



LEFT: The Cochrans of Wood Studio (from left): Randy, Keith, and Dylan.
BELOW: Working by hand



We're all wood nerds—we pay attention to the wood we use," Randy Cochran says. "That's what the guys did who built furniture that's still around after 300 or 400 years. They understood wood."

Like those master craftsmen, Randy and his sons, Keith and Dylan, create furniture meant to last for centuries, while saving centuries-old trees at their Wood Studio. It's located on 30 acres at the edge of the Bankhead National Forest near Arley, 45 minutes southwest of Cullman.

Working from a shop they designed and built, the father-sons team turns out custom-made furniture and cabinetry. Their Lookout Mountain Rocker has been featured in Robert Redford's Sundance catalog and honored by The Furniture Society, a nonprofit organization of professional woodworkers from the United States and Canada.

"We make sure our things are well built," says Dylan, Randy's younger son. "The only thing we don't make is furniture that's fast and cheap."

Dylan and Keith inherited their passion for quality woodworking from their father, an exacting man. After earning a degree in business administration from Auburn University in 1969, Randy went to work for a furniture machinery manufacturing

Just Call Them Wood Nerds

Randy Cochran and his sons craft old-fashioned, fine furniture from hardwoods.

BY LAURA HELBLING



Dylan at work



Traditional tools, no machines

company and didn't like what he saw.

"Guys were just throwing wood into machines we built and letting them do all the work," he says. "They were building furniture out of particle board with pretty paper pasted on the outside. It looked okay, but if you bumped a piece, it'd turn to sawdust, because that's all particle board is, sawdust and glue."

Randy left that company in 1987 and opened the Wood Studio. His goal was to make furniture *his* way, using quality hardwoods and original designs. "I've never been enamored of the same designs that have been around for hundreds of years," he says. "I've got a buddy who makes Windsor chairs. They've been making those things for 600 years, and they're still based on the same design. I always tell him, 'You'd think somebody would get those things right one of these days.'"

Both sons set out on their own for a while. Keith, 36, earned a degree in industrial design from Auburn, while



Keith (right), with Dylan, relaxes in the family rocker

Hand Built and Energy Efficient

In addition to putting a 4,000-square-foot woodworking shop on the first floor of their house in Arley, the Cochrans constructed an apartment on the second where Dylan lives while working on special orders. "We've been adding to it for five years now and are pretty close to being finished with the place," Keith says. While constructing the building, the Cochrans used several energy-saving and recycled elements

including the following.

- Insulation made from old newspapers (which contain recycled fiber)
- Quarter-inch tempered thermal glass in the windows and skylights
- A hydronic system that runs hot water from a small boiler through pipes in the floor to heat the building
- Beams salvaged from an old tobacco warehouse and trees downed by a hurricane for the building's frame and interior walls

Dylan, 34, got a degree in wildlife biology from the same school. But they never got far from their inherited love of working with wood.

"We grew up making furniture with Dad," Keith says. "We still have a lot of those pieces, as well as a rocking chair our great-great uncle made more than 100 years ago. It's not anything fancy, but the attention that went into it is unbelievable. That's the kind of furniture we're making today."

All their pieces, which use Southern hardwoods, are sanded, turned, and varnished. "A lot of woodworkers use exotic woods from South America and ignore our own woods like sassafras, ash, cherry, oak, walnut, and maple," Randy explains. "That's a wonderful range of native materials they're missing."



Randy, left, and Keith in the early stages of another rocker

The Cochrans find their raw material in demolished buildings and salvaged trees. "Spring storms come through every year and blow down some really awesome trees," Keith says. "We find wood all over—we even have some from cherry trees damaged by a tornado at The Hermitage, Andrew Jackson's home in Nashville."

Once the wood arrives at the shop, it's stacked and air-dried. "A lot of furniture-makers dry their wood in a kiln," Randy says. "That's faster, but it ruptures the inner cells of the wood and can make it brittle. Air drying takes a couple of years, but nearly everything we do takes more time. There's really a lot of preparation, knowledge, and skill that goes into preparing the wood so you can make a chair that hopefully is going to hold together for 100 to 200 years. We're kind of nerdy that way." *

LEARN MORE: Visit woodstudio.com, or see the Cochrans' furniture at Clay Scot Artworks, 2915 Highland Avenue, Birmingham, AL 35205; clayscot.com or (205) 326-2350.

RANDY'S FAVORITE *Wood Studio Pieces*



DETAIL WE LOVE:
The elegant simplicity of two woods joined in an age-old technique to form a motif at the front of the chair arms



DETAIL WE LOVE:
The small but ornate addition of brass pins for a clean and decorative element



Lookout Mountain Rocker

"I designed this when Keith and Dylan were babies. It has a suspended seat and back made from hand-stretched saddle leather. I designed it so when somebody sits down in it, their weight draws the frame together. That makes for a sturdy chair with a smooth rocking motion."

Beersheba Swing

"It's pronounced 'Bursh-ba.' It's a version of a porch swing that was popular around Beersheba Springs, Tennessee, in the late 1800s. It hangs by four mule-harness trace chains, so it'll swing a whole family without falling."

Little Wills Stool

"It's a combination seat, table, and footstool I designed when I had a tiny office. The frame is made out of American black walnut or red oak, and the top is a piece of saddle-grade leather that pulls the stool's legs together. It's a tough little piece of furniture."