



The table top of Charlie Lange's custom-built table was made from a 2,000 year-old sunken cypress tree.

The Wood Eternal

Charlie Lange crafts beautiful custom furniture from 2,000-year-old Tidewater Red Cypress logs he pulls from bayous.

BY BRAD WALSETH

Talk about recycling! Charlie Lange is a craftsman who is as hard working and busy as he is creative and resourceful. For more than 31 years, he has made a name for himself through his successful Charles Lange Furniture Co. in Mandeville, LA, specializing in hand-crafted furniture, millwork, wood turning and custom woodwork. Many of his projects have been featured in the Historic French Quarter and Garden District of New Orleans.

Much of Lange's work is done using more traditional woods like mahogany and cherry, but it is with his latest favorite species that Lange has really caught the attention of the outside world, with the beautiful custom pieces he creates using old logs of sunken cypress trees he pulls from the muddy bottoms of the lakes, swamps and bayous that surround the area.

Lange's inspiration for using this unusual material came from a basic source: location. "I live just five blocks from Lake Ponchartrain," he explains. "There's all this overgrown cypress, and I can axe chop the logs."

Lange is not the only one utilizing the supply of what is known as sinker cypress; he is aware of a couple dozen other enthusiasts who are currently reclaiming the abandoned sunken trees from their resting places on the lake bed. No surprise that woodworkers would want to reclaim these logs, as sinker cypress is considered by many to be one of the most beautiful types of wood to be found, with a wide range of color shading and tight grain.

Recovering the trees from the lake bottom requires both ingenuity as well as muscle, and the process involved calls to mind treasure hunters searching for pirate gold. "There's no set plan," explains Lange. "Everybody's got their own way." Once found, the searchers get to work pulling their sunken treasure from the murky depths below. "Usually it's done with a pontoon with an A-frame," says Lange, "with a little six-cylinder Chevy with a PTO – a 30-ton winch or so on it."

With the timber being submerged below

water for so long, one might think that some type of treatment would be necessary to allow the soggy wood to be used for Lange's furniture designs, but that turns out not to be the case. "No," Lange explains, "cypress lasts forever under water." In fact, the heartwood of these trees contains an oily resin called "Cypressence" that gives the wood its distinctive reddish coloration, while at the same time repelling moisture and preventing fungi from rotting the wood. "The Wood Eternal is what they call it," Lange adds.

Many of these sinker cypress trees were cut down during a lumber boom around 1900. As the log packs moved down the river, some trees broke away, became entangled in roots and vegetation and sank. There are also trees felled by natural causes that have been submerged for several centuries. One of Lange's recent creations shows just how old the recovered wood can be. "I made a table," he says, "out of a board 52-inches wide, that was more than 2,000 years old; I had it carbon-dated."

In fact, this log was found buried under 3 to 4 feet of sediment, approximately two miles from the current shoreline. The log was 8-feet wide at the base and near the top, where the table top came from, was approximately 5-feet wide. The University of Georgia Center for Applied Isotope Studies confirmed that this tree died between 260 and 320 A.D., and Lange believes the log had at least 500 to 800 years of growth before it died.

The top of this table was made from one solid piece of wood 52-inches wide by 8-feet long. The finished dimensions are 37-3/4-inches wide by 84-inches long, and 1-3/8-inches thick. The table base is made from old growth tidewater cypress, while the scalloped aprons are mortise and tenon, and pegged to the cabriole legs. Additionally, the table edge is a bead and cove, and the legs have a cloven foot detail.

Lange is currently offering this table for auction and believes the buyer will be acquiring a "one-of-a-kind piece of history." ❧



Charlie Lange's turned columns grace the Garden District of New Orleans.



These turned spindles were produced by Lange for Governor Foster's Home in Mandeville, LA.