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Hewing to tradition with his bare hands

Larry Williams carves Windsor chairs, an American classic, the old-fashioned way.

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(Ken Hively / LAT)

October 2, 2003

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By Janet Eastman, Times Staff Writer

Larry Williams is ready to attack. He bends his knees, braces his arms against his thighs and digs a medieval ax — a gutter adz — into a piece of pine, chomping slices here and there like a frenzied woodchuck. In seconds, a flurry of chips covers the floor of his Sun Valley workshop.

Stopping an inch short of breaking through the pine oval slab, he sets down the broad blade and catches his breath. Then he picks up a scorp, a knife shaped like a horseshoe, and scrapes away some of the rough parts. He uses a compass plane to shave even more and finally a travisher, another old-timer's cutting tool, to finesse what is now, three hours later, a smooth, concave seat.

Carving a chair by hand is hard work, especially for Williams, who specializes in making Windsor chairs the way the colonists did in the 18th century. It takes time, skill and sharp tools to bend U-shaped arms and bow backs, and sculpt spindles and legs.

But each chair is worth it. In three years, Williams has made more than 300 chairs from scratch, about two a week. He brands his logo under the seats and sells them for \$550 to \$1,195. One couple recently ordered high-backs and low-backs for their Westside home. "They dropped \$12,000 as if they were picking up shoes," says Williams, still slightly amazed.

Since the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, Williams has noticed more interest in patriotic furnishings from the late Colonial and Federal periods. The chairs also attract people who appreciate the craftsmanship, and their simplicity works with many decors. There is even a contemporary version made of steel, though not by Williams.

Windsors flourished in early America because of their informal appearance, durability and inexpensive price. Although inspired by chairs used in the gardens of the English castle for which they were named, hundreds of thousands of them were handmade in the United States and shipped all over the world until machines took over in the 1830s.

Benches, cradles and rocking chairs mimicked their style. George Washington used dozens of Windsors at Mt. Vernon. Thomas Jefferson sat in one to sketch out the Declaration of Independence. Even modest homes had them, washed in milk-based paints of Lexington green, barn red and black. A sack-back style

would have cost \$2 then; one made in 1790 sold for \$120,000 in a New York auction two years ago.

Because of increased interest, more woodworkers are learning to make the chairs the old-fashioned way. In the last 10 years, the Windsor Institute in New Hampshire has taught 6,500 people, including Williams, to steam-bend wood, cut pieces and assemble them to withstand heavy use. About one-tenth of the students set out to make the chairs for a living, says institute founder Mike Dunbar.

Because pieces are not identical, decisions have to be made at each step, slowing down the work. What angle should the outside spindle be, compared with the inside ones? Answering correctly requires experience and craftsmanship.

"I hadn't planned on making this a business," says Williams, who was a carpenter, house framer and Jacuzzi builder before focusing on chair-making. "I fell in love with the process and the romance of it. Some guy was using these tools 250 years ago to make the same chairs I'm making."

The beauty of Windsors rests in the saddle seat. Other "stick-built" chairs of the time were made with mortise-and-tenon joints that can loosen. But Windsors hold up for centuries because their tapered hardwood legs and spindles are socketed into soft pine seats. Sitting on the seat makes the fit tighter.

Another difference is that chairs such as ladder-backs use one piece of wood for the back and legs, with the seat attached. That makes them rigid. Windsors' backs and legs are independent of each other. The back spindles can be angled, allowing them to flex.

"Because the spindles are graceful, people are afraid to sit in the chairs," says Williams, "but they are tremendously strong and they bend. Our forefathers came up with the engineering to make their chairs stay together. These were smart guys."

Factory-made chairs rely on nails and screws; Williams and other purists use only glue. "Seventy percent of chairs in stores are Windsor knockoffs," he says. "But they're bulky with no form, no structure, no integrity."

Williams does it all by himself, selecting the hickory, oak and pine and splitting the logs by hand to protect the grain. "When I take a log and make it into a chair, I'm being challenged," he says. "With a hand tool, I can feel the grain and it steers me in shaping the pieces. The end result is I feel productive and it satisfies the artist in me."

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