

Friday

NOVEMBER 25, 1994

Indian pow wow

The Louisiana Indian Heritage Association presents its fall pow wow today and Saturday, Nov. 25 and 26 at the Tchefuncte Family Campgrounds off Highway 40 near Folsom. A grand entry of all dancers is at 7 tonight and on Saturday at 1 and 7 p.m. The pow wow features Indian crafts, food, dancing and games. Admission is \$2.50. Bring lawn chairs.

Book signing

Kumquat Bookstore on Lee Lane in Covington will celebrate Christmas in the Country this weekend with two book signings by local authors.

Mike Artell, illustrator of *Twas the Night Before Christmas* will be autographing books Nov. 26 from 1 to 4 p.m. and Rob Dalby, author of a Mardi Gras suspense novel, *God of the Door* will be on hand to autograph copies of his novel Nov. 27 from 1 to 4 p.m.

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PHOTO BY PAULA OUDER

HANDCRAFTED — Mandeville furniture maker Greg Arceneaux gives a petite table a handrubbed finish.

Woodworker crafts Creole cabinets

By ANN GILBERT
News Banner Reporter

Mallard, Seignouret and Belter.

Names familiar to those who relish the fine furniture found in New Orleans homes in the early 19th century.

Belter was a New Yorker and premier maker of Rococo Revival furniture which filled fashionable New Orleans parlors. Mallard and Seignouret, both born in France, settled in the Crescent City and made

names for themselves producing, on the one hand, heavily carved ornate rosewood and mahogany pieces and on the other, plain but massive scale furniture in the American Empire style.

In Mandeville, another man of French descent is carving out a niche for himself in handcrafting fine furniture. The Creole and Acadian reproductions and adaptations of Greg Arceneaux are now being exhibited in St. Tammany Art Museum in Covington as part of a 21-artist show with a

focus on functional art.

As a fine arts student majoring in sculpture at Louisiana State University, Arceneaux decided he "wanted to create something that would be used by people in their everyday lives. I really wanted to build furniture but there was nobody around to teach me, and I didn't want to go to North Carolina."

The Baton Rouge native ventured over to Lafayette and experienced a cultural awakening. "I discovered the Cajun culture was something

special and it was slipping away." His interest in history was further piqued when he was hired as a carpenter for the Lafayette National History Museum.

"Creole furniture has almost been forgotten except by collectors and Francophiles," says Arceneaux. "It was a contemporary of Hepplewhite and Chippendale but has been overlooked in

□ See, 'Arceneaux,' page 4.

Arceneaux upholds tradition of creating fine furniture

□ Continued from page 1.

the history books."

The history of the furniture is as important to him as the actual pieces he produces. He haunts used bookstores and finds out-of-print volumes on furniture from early French Canada and the French provinces of Normandy, Brittany and Provence.

"The French Creoles didn't just settle Louisiana, but the entire Mississippi Valley from above Detroit south," Arceneaux says. They were a different society from the Americans, who tended to live in small, isolated cabins. The French were gregarious and built towns. Their homes had large airy rooms to hold their massive furniture.

His love of the furniture of these past periods has drawn him to reproduce and adapt Creole and Acadian styles for homes on the North Shore and in New Orleans.

"The Creoles were the upper class French members of society," Arceneaux explains. "They hired craftsmen to make their furniture, usually out of cherry, walnut or mahogany. The Acadians or Cajuns, on the other hand, made their own furniture from pine and cypress and in a much simpler style. Before coming down from Nova Scotia, they were influenced by the Shaker style of furniture being made in New England."

Arceneaux primarily uses

cypress in the furniture he crafts. When his wood comes from sinker logs — those dredged up from the rivers and lakes of South Louisiana — he tells his customers with a grin, "It's archaeological grade lumber." Some call it black cypress because it can be so dark. Other cypress furniture constructed from sinker logs has a grey-green cast.

His work is assembled with mortice and tenon joints and diamond shaped wooden pegs — no nails are used. The dovetailing on the drawers is done by hand. "I could use a router, but it would not give me the look I want," says Arceneaux.

He fashions small, delicate tables with cabriole legs and delicate aprons, and large, pine arm chairs; massive armoires and squat blanket chests; slat back benches and rush seat children's chairs; dining tables and buffet tables.

The ladies' writing desk, unique to Louisiana, has tapered, chamfered legs. A sturdy oblong table with benches resembling those found in plantation kitchens is called the Mandeville table by Arceneaux. He builds two styles of beds: one with turned posts in the Acadian style and another with pencil posts.

The local woodworker uses the same techniques as the 18th and early 19th century craftsmen in reproducing or adapting furniture popular between 1725 and 1825.

Native woods are polished with tung oil and caruba wax to a durable finish. A painted finish popular in the lower Loire Valley gives a hand-rubbed antique finish to a chest custom-ordered by a client.

Arceneaux was commissioned to do the table and chairs for the Cabildo Museum room where the Louisiana Purchase was signed. While on a school field trip, his 13-year-old daughter Sarah told the guard on duty, "My dad made that table."

"Oh, no," he responded. "That table is hundreds of years old."

Arceneaux smiled, "I guess I accomplished my task at reproducing the original."

Much of his work has the distressed look. "I do those finishes not to fool anyone, but to give them character and an air of antiquity."

In addition to promoting the history of the furniture he makes, Arceneaux is working with the Louisiana Furnishings Industry Association to promote the products of small shops such as his. He is vice president of the group which would like to see a state forest products marketing board and a forest products research laboratory at LSU.

"Timber is the number one product of two-thirds of our parishes. We are selling our lumber as a raw material. We don't manufacture it and are losing this value-added industry."



VASSELIER DRESSER — Furniture maker Greg Arceneaux uses the old French term to describe this hutch or breakfront he handcrafts from native Louisiana cypress.

He continues, "Our immediate neighbor, Mississippi, is number two in furniture making after North Carolina. They tend to produce the lower end

products — upholstered furniture — and I would like to see Louisiana get more competitive in the high end products produced in small shops."



REED SEATS — These chairs made by Arceneaux contain seats of reed, left, and rolled brown craft paper.



WAITING THEIR TURN — Cherry logs rest against the workshop waiting to be turned into tables or a dresser by Arceneaux.

Photos
by
Ann Gilbert