

I've been milling and mulling

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—I spent four days the week before Thanksgiving milling hardwood logs into rough-cut lumber. I hauled the one-inch-thick boards from the portable band-saw mill in our woods to our farm barn where I stacked and stickered them to air-dry.

I now have a nice pile of black-cherry boards, a nice pile of spalted sugar-maple boards and a nice pile of white-ash boards. In a couple of years, they will be dry enough to work. Nice piles of drying lumber age well, certainly better than the guy I see in the mirror.

Spalting is a fungus-caused discoloration in light-colored hardwoods like maple, birch and beech. It often occurs when a tree has been cut and left on the ground for a year or two where it absorbs water. Too much water and too much time will produce rot. Just enough of both causes the spalting that fine woodworkers want.

Sawmills reject spalted logs. They want to sell clear, uniform lumber for cabinetry, furniture and flooring. Artisans, in contrast, value how a little bit of rot improves the whole. It's the same idea as jazzing up sheep milk by adding the mold *Penicillium* to get Roquefort cheese.

The question now is not why I worked with a hired mill operator for four days to produce nice piles of green lumber. It is, rather, what am I going to do with these nice piles? I have means at hand, but no specific end.

As regular readers might expect, the answer to this question is (like many of my answers) fraught with, let me not mince words, fraught.

I suppose that another blanket chest could be fashioned for the heir. We already have two -- one of walnut, the other of elm -- that I've cut and milled from our woods. Just how many chests do our blankets need? Do I want to be remembered as a one-trick Daddy?

I also have to suppose that new kitchen cabinets would be welcomed by a certain party who thinks we should do better by our dishes, glasses and mugs.

Admittedly, our existing kitchen portfolio has all the virtues of 100-year-old fixtures that were cheap sheet metal to begin with. Still, they have faithfully served three families during that time without asking for a raise or better benefits. So what, if one drops a door occasionally? The horses throw shoes about every hour.

To me, these metal boxes are irreplaceable antiques and worth at least the going price of bad scrap. I refuse to see them as rusty junk. If they are tacky by current standards, so am I.

The problem with building fancy wood cabinets is that they would overwhelm a kitchen frozen in 1916, a kitchen designed to function without electricity or running water. Why slather eye mascara on a corpse, I've asked of that radical resident advocating change.

In my defense, I can honestly report that I've been thinking about remodeling the kitchen ... for 30 years. But what I have in mind is more than just hanging a few wood boxes here and carving out a nook there.

A new kitchen would inevitably require building an adjacent eating area, new basement, a fourth bathroom, pantry, storage area, mud room, laundry-freezer room, new heating system, new water system and even a four-car porte-cochere.

Construction would disrupt us for more than a year. Sawdust would rise. Patience would fall. Tempers would flare. Marital bliss would end.

Nellie, our Yellow Lab, would be traumatized by the whine of a radial-arm saw. She would hide, shake and bark. The cat would hide, swipe and hiss.

All of this would be my fault.

Eventually, I would be asked: "Why didn't you just put up a couple of nice cherry cabinets—and don't talk to me about eye liner on dead people?"

My only response would be that I often plunge in where fools fear to tread.

But "look it," as a college friend used to say. We are only two, now. How many wood drawers and shelves do two adults really need?

"If we think of our kitchen as a small galley on a very small sailboat," I have argued, "we'll do just fine."

"But it's not a small kitchen," I was informed, "it's made small by seven doors, two windows and counters that I could mail as postage stamps."

"Maybe we should chuck the whole thing and buy a big sailboat."

Captain Corky and mate? (This idea may have rigging, but I don't think it's leaving dry dock.)

Maybe we should rediscover the hidden charms of what we both agree is a kitchen that, at best, is outdated and awkward and, at less than best, barely usable and ridiculous.

And so instead of devoting my nice piles of boards to kitchen cabinets, I plan to use them for a coffin.

For me.

I would rather stuff myself into a nice spalted-maple box than some stupid old high-ball glasses. Wouldn't you?

Admittedly, the resident requester of wood products prefers something more conventional like a cupboard or even another chest for more blankets that we don't have at the moment.

Admittedly, I have a bee in my bonnet about coffins, having watched my father be guilt-tripped into buying the most expensive model after the funeral director asked him as he was about to select a mid-priced version: "Bob, do you *really* think Rena would be happy in that one?"

Rena, had she been there, would have been yelling in his ear: "Bob, you idiot, take the cheap one!" How do I know this? Because I heard her yelling it in my ear, inside out. I am my mother's son.

Rena practiced thrift, though she didn't care much for it when it was compulsory. I'm comfortable with scrimping when it's not required. Want a kitchen island? I'll set up a card table.

My father did learn a lesson about coffins. He provided in his will that I should bury him in a plain pine box, which I did.

So I will do the same favor for my family, even though they may think I am macabre and dippy to boot.

I'll make it easy for them. I don't want to be hermetically sealed or locked in a concrete vault.

But if it's to be a wood coffin, I do face the question of ornateness.

Admittedly, I am not an ornate person. I don't wear jewelry. (Prescription spectacles are not jewelry in my opinion.) I've donated my three-piece suits to the local Feed-A-Moth Fund. I keep my surroundings pretty simple—see description of Stone-Age kitchen above. I prefer straight lines to psychedelic curvy-wurvies.

The simplest coffin would be knocked together out of unplanned, unstained lumber that I would call good enough for burial work.

I could do this with the tools and skills I have. No fancy joinery. No interior decoration. No brassy handles. No aerodynamically sculpted lids. No inlays, except for me.

Or I could kick it up a notch. A local cabinetmaker could plane the lumber, round the edges with a router, dovetail me in four corners, stain me and even rub it in.

He could insert a glass bubble so I could observe who was throwing dirt on me when I was unable to defend myself.

I could hire an electrician to rig up a little solar-powered lighting system. Maybe even put in a miniature microwave and fridge.

I might want a built-in bookcase for favorite reads. A little shelf for knick-knacks. A toothbrush holder. A drawer for socks to keep my feet warm. Pegs to hang my hats.

Once you start down this slope, it gets real slippery, real fast. Slopes are like this.

I can't do anything with the boards until they dry in a few years.

I will be fully occupied during this time watching them dry, which means I won't have the opportunity to remodel the kitchen.

I'm sure that it will occur to me in time that 2,000 board feet of lumber is more than enough to make a coffin, blanket chest and kitchen cabinets.

Dilemmas of this magnitude deserve decades of hard thinking to resolve amicably. I hope to start mulling after the first of January.

Serious long-term mulling, of course, does not preclude adding to the piles that are causing the problem in the first place.

It's just another win-win outcome down here on the farm.