

Wendell Rickon

TREASURE RESCUER

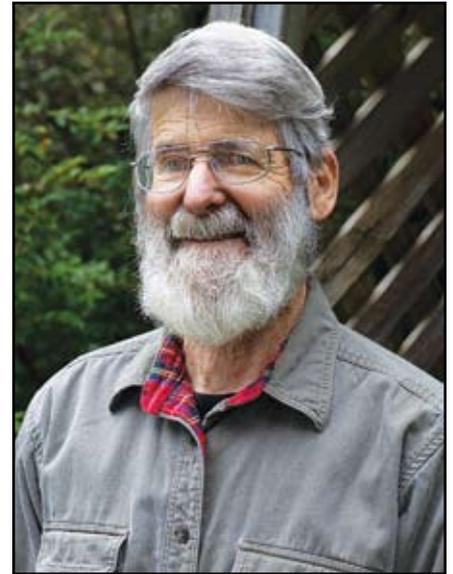


Photo: Larry Wagner.

By Michael Potts



Top: Lamp. Bottom: Bedside Table. Salvaged and recycled materials.

Photos: Larry Wagner.

SEVERAL CHAIRS-IN-THE-MAKING sit beside the garden at the Mendocino ridgetop land Wendell Rickon shares with his wife, Sammie, and youngest son, Tim. These chairs are getting ready for the Marin County Fair, where, for two years, Wendell has taken home cash prizes in the chair and craft divisions. A pair of quirky chairs echo Wendell's second career as a handyman and jack-of-all-trades. On the left, carpentry; on the right, plumbing and electricity, complete with a working switch and light.

"God wires us all in unique ways," Wendell explains matter-of-factly. "I'm a lifelong recycler, starting as a child, before it was fashionable." He began scrounging nails and boards around his Southgate home in southern California, where his father was an industrial mechanic.

Sammie remembers Wendell taking her home while courting, always along different routes, with the request "Keep your eyes open, it's trash day!"

"Do-it-yourself was in my genes, and I took shop classes when I could," Wendell recounts. "We were a camping family, and I always thought I'd live in the country and be with nature." The family's usual destinations were a cabin in the Santa Cruz mountains and Bass Lake in the southern Sierra foothills for water skiing behind one of the ski boats Wendell helped his dad build. Sammie reminds Wendell that Bass Lake was where Wendell started carving. "Yes, and drawing, too," Wendell adds.

Craft classes in high school and at Long Beach State, where Wendell was studying teaching, natural history, and recreation management, provided ideas and a grounding in arts and crafts. "I'm self-taught. I appreciate wall art and fine woodworking, but I don't aspire to it. I'm a rustic, and I want to make something functional you can put things in or sit on."

Wendell started his first career as a park ranger on Angel Island, but soon transferred to Hendy Woods, then MacKerricher and Van Damme. Many locals remember him as "Ranger Rick" who visited classrooms as the unofficial State Parks naturalist. Preferring interpretation to police work, he resigned after a dozen years and became a handyman. "I'm semi-retired now, and that gives me time to do other things. A theme that runs all through my work is that I like to be of service: as a ranger I made the natural experience available, and as a handyman I like to help people with their household maintenance and repairs."



Chairs: Work & Play, salvaged materials.

Wendell's palette is composed of "free for the finding materials" that begin a serviceable second life in his furniture. He fondly remembers when the Caspar dump was "the Exchange." He still manages to amass a library of inspirations through his fix-it work and local contacts: discarded boards, tools, parts, furniture, branches bound for the burn pile. "I think, 'maybe I'll use this sometime.' Someone says, 'can you dismantle this shed and take it to the dump?' and I say 'Sure,' and, to myself, 'via my yard!'"

"Wendell always finds creative solutions," prompts Sammie, and Wendell, who describes himself as a man of few words, picks up the thread: "Repairing is harder than building from scratch, and I seem to have a talent for finding unorthodox ways to fix things." This ability informs his furniture with natural elements – rhododendron stems are a favorite ("an amazingly hard wood") – attached to barnwood. ("I love the weathered grey.")

"I never draw a plan, but I begin with an idea, 'maybe I'll make a bench.' Sometimes I build in my mind all night



Farm to Table, salvaged and recycled materials. Above right: Hutch. Photos: Larry Wagner.

long. It's a cliché, but materials talk to me. The bench always comes out looking different than what I first imagined. It's fun to see projects morph, because ideas grow as you go. The question is always, particularly with natural forms, 'How do you hook these together?' How can I adapt my idea to get to an end result that someone can use?"

Artistry came into Wendell's life inadvertently when he walked past a store in Mendocino named "Sticks" where Bob Keller was eager to show locally made crafts alongside his own. Wendell started with fashioning walking sticks, but with Keller's encouragement graduated to rustic furniture, window mirrors, and doorknob coat-racks. Sammie notes that some of the best, most functional pieces never left home and are proudly serving in the family kitchen and living room. When Sticks moved to Oregon, Wendell's work was eagerly adopted by Sallie Mac and the Mendocino Art Center, where his sculpture will cover the gallery floor during August, 2012, accompanying the Plein Air Painters of Mendocino's exhibit, "Seeing the Light."

Asked what influences his work, Wendell promptly produces the books of well-known, rustic furniture maker Daniel Mack. "I never copy anything, but some of the ideas are inevitable. Of course I have to build a chair from broken and retired carpenter's tools." When he cobbled a stack of golf clubs into a chair and brought it to Sallie Mac, they weren't sure, "but the next day they called and said 'your chair is the talk of the town,' and when it sold, they asked if I could build another one." Wendell feels a kinship with scrap metal artist Tom Macomber (*Mendocino Arts*, Spring 2012): "Tom collects metal, and I collect wood."

The word "artist" makes Wendell uneasy. "I'm a crafts-person, not an artist, specializing in rescuing and repurposing wood." He smiles, then admits, "but if someone mistakes what I do for art, I guess that's okay."

