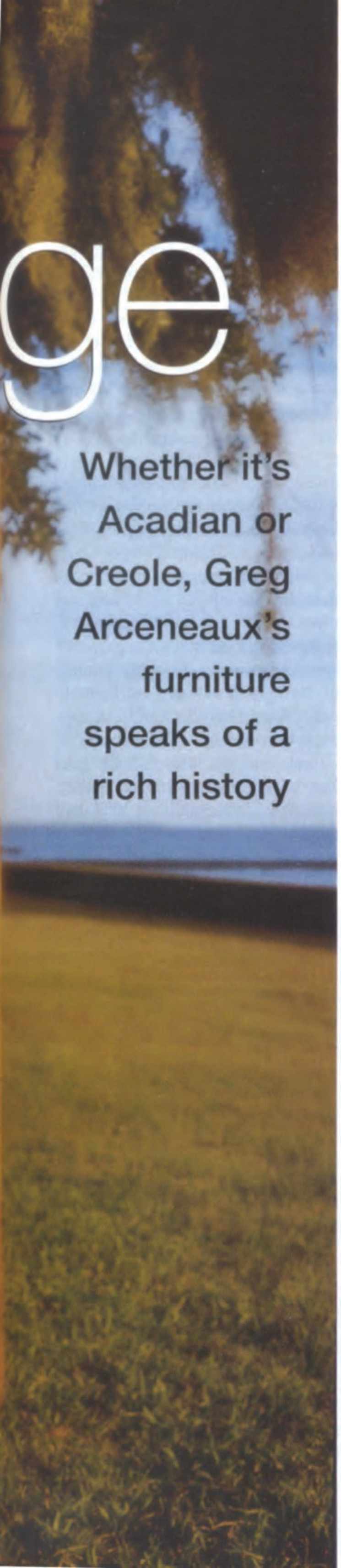
Louisiana herita

furniture



Louisiana's culture and people are as diverse—and sometimes mysterious—as gumbo ingredients. Discovered and claimed by the French in 1682, the vast area of Mississippi River Valley, bayous, and coastal plain that became Louisiana was influenced at times in its history by the Spanish, then American settlers after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Between 1760 and 1790, nearly 17,000 French people from Acadia in eastern Canada arrived, driven from their homes by the British. All the while, trickles of immigrants from Western Europe, and even Haiti, Jamaica, and other islands filtered in to blend a rich heritage.

Covington, Louisiana, craftsman Greg Arceneaux, 50, traces his ancestry in the state to the early 1700s, when long-ago relatives from French Canada settled on land grants from the French government. To him, the state's history and culture aren't as muddled as jambalaya.

"Creoles are descendants of the original French explorers and French-speaking Spanish colonists," he explains, "and usually represented the upper classes in old New Orleans and South Louisiana for nearly 200 years. Acadians are those whose French families originated in English Canada—basically owing their living to fishing and farming. Now, their descendants are what most people refer to when they say 'Cajun.' Anglos recall an American-English heritage."

Utilitarian art

Greg, now known in the state for the Louisiana-heritage furniture that comes out of his five-man workshop, began his woodworking career as an art student. "I went to Louisiana State in the early seventies with art in mind," he says. "Once there, I focused on sculpture. My teacher was a true artist in wood, so from him I did learn about hand and power tools and how to use them. But after two years, I realized that art alone wasn't fulfilling enough. I wanted to do something that impacted people's daily lives, not just the lives of those who appreciated art. Eventually, I came to the conclusion that furniture had the same artistic quality to it as sculpture, but it was utilitarian, too."

Even at that point, though, Greg was designing furniture in the rustic style. So when he left school to "deal with the real world" as a carpenter's apprentice, he set up a small shop in Lafayette and began building what he had designed. "With my Dad's help, I got a radial-arm saw, a circular saw, and a few hand tools; all I needed for rustic furniture," he recalls. "My first chairs were made from cherry saplings with the bark on—all mortise-and-tenon joinery. Then, because there's a tradition in Cajun country of using 'hide' seats—stretched rawhide with the hair still on—I took those chairs to an old man to have them done in black and white cowhide."

Greg's desire to further understand how furniture was made grew as he worked. He learned what he could, where he could, and kept on building, buying tools

Liz, Greg's wife and partner, studies a furniture reference book at the Creole-style, cypress dining table. The buffet, small chair, and box behind her are all based on early Louisiana pieces.

Greg freehands cypress through the bandsaw to rough out a cabriole leg.

as needed. Finally, he abandoned his carpentry to focus on woodworking. "But I was just scraping by making furniture and doing some millwork, like tapered posts for porches," he remembers. "Then I got a job at the natural history museum in Lafayette as head of exhibits," Greg says. "I built the bookcases, library tables, display cases, shutters, and did trim work. It ended up being 10 years of really great experience."

From there, Greg went on his own once again, building furniture of his design as well as commissions. "That's when I really became curious about heritage furniture. It was a time of a cultural rebirth of the French tradition in Louisiana," he recalls. "A lot of people in my generation saw that rich culture being eroded, the very thing that made Louisiana special.

"My family had been in Louisiana for centuries, but I really hadn't been truly aware of that wonderful heritage until then," he continues. "And I was, by definition, really a Creole."

A heritage discovered

"Even as a high school student I liked antiques," comments Greg. "Yet I didn't see much old French-style furniture around—meaning Acadian and Creole. (See sidebar *below*, "Acadian and Creole: What's the difference?") But I have to say that the distinctions between the two are ones that I draw. Historians may not have the same conclusions because I don't think the styles have been studied that much.

"Anyway, I wondered where it was," he continues. "It turned out that what was left was mostly in museums, plantations, and other historic sites. My theory about why there is so little left is that the Mississippi River Valley has always been prone to flooding, and the early French settlers lived along the rivers. Therefore the furniture suffered. And the way furniture was passed down also differed a lot from what is done today.

"People back then didn't want to inherit their parents' or grandparents' stuff because they believed that their spirits came with it," he recants. "I've read and heard about people piling belongings up and burning them! Some also got stashed in barns. In fact, many of the finest Creole and Acadian pieces have been found in barns under a pile of old oil cans. And of course, the weather and insects took their toll, too, especially in south Louisiana."

Furniture that recalls the past

"It was only in the last 10 years or so that I seriously focused on developing this Louisiana style of furniture," says Greg "Before then, I was building anything to help me make a living."

In the late 1980s Greg was instrumental in forming the Louisiana Furnishings Industry Association. For an annual meeting, the group brought in Thomas Moser, the Maine designer and furniture-maker renown for his Shaker-inspired pieces. Greg and his wife Liz became good friends with Thomas Moser, as they still are today. "He really helped me focus on what was necessary to create a distinctive furniture line," says the craftsman. "I give him credit for helping me

Acadian and Creole: What's the difference?

Greg likes to call his pieces "American French" or "Creole- and Acadian-inspired." He explains: "It's a distinct style. My Creole pieces have aspects of French Provincial furniture, but not all of the intricate moldings and carvings. For instance, I like the curve of the cabriole leg in the Creole pieces and the sense of motion that it creates (see photo *right*). You get the feeling that the piece could get up and walk away. You don't get that out of the angular, more simple Acadian pieces (see photo *left*). They reflect the rural, agrarian nature of Acadian life. Creole pieces also usually have ornamentation in the form of a scalloped apron on an armoire, table, or case piece," he points out. "There's this essence of Old World design, but the focal point is the wood that was available in the New World."

develop furniture that has become distinctive and recognizable.

"I think early Louisiana furniture is a beautiful form, and fairly classic," he adds. "With its simple lines, it stands up well with traditional styles and also mixes easily with contemporary because of the simple detail."

For his line of furniture that ranges from $400 for a lamp table to $12,000 for an armoire, Greg employs many of the same woods that early Louisianans would have used. In his shop you'll find stacks of cypress—dense "sinker" stock from recovered sunken logs; recycled boards sawn from building timbers; and young, second-growth wood. Then there's cherry, longleaf pine, walnut, hickory, and pecan. Some mahogany occasionally shows up, too. It would have been available in 18th-century New Orleans because of the city's seaport stature.

Missing are the now noncommercial woods that would have been put to use. "Mulberry went into a lot of chairs," Greg notes, "and redbay became furniture, but you can't find it now. And oak, although available, was hardly ever used back then."

Greg, however, despite the other wood he has on hand, bases his furniture line on cypress. "Here, people are very taken with cypress," he points out. "At one time, the trees were huge—150' tall with trunks 18' in diameter. And what amazes me is that they cut them all down—all gone by the early 1930s. Then the cypress cutters moved to the Pacific Northwest because they had the technology to cut big, buttressed trees. Why, we don't even have some old trees protected in a park somewhere so people could see what a 1,500-year-old tree looks like. A big tree like that is far more majestic than any furniture I could ever build."

John Thomson, production manager, cuts tenons on the shop-built tenoner, a benchtop tablesaw fitted with a split dado set.

Square pegs of pecan pin the mortise-and-tenon joints in Greg's furniture.

Joinery from days of old

Although Greg strives for authenticity in his joinery, including the much relied on mortise-and-tenon, it's not always feasible. "We do use biscuits in edge-joining a tabletop, for instance," he admits, "but they're principally for alignment. And why not? I think that Chippendale would have used a router had they been available back then. As a craftsman as well as a business person, I've got to try and produce the product in the most efficient way possible without impinging on its integrity. And I can feel good about doing that."

In his eighties, Charlie Berger still puts in half days at the shop. Here he calculates a tenon cut on a pecan chair.

A close look at Greg's furniture reveals two of his joinery trademarks, neither of which result from modern power tools. First, there's the pegged tenon, shown in the closeup photo *above*. "The square peg of pecan provides a mechanical bond to the mortise-and-tenon," he advises. "It's a little bit of insurance as well as a decorative element. The customers feel reassured when they see that peg."

According to Greg, square pegs also add to his furniture's period look. " On many of the old pieces, the pegs were square," he says, "because dowels are a comparatively recent development. I do like turned pegs, though, but they take time."

The second trademark is the dovetail. "All of our drawers have hand-cut dovetails. They take longer than machined ones, but they're our signature," Greg notes. "And unlike English dovetails, which have real fine necks, ours are more like the French. They're large and not as refined. In fact, we may use only one on a drawer side."

Building furniture in a climate known for its humidity begs a question regarding joinery and wood movement. Greg's response is a studied one. "It's not unusual for us to have weeks of 100 percent humidity, and that causes problems because wood's natural tendency is to absorb moisture when humidity is high, and give it off when it's low," he says. "But as long as we engineer properly, we don't have problems. Yet, if we were to

glue tops down and glue panels in place, we'd have horrible disasters. Instead, we use screwing strips and screw tops down. But, we rely on a slightly enlarged hole so that the screw can actually move back and forth with the wood. The head of the screw holds the top in place, but the enlarged hole in the apron allows it to move. Panels, such as on a cabinet door, are always floated.

"We've sent furniture to places all over the country that are much drier than Louisiana," Greg continues. "And no one has ever called to say that a top or panel cracked due to wood movement."

Furniture in distress

Much of the furniture that comes out of Greg's shop looks as old as the pieces they're meant to represent. They've been distressed. And to Greg, the technique has become an art form.

"Distressing has many aspects, and a right way to do each," he says. "First, there's insect damage—powder post beetles, mainly, and in the South, termites." For tell-tale beetle marks, Greg goes after the wood with an awl or ice pick to emulate exit holes, "just a few here and there." To portray once-active termites, he twists a piece of wire and pounds its impression into the surface, then tops it off with an awl hole.

With a chisel, Greg shaves off small areas of a cypress table's machined edge. Finished, it will look centuries old.

"Wood also shrinks and swells constantly. You can't stop it. So wood checks," Greg points out. "We try to limit our checking to where it would normally occur, such as on the end grain and into the flat grain. That's where we scribe in a check mark."

Part of the trick to authentic-looking distressing is to develop a layered effect, Greg believes, as if it happened over the years. "Where we have a worn detail, like an edge that we shaved with a chisel [see the photo *below left*], we come back and bang it with a hammer, like it got nicked years later. We look at the underneath areas, too, what would be the wear points. You want to soften the details because with age, everything gets softer and smoother. But with distressing, you don't want to overdo it, either. You leave some sharp, machined edges, but they have to be where the piece would have been protected."

In the finishing room, Tommy Bourg evens out the aniline dye on an armchair with steel wool. The dye gives a rich hue to the wood.

A finish to fit the climate

In Greg's shop, staining involves aniline dye, as well as water-based and oil-based stains, whatever suits the end result. A favorite there, though, is Minwax Special Walnut. "We use that for what I call our 'Tidewater' finish," he explains. "But whatever stain we put on, it never goes directly on the raw, sanded wood. We first put on a sealer coat of the final finish, Deft Danish Oil. That gives a whole lot more control with how the stain is absorbed. Cypress, for instance, won't get blotchy."

With other hardwoods, the story's a bit different. "After final sanding with 220-grit we go over the piece with a damp cloth to raise the grain, then sand it and seal it before staining," says Greg.

In order to "preserve the character of the wood" Greg prefers a penetrating finish, such as Deft Danish Oil. "It doesn't make the wood look as if it's coated with plastic. And oil really is pretty foolproof, especially when you can have high humidity like we do.

"When it's 100 percent humidity, and it frequently is in summer," he adds, "you can't spray lacquer without getting a blush. Oil is a much slower finishing process, of course, but it's consistent."

Greg generally figures on three to five coats of oil, rubbed in between as needed with #0000 steel wool. "Then we top off the finish with a coat of paste wax to give it a satiny feel," he says. "We experimented with a lot of waxes; ones with a lot of beeswax won't work around here. The hot climate softens it, and it darkens with the humidity. A wax with a high carnauba content works better. It's much harder and has a higher melting point, and to me it provides a smoother finish. Generally, we use Treewax. But to accent distressing, we'll go to a darker tinted wax. It works nicely to fill in the cracks, corners, and the distressing to give the piece the antique character we're looking for."

Written by **Peter J. Stephano**
Photographs: **Michael Taranova; Baldwin Photography**

Greg's got more for you

For a brochure with line drawings of Greg's furniture, send a business-size SASE to: Greg Arceneaux Cabinetmakers, 67230 Industry Lane, Covington, LA 70433. Greg holds monthly weekend workshops for a cost of $250 per student. He also offers Louisiana-style furniture plans, kits, and traditional woods, such as cypress. For details, phone 504/893-8782, or e-mail Gregarceneaux@aol.com.