

IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WOOD

From the forest to the workshop
to the den: A tale told in trees

STORY BY MILES DEMOTT

Deep in the grouse woods along the Allegheny Plateau of northwestern Pennsylvania, the American black cherry rises from the forest floor to reach for the sky. At peak maturity, the trees are harvested, milled, and graded for their quality and potential, with the highest grades fetching the highest bids from craftsmen around the globe.

For those who work with fine wood, this variety of cherry holds particular value, for a number of reasons. First, the grain is both compelling and consistent. Second, as hardwoods go, cherry is quite malleable and easy to work with. These first two characteristics emerge immediately. The third benefit requires a bit of age, and therein lies the magic. Cherry ages beautifully and assumes a rich patina over time. Of course, the same might be said of the craftsmen who elicit the best each piece of wood has to offer by sawing, shaping, and sanding milled lumber into the seats, shelves, and sideboards that soften our human experi-

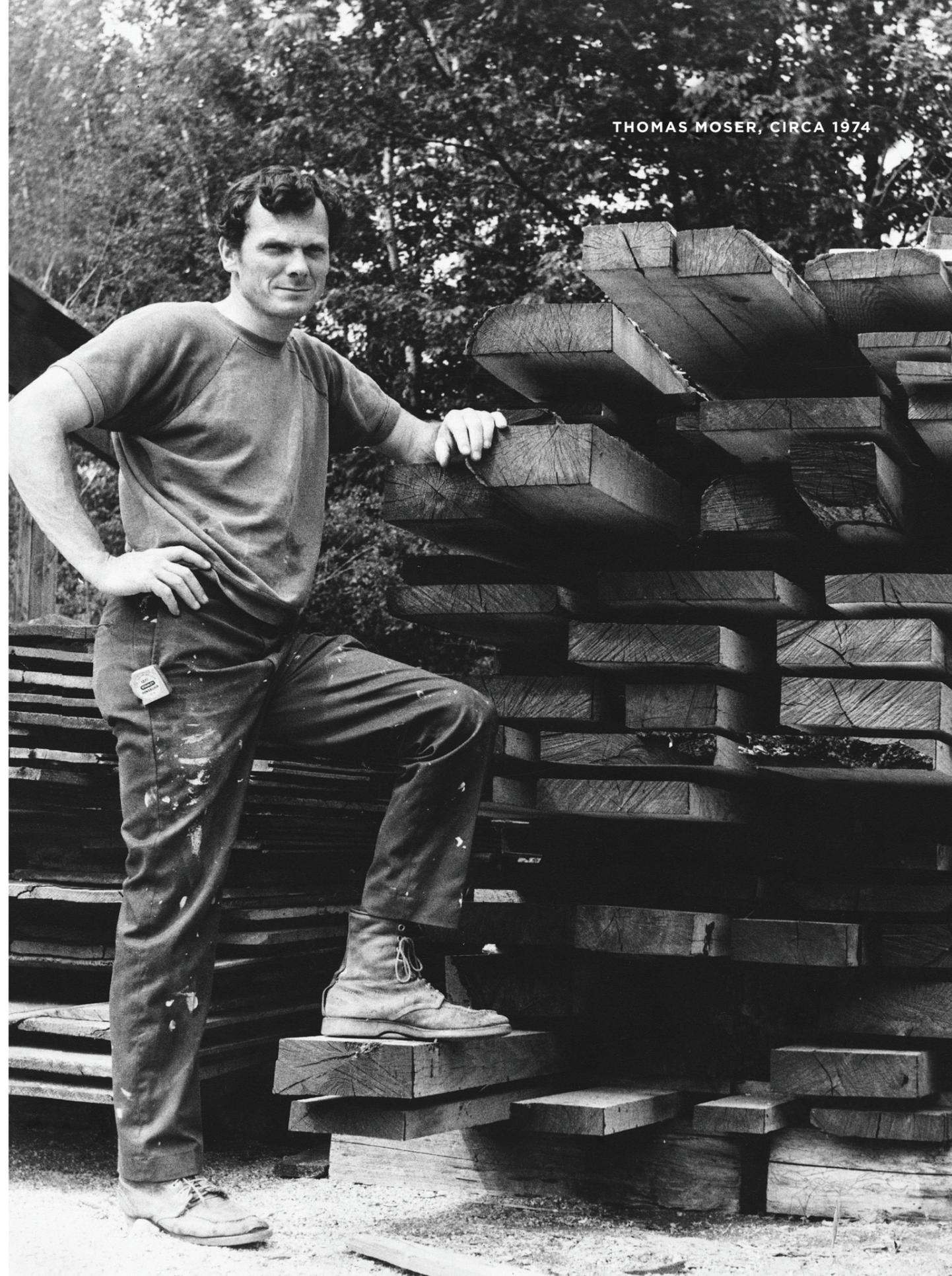
MEASURING LIFE DIFFERENTLY

Tom Moser swapped the classroom for the woodpile in designing a life for himself and his family, building a community of craftsmen and a solid body of work.

ence and offer the forest a very real legacy for generations to come. This is the story of one such craftsman and the legacy he and his family have built by hand over the last half century.

Nestled in an unassuming building in a small industrial park outside Auburn, Maine, the men and women of Thos. Moser Cabinetmakers take the finest grades of American black cherry, New England ash, and Missouri walnut and build furniture that thrives at the confluence of art and utility. The 60,000 square feet of shop space houses every woodworking tool imaginable, from the smallest chisels to sanders and planers equipped to dimension and finish even the largest tabletops. There are even those tools that defy all but the cleverest imagination, like the jig that was developed to bend thinly sliced laminates of a single piece of wood into the graceful form of the Continuous Arm Chair—Moser's trademark adaptation of the traditional Windsor form—or the 5-axis CNC router that shapes, among other things, the curved seat base of the same chair in a fraction of the time that was required when the chair was introduced in the 1970s. Back then the seat was carved from a wooden block using a variety of hand tools, including, but not limited to, a chainsaw. Let that image marinate a bit as I introduce Tom and Mary Moser, the founders of a company that has flourished against all odds.

THOMAS MOSER, CIRCA 1974

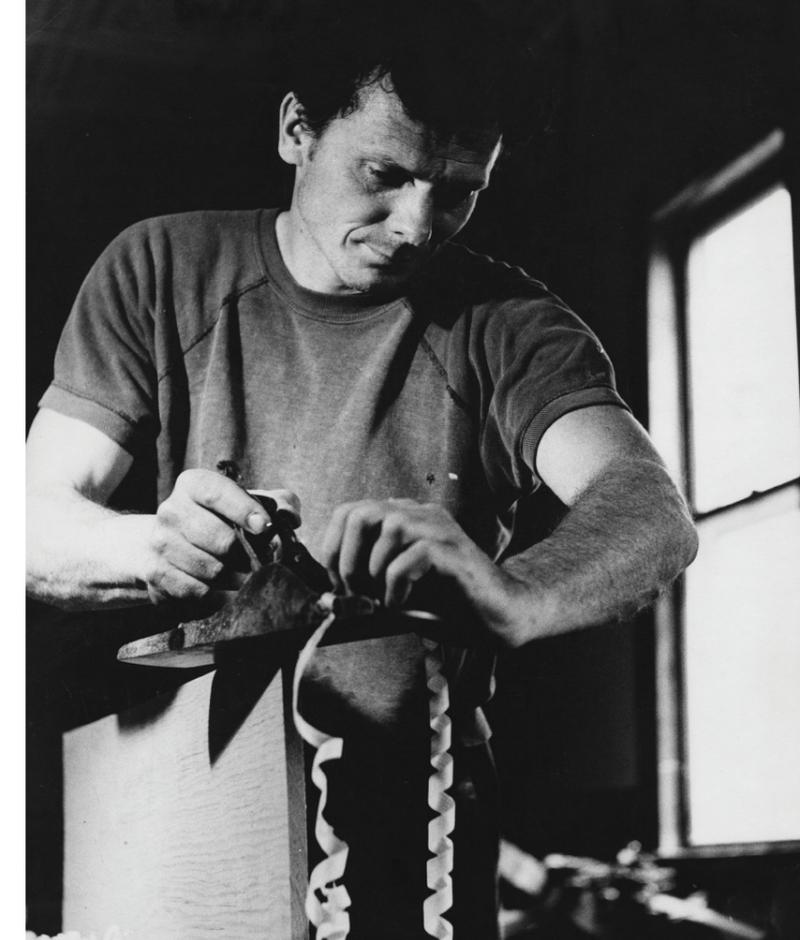


PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THOS. MOSER ARCHIVES



ROOTED IN THE FOREST

Mature cherry trees are harvested and given new life in the traditional craftsmanship Moser has celebrated for over four decades.



THE ROAD LESS TRAVELED BY

Hometown sweethearts in a way, Tom and Mary's early life together might've been described as conventional. Returning from military service, Tom enrolled at SUNY Geneseo to study speech and communication. Within a year, he and Mary were married and building their first house together, along with having the first of four sons. Tom's studies culminated in a Ph.D. and teaching positions in New York, Saudi Arabia, and finally Maine.

Along the way, he and Mary built a family, restored furniture and antiques for resale, and renovated old houses in rural Maine. This last activity was in part to supplement a young professor's income as it spread over six months to feed, but there was also, for Tom, a compulsion to build, to create, and to work with his hands, an uncommon characteristic among the professoriate. In many ways, Tom and Mary straddled the worlds of the established and the alternate lifestyle, the latter characterized by a return to authentic, hand-made products and a general weariness of mass-produced, largely plastic consumer goods.

The shop in the basement of their restored, 1700s Maine house became a place of refuge for Tom, who was becoming increasingly restless with an educational system reeling from the political and cultural upheavals that found their tipping point in the summer of 1968. Then a tenured professor at Bates College, with the job security and all the trappings, Tom

withdrew to the basement to take apart old furniture, study the craftsmanship and methods, and reproduce similar pieces. Emerging from the basement shop with a newly completed breakfast table of finished pine, Tom was met by a neighbor who offered to buy the table, and the Moser family was set on a new course.

Taking a one-year, unpaid sabbatical from Bates with the agreement that his job was secure, Tom and Mary bought the Grange Hall in New Gloucester, Maine and started a business with no clear marketing strategy, no formalized business plan, and no existing customers or contracts to propel them into the year. To be clear, they had only the barest collection of hand tools—including a chainsaw—with which to build their initial offerings, and they were milling local hardwoods from property surrounding their house to control costs. Tom worked the shop and Mary handled the business. It wasn't the first time they had risked what seemed like everything in pursuit of a dream, and it certainly wouldn't be the last. As a family, together with their four sons, they leaned into the challenge and made a go of Thos. Moser Cabinetmakers, and they've never looked back.

DESIGNING A LIFE

Their early work was mostly reproductions of Shaker pieces and established antique favorites, and within a couple of years the Mosers recognized that building the reputations of

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other brands wasn't going to help them in the long run. To root Thos. Moser in the conversation surrounding a renewal of American craftsmanship, original designs began to emerge from the New Gloucester Grange Hall, from simple tables and chests to a complex adaptation of the traditional Windsor chair that would evolve into Moser's signature piece. Mary had cultivated an interest in antiques and a sense of what would sell through a business she started—Riverside Antiques—while Tom was still in graduate school. She offered a unique historical and cultural perspective on prospective designs, as well as how and to whom they might be marketed. Since she managed the business of Thos. Moser, she also had a keen insight into what designs their customers might support.

An interest in and ability to design furniture came almost naturally to Tom. One of the many ironies surrounding the professor-turned-woodworker-turned-entrepreneur is that Tom dropped out of high school, but not before finding success and enjoyment in classes like art, drafting, and wood shop. From his early childhood days assembling model airplanes in the basement, to his teenage work designing and staging shop windows for Chicago department stores, Tom had developed a sense of place and scale that would lend itself to new furniture designs. He also had the examples of those who preceded him to draw from, with names like Sam Maloof, George Nakashima, and Hans Wegner. The processes and

products of each of these pioneers and early practitioners left a mark on both Tom's designs and the business he was building.

While his designs emanated from traditional and historical precedent, his interpretations of those earlier craftsmen resulted in iconic shapes and pieces that filled their catalogs, the homes of their customers, and the galleries that began springing up in larger markets across the country. There were large commercial installations as well, in college and university libraries and other academic settings, and—even to the untrained eye—there was something special about the furniture, from the lines of the chairs to the grain and dovetails of the casework and tables. To those familiar with the work, a room was immediately identifiable as a Moser installation.

IS IT ART OR IS IT CRAFT?

The craftsmanship of Thos. Moser designs embodies the company tagline: Handmade American Furniture. There is an artistic quality to the artisanal nature of the work that extends beyond etymology. Sure the words are related, and both stem

SHAPING GRAIN WITH GRIT

Craftsmen use a sanding wheel and later a hand sander to shape both component parts and a finished chair. Human hands and expertise guide the wood's journey, including an almost unimaginable amount of sanding.

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ELMORE DEMOTT



Theirs are the hands that create the confluence of art and function that engages our eyes, seats us comfortably, and gives new life to the mature trees of the American forest.

from a conception of art that includes the word “artifact” and reflects a time when “art” meant that an object was handmade and expressive of something uniquely human. We have since allowed “art” to assume a more idealized and less practical position in our vernacular, but Thos. Moser makes a compelling case for considering both ends of the spectrum.

There is, for example, an artistic element to each of the Moser creations, an aesthetic that, while not uniquely his own, is characteristic of Tom’s design work. It is informed by Shaker traditions—including the refrain from ornamentation—and the insistence that form follow function, a central tenet of the Bauhaus movement of the early 20th Century. More than that, though, the Moser aesthetic benefits from the long history of the Arts and Crafts Movement, itself a rejection of the industrial age and mass production in favor of handmade, human art and artifacts. The movement found its stride in Europe in the mid-19th Century and was popularized in America through the Prairie School architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright and the California Bungalow designs of Charles and Henry Greene, among others. The movement proceeded apace until the advent of Modernism, when popular culture met new manufacturing technologies, and molded plastic and plywood transformed both office spaces and suburban homes. And then came the summer of 1968 and a renewed rejection of establishment politics and industrial manufacturing processes in favor of more authentic, more human connections to the products we use. And that’s where the art meets the craft.

Every now and then, a tractor trailer load of cherry or walnut arrives in the rough mill of the Thos. Moser Cabinetmakers shop outside Auburn, Maine. A craftsman, apprenticed in cabinetmaking and experienced in the ways of wood, pulls from the stacks the boards that meet his eye and possess the dimensions required for the task at hand, be that a chair or a desk or a chest of drawers. The same craftsman envisions the project from beginning to end, because the same craftsman will build and shepherd that piece of furniture from the rough

mill to the finishing room. In addition to the chisels and hammers and other hand tools he has at his workbench, our craftsman has at his disposal all manner of saws and planers, jointers and sanders, jigs and routers that might be necessary to carve each and every constituent part of that piece of furniture from the rough plank. The parts are created and collected at the workbench for assembly multiple times to ensure fit and finish. Where it improves efficiency and creates better parts, CNC equipment is used, for example, to carve seat bottoms, cut dovetails, and turn chair legs. These parts are then added to the collection for hand assembly at the workbench, where the hands of the same craftsman touch every part through every step of the process. Those same hands sign the craftsman’s name on every piece of furniture he builds, a privilege earned after one year on the floor, and a point of pride for the men and women who share their art, practice their craft, and send the furniture they make all around the world.

ALL IN THE FAMILY

What began more than 45 years ago in a New Gloucester basement has grown beyond anyone’s expectations. Thos. Moser Galleries are sprinkled across the country, the furniture attracts a diverse but devoted clientele in both residential and commercial settings, and the craftsmen who bring it to life are some of the most skilled woodworkers in the country, if not the world. Not bad for a nutty professor and a working mother of four sons, all of whom have worked in the family business in some form or fashion over the years.

From the very beginning, though, a sense of family was integral to the community that was developing around Thos. Moser, from the first employees who sought the alternate lifestyle encouraged by the early 1970s, who viewed woodworking as an authentic cultural and philosophical pursuit, to the current shop staff, many of French-Canadian descent, who ply their trade on largely pragmatic, economic terms, never forgetting the connection between the precision of their work and their ability to support a family. And with that community of craftsmen rests the hopes and promises of Thos. Moser Cabinetmakers. Theirs are the hands that create the confluence of art and function that engages our eyes, seats us comfortably, and gives new life to the mature trees of the American forest. Theirs are the stories we share—written in the clean lines and exposed grain of every piece of furniture—across generations. ✨

WALNUT TO WINDSOR

Skilled workers align, glue, and sand spindles before finishing one of Moser’s original designs, the Continuous Arm Chair, an adaptation of a true Windsor form, built from walnut harvested from the riverbanks in Missouri.



PHOTOGRAPHY BY ELMORE DEMOTT