



Life in the Slow Lane
Earl Waters

Overalls, a suit, a smile

I was 18 years old before I got my first new suit.

That's one of the reasons why I can understand how Dan felt when he lost his new, expensive suit. More on that later.

Pictures of my father when he was young indicated he appreciated a nice suit and tie. Then the Depression came along and put him in overalls for much of the rest of his life.

During my first 18 years, I can remember my father getting just one new suit. He was proud. We were all proud when on a Sunday morning my father put on his new suit, a white shirt and a tie.

He even had new garters to hold up his Sunday-go-to-meeting socks. No well-dressed man in the 1940s would be without garters.

The poor-but-proud agrarian culture of the late '40s and early '50s was centered around church and school.

Clean clothes — a suit, no matter how old and outdated, a white shirt and tie at church or special event in the school auditorium — said that you may be poor, but you weren't trash. Your neatness underlined your pride and self-respect.

All this may seem a little strange to people whose first memories are of the 1960s, a time when hippies changed oil in their filthy jeans every 10,000 miles.

Poor rural people didn't deal with filthy jeans. Their grease is called was their motto. I never felt right until I got a suit. And then it was a heavy wool hand-me-down that didn't fit well and made me itch in summer.

My first new suit came when I was 18 and had been accepted at Berry College for its workstudy program.

Berry had a dress code that was a reflection of the agrarian culture. It required that I show up with three pairs of jeans, three blue chambray shirts, a white shirt and tie, and a dark blue suit.

I worked 10 to 12 hours a day bagging, grading and loading what is now known as the Vidalia onion so I could buy a suit.

I paid \$30 for that suit, a double-breasted blue serge. It was 1953 and the salesman didn't bother to tell me that double-breasted suits were on the way out.

At college, we borrowed and traded and sometimes I wound up wearing Poré Devil's — my roommate — white bucks.

Today, I'm not sure what happened to that first new suit. But Dan will always remember his favorite suit and what happened to it.

When I was buying my suit, Dan was just a gleam in his father's eye. Dan comes from middle-class parents who are used to dressing correctly, for the occasion, if not always in the most expensive clothes money can buy.

Despite growing up in the 1960s, Dan has always had a healthy respect for a good suit. He has never believed that clothes make the man, but he knows that a fine piece of cloth sewn with care and imagination can make a man feel better.

Dan has worn his share of torn jeans, pointed-toed, roach-killer cowboy boots, and sweat shirts with the sleeves cut off.

But for years he coveted a fine suit, a suit with that special feeling of cloth and workmanship, one custom-made that anticipates his every move and is tailored to those moves.

Dan set up a budget. This money was for the house payment. This for the car. This for the utilities. This for that special suit.

Finally, Dan brought his suit home. He was as proud of it as

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Phil Faircloth aligns the arm joints on an unfinished hardwood chair at his workshop in Rising Fawn, Ga.

— Photos by John W. Costello/The Chattanooga Times



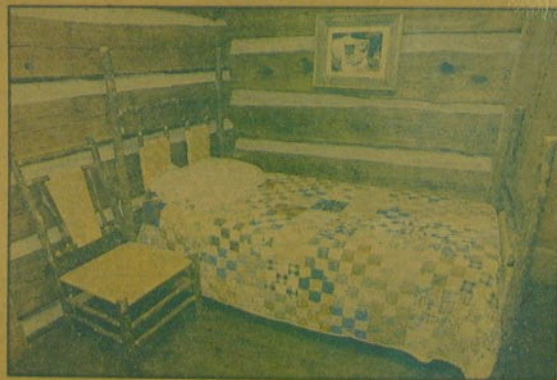
Designers are already scrambling for Faircloth's tastiest piece, a limb formation he plans to make into an end table.

Faircloth's fur'nature'

Craftsman finds art, function in the twisted trees of Georgia



Faircloth and wife Kathy spend a few leisurely minutes in the porch swing.



Faircloth's rustic beds are popular among big city interior designers.

By Mark Kennedy
The Chattanooga Times

Most people walk through the woods and see the unruliness of nature. Phil Faircloth sees furniture.

Faircloth, a designer and builder of rustic furniture, often tramps through the woods hoping to spot an elegantly turned tree limb or a gnarled branch with just the right ingredient of character.

He sees with the eyes of a craftsman — eyes that see true art in the random arcs and filigrees of living wood.

"I can see furniture in the trees as plain as day," he says, "headboards, tables, everything."

Faircloth's pieces are in great demand among collectors and interior designers from Atlanta to Manhattan. His hand-built willow chairs and tables are standard issue in Ralph Lauren boutiques across the America.

This sudden celebrity is a bit jolting for a man who used to sell his furniture from the back of a flat-bed truck — furniture he assumed would be used on front porches, not in master bedrooms.

But while selling on the roadside a curious thing happened.

Faircloth, whose daily uniform is faded overalls and a baseball cap, noticed that some of his customers were from upper-class neighborhoods. People who could afford Louis XIV furniture were suddenly smitten by Phil the First.

He points to a letter from a potential customer which has just crossed his desk. "His address is 1000 Park Ave., New York, New York," says Faircloth. "I assume that's a high-rent district."

So, why are well-heeled customers attracted to his work?

"People today are getting so far away from nature," says Faircloth. "I can't really put my finger on it, but I think they have something inside them, some natural instinct, that draws them to trees."

Faircloth's new workshop and showroom, a converted 130-year-old log home in Rising Fawn, Ga.,

near the Alabama state line, is actually a furniture laboratory. A place to tinker, create.

He calls his furniture "Appalachian rustic," a design inspired by generations of mountain craftsmen who valued utility and durability over flamboyant design. His works are also derivative of craftsmanship perfected by the Amish, a religious sect with colonies throughout the eastern United States.

The staples of Faircloth's furniture inventory are tables, chairs, headboards, canopy beds, settees, bookstands and lamps, although he can make virtually every frame-built home furnishing.

After moving to Chattanooga from Florida in 1980, Faircloth — a furniture refinisher by trade — began designing ornate chairs and beds made from young willow trees.

Unlike other hardwoods, willow shoots are pliable and can be shaped into sweeping loops and interwoven arcs. Faircloth calls his early willow pieces "whimsical," and says "It was never meant to be serious furniture."

More recently, Faircloth has begun building most of his furniture from cedar and hickory. As anyone who has ever wrestled with the ornery wood knows, hickory is nothing if not serious.

"Hickory has a more sincere look to it," explains Faircloth. "There is no fantasy about it. It's functional. It's strong. It's honest."

To sit in a hand-made hickory chair, held tight by tenon joints, is to experience a chair for the ages. With proper care, a hickory chair should easily last more than a hundred years.

Before the building begins the wood is dried in a kiln made from an old refrigerated truck trailer stationed behind Faircloth's workshop. Cured for several days at a constant 115 degrees, the wood is sapped of its moisture and becomes as hard as stone.

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