

BACKWOODS CHAIRMAKERS

In Search of the Appalachian Ladderback Chairmaker

By Andrew D. Glenn



with a foreword by Curtis Buchanan





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(opposite) Chester Cornett and his children. Photo courtesy of Appalshop.

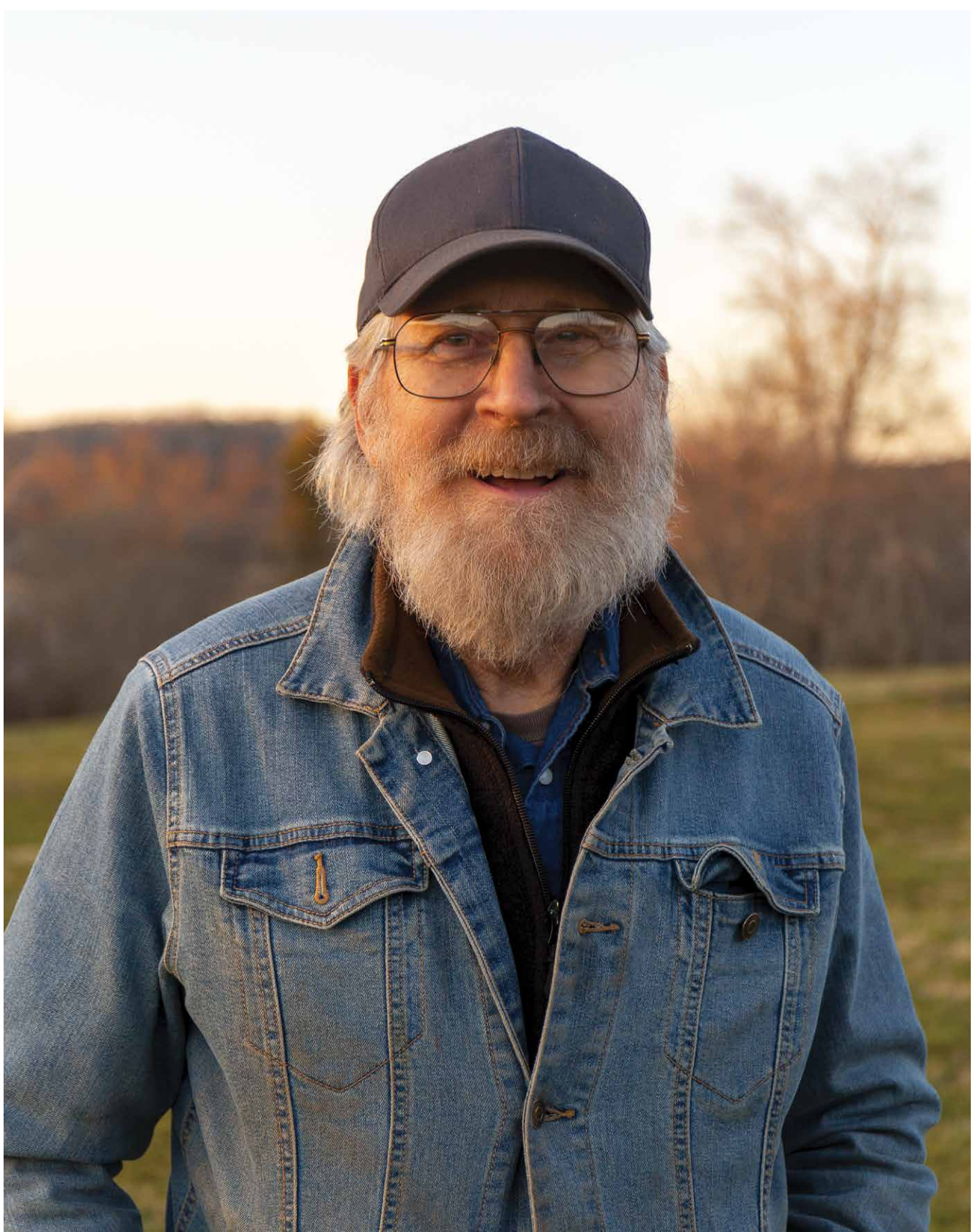


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9: Tom Donahey

“I’m not trying to be an advocate of being a chairmaker. But I feel that if a person has an interest, my knowledge should be easily available to them. I want to share my knowledge.... All the information I received was given to me. It was freely given. I feel that it should be freely passed on. Nothing I do as a chairmaker is secret or magic or anything like that.”

— Tom Donahey

BRASSTOWN, NORTH CAROLINA – Both Tom Donahey and Drew Langsner moved to Madison Country, North Carolina, in the 1970s, with an hour-long drive between their places. In 1991, Drew proposed an exchange: Tom would join one of Drew’s ladderback chair classes at Country Workshops in trade for Tom’s carpentry skills and other help around his property. Tom accepted and helped Drew upgrade the facilities on the homestead, with Tom adding plumbing, putting on a tin roof, and building a deck and stairways on a guest cabin.

The offer came at the perfect time in Tom’s life. For a decade, he left his rural mountainous home, five days a week, to work a carpentry job. It often took more than an hour to reach the jobsite. After his carpentry colleague moved away from the area, Tom reconsidered his work and aspired to work from his home.

Tom directly benefited from Drew’s teaching and generosity during his entry into chairmaking. He’d considered chairmaking before, going as far as making parts, but not completing the assembly. He’d read through Roy Underhill’s “The Woodwright’s Shop” (University of North Carolina Press, 1981) and made the shavehorse from it, but the chairs seemed beyond his skills. Country Workshops classes provided a boost. After the initial class, Drew gave Tom a small oak log, which became the first set of four chairs that Tom made on his own. The same barter happened the following year. Drew suggested that Tom take the advanced chair class with Brian Boggs. Tom found encouragement and freedom from the striking differences in the approaches employed by Drew and Brian. Tom felt as if he now had “permission” to develop his own style and ways of working.

Tom was drawn to post-and-rung chairs because few tools were needed, most of which he already owned. Jennie Alexander’s chair was available as a starting point. Also, Tom desired that his chairs be easy to build from pictures or plans or from customer input.

As most makers do, Tom adapted his techniques throughout his career. He disliked adding wet or greenwood slats to the back posts, which resulted



Red oak rocking chair with fiber rush seat. Photo by Robert Alan Grand.

(opposite) Tom Donahey. Photo by Robert Alan Grand.



Tom pulling logs with his team of horses. Image courtesy of Tom Donahey.



A customer image of a set of two-slat chairs Tom built. Image courtesy of Tom Donahey.

in gaps when the slats shrunk as they dried. He felt the patchwork was unsightly. As a labor- and wood-saving device, Tom carefully band saws, then planes the slats to the desired thickness. Because larger splits of wood are selected and prepared and he closely reads the grain, Tom finds that this method produces 70 to 100 percent more slats than splitting and shaving. It also produces slats that are more uniform in thickness, which then bend more evenly. Tom installs pre-bent slats into his chairs. He initially added the slats after putting the frame together, but that method afforded only one shot at fitting the slat. Removing a poorly fitted slat was difficult at best and sometimes required cutting it out. This frustration led him to put the front and back of the chair together first.

Tom's techniques evolved to temporarily assembling the back with dummy rungs as a way to fit and adjust the back slats. The dummy rungs are the proper length with the tenons fitting slightly loose. The back is held with clamps during test-fittings and easily comes apart to fit each slat. Using dummy rungs allows for adjusting and making corrections before the glue-up.

I inquired whether Tom considered himself an artist and received a flat "No." Followed by silence. When I sought clarification, Tom said he considered himself a craftsman; an artist would create a new form and design with each chair. That is not his intention. Tom is interested in making chairs that look good, prove durable and are comfortable.

With regards to an appealing chair, Tom thinks that the proportions must be subjectively appropriate. The seat cannot be too short or too wide. The sizes of the chair's parts must go together just right – not too heavy or light. Tom takes pains with the grain presentation in his chairs. Materials are considered and well-matched between similar parts. Another example is the grain along the bottom of slats, which should run parallel to the edge and flow from one post to the other.

Tom primarily uses red oak for his chairs for durability and strength. He likes a slimmer chair, one with shaved parts, meaning 5/8" tenons and posts about 1-1/2". Red oak allows for the 5/8" tenons without the need to add bulk to the design. He doesn't build out of poplar because the wood is too weak for thinner parts. His cherry chairs use 3/4"-diameter tenons and 1-3/4" posts to compensate. He also adds oak seat rungs to handle the stress.

He suggests a test for a properly durable chair is the ability to rock on two legs, or even one leg, without the chair failing. Tom first saw the test in a class (he can't remember who showed it) then again at a craft show, with Arval Woody demonstrating it before a crowd of onlookers. Arval called it the "Arkansas Test," steadying the chair on one leg while the maker balances on the frame. Tom had not heard the term "Arkansas Test" before and doesn't test every chair he builds in this way. He uses the technique in the same fashion as Arval when demonstrating the chair's strength before onlookers at shows and fairs.

In order for a chair to be comfortable, Tom believes its back posts should be bent. Straight-posted chairs may be easier and have a formal appearance, but they are too uncomfortable. Tom said a person would "eat and immediately leave the table."

There are two time-saving methods Tom has adopted that use machinery. Tom uses a tenon cutter to quickly form the tenons, and the drill press for cutting rung holes. These methods add to the accuracy of the non-visible aspects of a chair while decreasing its construction time. Greenwood technology affects the designs. All the parts are taken from a log; he shaves and shapes each part. Slat mortises are cut by hand. Fit and finish are all by hand, before adding a fiber-rush seat in an envelope pattern. Tom prefers the rush seat because it is handsome, cost-effective and the rush is widely available.

Defining "handmade" is an issue for craftspeople. Because Tom personally creates each piece of his chair, mostly with hand tools, he simply calls them "Tom Donahey chairs," not handmade chairs. Creating "Tom Donahey chairs" proved successful because it allowed him to work from home with a spartan lifestyle. Developing his reputation was slow but steady.

Pricing and selling is hard, which is the consistent message from a number of makers. Tom is not getting paid for the work that goes into a chair, and his prices haven't changed in 15 years. He doesn't consider himself a salesman. He used to take his chairs to shows and fairs, but has stopped doing so at this point in his career. He had success with two-thirds-scale rockers, the perfect size for a child's rocker and attractive to impulse buyers and grandparents. His three-slat dining chairs sold best at \$450. People could envision them around their table and were willing to spend for them. The mule-ear chair (close to the JA design) was priced at \$350, but it didn't sell well. His large, flowing rocker sold at \$1,100. Tom developed a few loyal customers and frequently



Two cherry chairs with snake arms. Images courtesy of Tom Donahey.



The log building behind Tom serves as his shop.



The split log. Tom works clear, straight grain for its inherent strength. Images courtesy of Tom Donahey.



Quarter-, one-third-, half- and two-thirds-scale rockers at the Hendersonville, North Carolina, Doll Show, 1993. Photo courtesy of Tom Donahey.

received calls after the shows (once his customers had time to consider their needs and weigh the decision). He always had enough work to stay busy – just enough work always came through the shop door.

Teaching classes provided a little income. Tom taught an advanced rocking chair class at Country Workshops to experienced chairmakers. Dana Hathaway, who Tom met at the Craft Fair of the Southern Highlands in Asheville, invited him to teach at the John C. Campbell Folk School from the mid-90s until 2010. These days, Tom makes fewer chairs and more shavehorses. He sells both the shavehorse plans and the built horse, selling about 50 horses a year through his Etsy site. He also offers chairmaking videos through his YouTube channel titled “Chairman Tom.”

Tom’s lived in Brasstown, North Carolina, near the John C. Campbell Folk School, since 2010. It provides an opportunity to teach “work study” people from the school to make a two-slat chair with him in their extra time. At this point in his career, Tom wants to teach people who show strong desire by searching him out, or by his invitation.

“I’m not trying to be an advocate of being a chairmaker,” he said. “But I feel that if a person has an interest, my knowledge should be easily available to them. I want to share my knowledge. That is the reason I did YouTube. All the information I received was given to me. It was freely given. I feel that it should be freely passed on. Nothing I do as a chairmaker is secret or magic or anything like that.”



Winter 1982. Image courtesy of Tom Donahey.



Three-slat dining chair with an oak splint seat. Image by Tom Donahey.



Tom demonstrating at a Craft Fair of the Southern Highlands in 1997. Image courtesy of the Southern Highland Craft Guild.