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Century-old butternut lives on in hands of woodworkers

By Keith Uhlig - Wausau Daily Herald

The wood of a butternut tree that was part of Wausau for more than a century is now taking root as a community art project.

It's an ambitious undertaking that includes woodworkers from across the Wausau area, the Marathon County Historical Society and the Center for the Visual Arts.

The tree -- 26 inches in diameter, 6-feet in circumference and weighing about 4,200 pounds -- once loomed over the historic Yawkey House Museum at 403 McIndoe St. When the Historical Society renovated the house, officials determined that the tree was near the end of its life, and the decision was made to bring it down in September 2007 while the construction work was being done. It was estimated to be 104 years old.

Not wanting to see the tree go to waste, Historical Society Executive Director Mary Forer contacted Mark Duginske, a woodworker and award-winning author of 10 woodworking books.



Mark Duginske works with a piece of an estimated 104-year-old butternut tree Tuesday in his Merrill workshop. (Xai Kha/Wausau Daily Herald)

Duginske, 58, of the town of Scott occupies a narrow woodworking niche. He specializes in making lumber from city trees, and often uses that lumber to build items such as cabinets or furniture for the trees' owners.

Duginske took the butternut tree and milled it into usable pieces of wood.

"It's a beautiful tree. I mean, the wood we've been getting out of it is phenomenal," Duginske said. "It's very, very pretty. It's a very mild, medium brown, and it's soft, so wood carvers like it."

Duginske is a member of the Wisconsin Valley Woodturners, a Wausau-area group that specializes in lathe woodworking. He enlisted the group's help and hatched a plan that would allow woodworkers to take some of the wood from the butternut tree and create their own pieces.

Those finished products will be put on display at the Center for the Visual Arts starting April 24 in an exhibit called "If a Tree Falls in a City."

Organizers such as Roger Zimmermann, president of Wisconsin Valley Woodturners, hope the artisans will sell their work, and the proceeds will go to the CVA and the Marathon County Historical Society.

Additional Facts

To get involved

Call Mark Duginske at 536-7449 or markd@airrun.net to procure a piece of wood and details about how to take part in the Center for the Visual Arts exhibit.