chestnut tree sometime during 1904, destroyed what must have been one of the most dramatic natural features of the entire eastern United States. New Yorkers initially noticed the chestnut trees in Central Park turning gray, dropping their leaves and dying. A few short decades later, over 4 billion American chestnut trees had been claimed by this ecological nightmare. Whereas our forests were once literally teeming with specimens of up to a recorded ten feet in diameter, chestnut trees today grow only as saplings that die once they reach diameters of only three or four inches. The American chestnut tree is essentially gone.

Many folks like former President Jimmy Carter, whose boyhood home in Georgia stood on the southernmost outskirts of the chestnut's natural habitat, recall and lament what it was like to lose the nut-bearing trees that provided basic sustenance to many rural economies and a multitude of wildlife. His book of depression-era stories, *An Hour Before Daylight*, relates how every year he and his family gathered nuts from a giant chestnut tree for his birthday in October. "When I took a few chestnuts to school with me," he says, "I could swap each one for a good marble." But by the time he returned from the Navy, most trees had been killed by the blight—along with the tradition of sustaining families through harsh winters by using the glossy nuts to fatten livestock and selling any excess for consumption in larger cities.

Today, President Carter is the champion and spokesperson of The American Chestnut Foundation, which currently owns the only group of American chestnuts still thriving and unaffected today—a small stand of about 20 trees in Wisconsin that arborists study furiously. The foundation one day hopes to hybridize and reintroduce the chestnut tree back into the mountains, and has met with some success in their efforts to cross-breed American chestnuts with the naturally blight-resistant Chinese chestnut. The best work, however, is still to come. It will take patience and a good deal of scientific ad-

vancement to realize the foundation's long-term goal because, even if it were possible to plant trees capable of reaching maturity, it would take as much as 150 years to grow examples comparable in size to those that were lost. Consequently, there will likely never be chestnut populations approaching the sheer multitudes to which our forbearers were accustomed.

The American chestnut was significant and beneficial to Appalachia because it provided the finest material for virtually everything from barn-making to furniture to musical instruments. Its ability to grow straight and branch-free for over fifty feet, its natural rot resistance (like cedar), its relatively light weight (compared to oak), and its easy workability made it extremely valuable to local economies and to farmers erecting structures completely by hand. As such, even the most casual country drive confronts us with what is left of that vanishing agricultural heritage.

The abundance of old buildings—barns and farmhouses—is in many ways *the* vernacular and architectural language of the region. While most of the antique farmhouses are now variously restored or have been completely torn down and replaced with new homes, barns often still stand. You can not help but notice the old double-crib and tobacco barns that dot the landscape, fill small clearings, and nestle up against steep hillsides. They are beautiful in a way that only necessity and

time can produce. They are modest and yet noble even though they lack the elaborate cupolas and masonry found on Northeastern barns, which can be up to twenty times larger. Appalachian barns are straightforward, unpretentious, and have the dignity of many years of steady service. The fact that they lean and slowly give up portions of themselves to weather and rot and neglect only reinforces the effect they have on the popular imagination.

People, like Zachary Guy, absolutely love the look of old barns and love to re-purpose their wood in unique and unexpected ways.

Zac is the owner of Appalachian Antique Hardwoods of Waynesville—the Southeast's largest and most respected specialist in antique timber reclaimed locally and everywhere east of the Mississippi. He knows more about vintage barns and the different species of wood they contain than anybody you will ever meet. He began tearing down old structures in WNC while he was still in high school and since 1996 has turned his passion and enthusiasm into a very successful company. Appalachian Antique Hardwoods has sourced wood for clients such as Tom Hanks, Liv Tyler, Rusty Wallace, and Clint Black. And on average, Zac and his team take down two structures a week—about half of which are local—to sell in all 50 states and several foreign countries. Since it is increasingly rare to find buildings made completely from chestnut, he has resorted to the use of horses to dredge virgin chestnut logs from creek beds and even used helicopters to access remote sites. His company currently holds about 200 barns, cabins, mills, and factories to draw from as needed.

Zac is also the only person endorsed by The American Chestnut Foundation. When visitors to the foundation's website click on a link to purchase reclaimed chestnut they see a short biography and information about Appalachian Antique Hardwoods' products. For each purchase made through the link, Zac donates 15% to fund research in the hopes that American chestnuts may once again flourish. "Maybe my grandkids," he says with his characteristically can-do optimism, "will get to see big chestnut trees." Until then, "the only way get chestnut wood is to reclaim it."

The intricate network of architects, builders, craftsmen, and hunters of historic structures Zac has established over the years allows him to provide homeowners like Mr. and Mrs. Gil Culbreth, whose lovely new 5000 sq. ft. vacation home is pictured here, with the opportunity to, as he says, "make history...again." The Culbreth's Waynesville home, built by Scott Campbell of Campbell Construction, is an extraordinary showcase of the effects achieved through extensive use of reclaimed lumber. It is amazingly warm and well-built, with a substantial feeling that belies its new construction. The antique wood imparts an easy elegance all but unattainable with new materials. The home uses not only expensive chestnut but vintage hickory for its tongue and groove flooring and kitchen cabinetry, poplar bark siding for interior wall coverings, and hand-hewn oak timbers for trim work and baseboards. Zac even disassembled an 1860 northern Kentucky log cabin and re-erected it on the home's lower level as a bar.

One of the most interesting aspects of what Appalachian Antique Hardwoods does for its clients is to provide a portfolio

and framed print at the end of every job containing any history, pictures and stories about the vintage architecture used in each project. In the portfolios, the buildings are shown both in their original state and in the process of being taken down to procure the wood. "The stories are what people are interested in," Zac says, "not just the look." Customers want a conversation piece, a sense of place *and* to feel like they are doing something to celebrate and preserve a rich pioneer and agricultural legacy. Many people even want a hand in taking down the structures reclaimed for their particular job. Appalachian Antique Hardwoods consistently has clients who already have a neglected building somewhere on their property and want to make use of that material in their present homes—people after Zac's own heart. He gets "cold chills," he says "every time [he] take[s] one of these barns down because it's taking something down that a group of men put up a hundred years ago. You can see their axe marks, and where their hammers have hit the wood."

For Zac and most of his clients, the point is not simply to have what others do not but to somehow keep the past alive. Customers also want to find the best and most intriguing materials for their homes. Reclaimed wood is an outstanding choice because its rich patina and overall look is superior to new lumber. It is also much higher quality, far more dimensionally stable, and rapidly adapts to changes in temperature and humidity—having been exposed to years of wind, sleet, snow, rain and hail. Because the pores of vintage timbers are fully open, they can be soaked, yet will dry out in just a couple of days. New lumber, on the other hand, will retain moisture and may twist or warp. Expertly reclaimed wood is, frankly, the finest material you can buy even with a price often less than imagined. "It's not rocket science to go out and tear down a barn," Zac explains, "but it is to tear down a barn and extract only the highest quality lumber that will make the best wide-plank flooring, kitchen cabinetry, custom moldings and hand-made doors. You really have to know what you're looking for and have to hand-select only the best boards."

Naturally, the rarity of chestnut ensures its higher cost over many other woods—vintage oak, pine or maple flooring, for example, which are typically *less* than the cost of what can be purchased in hardware stores. In this way, almost everybody has the opportunity to incorporate some type of antique wood into their new construction or existing home. The only limits are a lack of imagination and resourcefulness. Regardless of the price, each board has a distinct look, uniquely raised grain and characteristic nail or worm holes. Each application of old lumber somehow manages to produce results that are interesting to look at *and* practical. Those who use antique woods know that every timber, every cut, every surface tells a story. They speak to a certain continuity between the past and present and provide an opportunity to make every day a celebration of a nearly-forgotten way of life. This region's history is in many ways tied up with the process of finding what is most useful and not wasting it. Recycling old wood is one way to continue that history. *PM*

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