



Close to nature, close to home

Faircloth & Croker win fans nationwide

By LINDA QUIGLEY

Staff Writer

RISING FAWN, Ga. — A peeling outdoor thermometer advertising Pollack Wheeling Stogies measures the late spring temperature at 72 degrees, just right for settin' a spell on the front porch.

Lord knows there's plenty of chairs, since the long front porch is an extension of the "showroom."

The showroom is actually just the "front room" of a 120-year-old log house that Phil Faircloth and Joe Croker have turned into headquarters for a handcrafted furniture business.

Their creations of chairs, tables, porch swings, beds, settees, benches and even a "throne" in bent willow, hickory, cedar and other hardwoods have drawn the attention of big names in decorating and publishing, like Ralph Lauren, Mary Emmerling, *House and Garden* and *The New York Times*.

Faircloth, who said he has "always fooled around with furniture," insists that the two "didn't have the talent when we started."

"The more you do, the more you can do," said Croker, who was a carpenter by trade.

Doing more and more is what they're up to these days, as orders for stock items and custom designs of their rustic folk art come from decorators around the country. The business has grown rapidly since the two half-brothers, who were raised together, tired of the bustle of Orlando, Fla., and came back to their northwest Georgia home.

"The rest of Georgia kind of forgets about this county," Faircloth said of the area around Rising Fawn, population 100.

It is in that restful atmosphere, under the shade of a huge maple tree at least double the age of the house, that Faircloth & Croker thrives. "You couldn't find a better showroom," Croker said.

"Furniture like this cannot be produced in a factory," their catalog tells potential customers. "It has to be built where it is conceived, in the dense thickets of a mountain valley. That is why Phil and Joe continue to work in the natural surroundings. ... Perhaps it is not the most efficient environment, but they feel it is more important to be closer to nature, closer to family and closer to God."

They find their inspiration as they search the wooded hills. "After a while, you just know. You can look up in a tree and see the fork of a

branch and it tells you something," Croker said.

The wood they use does not damage the forests. "A lot of the stuff we cut is undergrowth," Faircloth said. "If we didn't take it, it would eventually starve out and die anyway."

He pointed to some of the cedar furniture, with pieces of wood only a couple of inches in diameter showing age rings of 30-40 years. "This was taken from undergrowth. It was so stunted that it stayed real small."

Once they've gathered the wood — Faircloth focuses on hickory, cedar and hardwoods, while Croker concentrates on bent willow and intricate mosaic work — they bend it and dry it without modern factory methods. Their kiln is in a trailer behind the house; the wood is bent through a seemingly makeshift, but effective, arrangement of pipes lining the workroom walls.

That, along with inspiration and talent and a measure of sweat, is about all it takes. (Well, you

also have to know to harvest hickory when the sap's down so the bark won't fall off, and to shape the willow while it's still green, and maybe to keep an eye out for wild and woolly things in the woods...)

"You'll see a piece of wood that gives you an idea, but you won't have just the right pieces to go with it," Croker said. "Then two or three things come together at once. Those are the fun things."

When it all comes together — and it does, eventually — the two furniture makers/artists add to their stock of "staples" — the armchairs and rockers in a dozen or so styles (as well as several hand-rubbed and handpainted finishes).

"These are always big sellers," Faircloth said. And they have been ever since the two, individually and together, peddled their wares off the back end of a pickup truck parked on the side of the highway.

"We started out with chairs and love seats, but people demanded more," Faircloth said. "We try never to turn anything down. Some maybe don't work out as well as others, but we learn."

They've refined their techniques, and learned some things through trial and error, but their attention to the basics of their craft remains the same: All the hickory and cedar furniture is constructed in the mortise and tenon method. That means the openings are created and the poles



The furniture made by Joe Croker, standing, and Phil Faircloth, is displayed in the century-old farmhouse in northwest Georgia.



P. Casey Daley ● Staff



Phil Faircloth made this canopy branch bed of cedar taken from undergrowth along the limestone ridges of the Appalachian mountains near his workplace in Rising Fawn, Ga. To the left of the bed, a willow heart plant stand and white three-holer birdhouse are more of the handcrafted creations of Faircloth & Croker. The Southern tradition of building rustic birdhouses is thriving. The house at left, the Rising Fawn Grocery, is one of many designed by Phil Faircloth and handpainted by his wife, Kathy, as part of their handcrafted furniture and accessories business.

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are put into them, which allows the wood's natural expansion to tighten the joints securely. As the furniture ages, joints become tighter and the furniture becomes even more solid.

Even the armchairs and rockers that are made in larger numbers don't come anything close to assembly-line production.

"Everything is one of a kind," Faircloth said, pointing out that every chair rung is individually picked from those that have been cut. The furniture makers and their helpers

don't grab just any four; they compare the shape and bark and choose accordingly. This is folk art, not a furniture factory.

Their employees are from the area around Rising Fawn, and they know the land and the community. One of them, their caner, has been blind since birth and relies solely on his fingertips for the exacting work.

Faircloth's wife, Kathy, and the oldest of their four children, Ryan, 15, are also part of the Faircloth & Croker operation. Ryan — who is "getting really good," his father

said — is making chairs, and Kathy is doing a variety of small pieces, as well as the painting on the birdhouses her husband designs.

The birdhouses, which are one of the many additions to the original line, are particularly fun. "You let your imagination go. It seems like the crazier you get, the better people like 'em," Faircloth said.

The little advertising signs and whimsical touches make them a joy to examine. The furniture, with every piece enhanced by the unique growth of the branches that it came from, is worthy of careful examina-

tion too.

That's why Faircloth and Croker like showing it off in the big, old, country house.

"In the wintertime we have a big fire in the fireplace," Croker said. "People come to look and stay for hours. We're having a real good time." ■

Faircloth & Croker is on Highway 11 South, Rising Fawn, Ga., about 20 miles south of Chattanooga. For information on catalogs or visits to the showroom, call 404-398-2756.