TALLAHASSEE WOODCRAFTERS SOCIETY

JULY 2011 NEWSLETTER

CURRENT OFFICERS

PRESIDENT: Spencer Cullen…(850)878-8409

TREASURER: Austin Tatum…(850)561-1400

NEWSLETTER EDITOR: Joe Doker… (850)509-1337 e-mail tws@redbaystudio.com

Next Meeting: Tues, July 12th @7:00 p.m.

Members want to try to beat the heat by holding the July meeting at an air conditioned location so the meeting will be held at the Whataburger located at 815 Lake Bradford Road in Tallahassee.

The July meeting will be an open forum round table format. Bring your questions and ideas to share.

Meetings are held on the second Tuesday of the month.

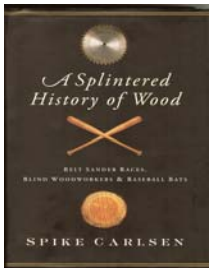
Highlights From the June Meeting

Your newsletter editor once again had a conflict and was unable to attend the June meeting. **Austin Tatum** passed on the following information about the meeting. Ten members were present. **Richard Wieckowicz** brought a couple of show n tell items including an old Stanley Surform file with the hard rounded abrasive blade. **Jim Gerus** shared pictures of some of his recent projects-rounded molding for a Grandfather clock, and 3 crosses he made for his Church. There was a lot of discussion about current projects and a couple of jokes from Spencer Cullen. Plans are in the works to visit the Willis Dairy on Centerville Road for a future meeting. Dick Pittman, past club president, was in the hospital but has been released. Keep him in your prayers.

Buy Sell Or Trade

If you have items for this column, please contact the newsletter editor.

SPLINTERS: excerpt from Spike Carlson's book "A Splintered History of Wood"



A BARRELFUL OF COOPERS, KEGS, AND TRADITION

"I'm at the Barrel Mill in Avon, Minnesota, a small town just far enough beyond the grasp of the Twin Cities to still feel like a real small town. The atmosphere sings "family." Some of the machines have the date 1895 emblazoned on their cast-iron frames, while others are a modern-day concoction of pneumatic pistons and digital gauges.

There's a saying, "There are no amateur barrel makers." and as the owner, Russell Karasch, walks me through the Barrel Mill factory, one can understand why. "It's not brain surgery," he explains. "Yet, to become a cooper used to require a seven– or eight-year apprenticeship—the longest of any trade."

The process begins with the rough staves—pallet after pallet of them, planed smooth on both faces and rough-cut to length and width. The wood is clear, mostly Minnesota-grown white oak. The wood is quarter sawn. For wine and whiskey barrels, white oak has always been the wood de rigueur. White oak has all of the required

(Continued on page 2)

(**Splinters,** *Continued from page 1)*

qualities. It's widely available, strong, and hard-wearing, yet capable of bending. Its cells contain tyloses, which keep the wood watertight while still allowing for a slow exchange of air between inner barrel and outside world.

The staves come from Staggemeyer Stave, a company in southern Minnesota that annually saws fifty thousand logs from hundred-year-old oaks into 5 million feet worth of staves. Staves are shipped to locales as diverse as Napa Valley, Hungary, Australia, and of course, Avon , Minnesota. The stave material has been allowed to air-dry outdoors for two to three years before being brought into the Barrel Mill drying room, where it's brought down (or up) to a uniform 12 percent moisture content. The staves are fed one by one into a Rube Goldberg saw/stave jointer that, in two swipes, cuts each stave to a cigarlike shape with a slight bevel along each edge.

If the barrel is a "slack Barrel" intended to store or haul only dry materials, the staves are tongue-and-grooved along the edge. If the barrel is a "tight barrel" destined for the wine or whiskey making trade, there are no tongues and grooves. Using jigs and raising rings, the shaped and beveled staves—a typical barrel requires twenty to twenty-five—are gradually shaped into a barrel.

Based on the expense and work involved, one might presume a fine barrel would be used for centuries. Not so. In the 1890s the American Cooper's Union got a law passed mandating whiskey barrels be used just once—a law that right or wrong remains in effect today. Thus the life span of a whiskey barrel in the United States is usually three to eighteen years. But one country's loss is another continent's gain. European whiskey and bourbon makers feel that a barrel doesn't even start producing its best until after two or three batches. European brewers are the main buyers of used American barrels.

Some barrels made at the Barrel Mill are for display purposes—the type of thing you might find near the cash register at Cracker Barrel Restaurants. Others are built as movie props; the barrels detonated in Pirates of the Caribbean II in an attempt to kill the "Davey Jones" were Barrel Mill barrels. As was the 250-gallon beer barrel featured in Beer Fest. But most of the barrels are used in the wine and whiskey industry.

Up through 1890, barrels could be, and were, used for hauling nearly everything. Barrels were vital for trade. The 1870 census reported that there were nearly five thousand cooperages in the United States employing nearly twenty-five thousand coopers. There are only twenty-two companies in the United States today with a capacity of over ten barrels a day.

The barrel-making industry was caught in a catch-22 during the late part of the Industrial Revolution. The same technological advances that allowed the barrel industry to mechanize were allowing the makers of other types of vessels to mechanize. Vessels like metal cans and bottles would eventually throw the barrel-making industry into decline. The forklift, making its debut in the early 1900s, suddenly produced more cheaply made boxes and crates that were easier to move, load, and stack."