
THE BLAKELY BURL TREE PROJECT:
FROM THE GROUND UP

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THE BLAKELY BURL TREE PROJECT: FROM THE GROUND UP

THE BIRTH OF THE BLAKELY BURL TREE PROJECT

The threads of seemingly unrelated events, ideas, experiences, and chance meetings from which the story of the Blakely Burl Tree is woven make a particularly satisfying tale.

If you want to go back far enough, you could decide the Project had its origins nearly two thousand years ago when the Native American Woodland People of the south Georgia region started using fire to promote healthy forest growth, including the pecan trees that produced the nutritious nuts that supplemented their diet. In fact the region, more than any other part of the United States, still heavily depends on pecan trees to provide part of the national diet. The pecan trees have always been part of the story, both in the minds of the participants and in the Burl Tree itself.

More significantly, you can say the Project began when a single pecan was lifted high on swirling flood waters and carried away to lodge on the east bank of the gully that ran through the site of the town of Blakely in Early County, Georgia. Out of the hundreds of millions of pecans that must have swirled downstream over thousands of years, that pecan carried with it the genetic predisposition to grow in such a way that when it was a mature tree it would become the focus of international attention.

For decades the tree grew inch by inch, steadily locking its roots into the bank of the gully that had unromantically become known as the Big Ditch. When J.B. Rice built the J B Rice Plumbing & Electrical Co. within a few feet of the Big Ditch, he started the family connection to the tree. If the shop, or the tree, had been in any other place, the Project would never have come about. Apart from his business drilling water wells, it seems appropriate that for fifty years J.B. Rice bought and sold pecans from his shop while the unusual tree quietly grew behind the building.

Time passed and J.B.'s son Charles came to play at his father's shop. The young adventurer Charles used to slip behind the building and explore the gloomy banks of the Big Ditch. For him, the tree was one among many and he had no idea what it would come to mean to him and his home town, as he explains: "It was already a pretty big tree when I was growing up. I used to chop that old tree with the hatchet I always carried in my belt and even drove nails into it, but luckily it didn't do any harm."

Time passed and Charles, moved by his own genetic predisposition to grow, moved out of Blakely to Atlanta where he would eventually achieve phenomenal success in business. Later, Charles' son Barton would return to Blakely every year to spend his summer vacations with his grandparents. He recalls those idyllic days: "No matter what time of the day it was, it always seemed like it was late afternoon with the lazy hot sun on the horizon. We ran around barefoot and bruised our heels from stepping on pecans in everybody's front yard. Everyone had a pecan tree. The Big Ditch was always all murky shadows with snakes and other things you didn't want to play with. I was not supposed to be behind the shop playing, but when my grandfather was helping a customer I'd sneak out there. I remember the burl tree. It was this horribly misshapen,

gnarled thing. The space between the back of the shop and the creek was probably only around three feet, so you had to negotiate getting by that tree.”

Barton grew up, graduated from college and eventually joined the family business – and the tree continued to grow. In 2004 Charles’ mother, Mary Kathryn Patrick Rice, passed away. Mary was born on February the 12th and she passed away on February the 12th, exactly 93 years later. Charles and his extended family returned to his home town for her funeral, together for the first time in over thirty years. He was filled with thoughts of family and family roots and was saddened to see that a town he remembered as a vibrant community with a rich life had become run down and that many of the residents had become dispirited about the future of Blakely.

Barton explains: “My dad was saddened by the changes. He’d say, ‘That old building used to be a store and now it’s all run down,’ or ‘I used to buy groceries there and now the building’s gone.’ My grandfather’s shop hadn’t been used for twenty years and the roof was caving in. We realized that the town hadn’t had the affection that it once had and that it needed some help.”

Charles was struck with the idea of creating a project to rejuvenate his home town and in this way the Early County 2055 Project began. Charles assembled a team, headed by his son Barton and his childhood friend Stanley Houston, and a fifty-year plan was developed with the aim of restoring quality of life and economic viability to Early County. The 2055 Project will be described in more detail elsewhere, but its significance for this story is that Charles started to acquire land for the project, including the land where his father's former shop still stood, and he tasked Stanley Houston with managing the acquisition of land. On top of the already unlikely twists of fate, now a series of supremely serendipitous occurrences came about.

Charles wanted to establish a memorial garden to his parents on the site of the old shop, so Stanley engaged contractors to plan the work. One day Stanley was showing some people around the town. “I don't know why I did what I did on that particular day,” he says, “but I pulled in at the shop site and walked around to the back of the building.” Marty Weck, one of the visitors, said to Stanley, “Do you know what you've got there? You've got a burl tree.” “What's a burl tree?” replied Stanley. It was a question that soon would be repeated many times by different people.

You could say that was the moment when the Burl Tree Project was born. If Marty Weck had not advised Stanley that the tree might be a source of rare and beautiful wood, it almost certainly would have been chipped with all the other trees along the bank when the site was cleared. Stanley knew that Charles Rice was still searching for a way to honor his mother and father, so he called Charles and told him, “I think I just found your answer.” He told Charles about the tree and Charles, in turn, said, “What's a burl tree?”

Stanley admits that, “At that time we didn't really have a clue. Marty told me that the wood might have really interesting grain, so we were thinking about nice furniture like a conference table, or veneer for paneling in Charles’ office. We didn't know who could confirm it was a burl tree and we didn't know who could process it.” J.B. Rice’s shop was soon demolished and on that day the tree that for generations had remained hidden between the scrubby foliage lining the

Big Ditch and the back of the shop was fully revealed for the first time. Stanley knew he had to find out more about the tree.

In another one of those amazing coincidences, Stanley had met Steve Cross, a fifth-generation sawyer from nearby Iron City, about one year earlier. "I'd been carrying Steve's phone number around in my pocket for months, but I'd never called. I decided Steve might be able to help us, so he came and looked at the tree."

Steve is a specialist sawyer who works closely with skilled artisans to get the very best from every tree. Once he saw the tree he realized that he had just met the ideal person to advise everyone on what they had found. Steve told Stanley that only two weeks before he had met Mark Lindquist, who lives in Quincy, Florida, less than two hours from Blakely.

It would be no exaggeration to say that in all of the United States there is no person better suited to advising on such a tree. Mark Lindquist's history as a woodsman, artist and creative thinker meant that he was uniquely placed to understand its potential. He came and inspected the tree and confirmed that it was indeed a rare specimen.

Soon Mark was introduced to Charles Rice who recognized the can-do spirit that Mark brings to any idea, so he asked Mark to make a proposal for a project that would immediately focus the energies of the Early County 2055 Project. Mark did so, Charles delightedly accepted the proposal and at that moment the formal Blakely Burl Tree Project was born.

What follows is the unique story of what happened to the tree. We will follow its journey through the assembly of a remarkable team of experts, the respectful harvesting of the tree, the painstaking milling of the tree into sections chosen for the best use of its qualities, selection of artists from around the world to bring the potential of the wood to reality, the sometimes joyous and always painstaking process of the creation of Burl Tree art, its reassembly in its birthplace, and its triumphant presentation to the people of Blakely and the wider world.

The truth is that the Blakely Burl Tree was an unlikely survivor. It had grown largely unnoticed, unattractive and unappreciated. If it had been more accessible it probably would have been chopped down for firewood long ago. Now it has become the focus of intense interest and hope.

When we look back over the events leading up to the Project's inception, it is hard not to be amazed by the thin but unbroken thread of circumstance that led to its birth. If that pecan had not lodged where it did...if J.B. Rice had not built his shop right in front of it...if Stanley Houston had not taken his visitors behind the shop – and so on through all the chance occurrences that meant the right people were able to meet.

The timely recognition of this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity allowed a remarkable team of varied skills and backgrounds to be assembled. The project will ultimately belong to the community of Blakeley, although for a time the tree will be entrusted to outsiders who will help realize its full potential. The threads of history and circumstance that make up the burl tree story were sometimes thinly stretched, but they remained strong and were finally woven together in 2009. Was it all mere coincidence? Many of the good folk of Blakely believe it was the answer to sincere prayers.

THE HARVEST

THE ROAD TO BLAKELY

It is a Saturday in late November 2009, and the rain mists down out of a humid sky as we trail in a convoy of four vehicles to Blakely, Georgia. The first vehicle is Mark Lindquist's pickup and Mark is guiding the team from his home in Quincy, Florida, to Blakely in south Georgia. We are going to work on a project that promises to be unlike any other project we have ever worked on.

Mark is the driving force behind the Blakely Burl Tree Project (BBTP). Charles Rice challenged Mark to create a new project that would fit in with the objectives of his Early County 2055 project and Mark has come up with a timetable that will challenge us all over the coming two weeks.

The next vehicle is an enormous motor home driven by Gary Stevens, the "harvest master." This huge vehicle will become our on-site mission control and project office. Gary is a construction superintendent from Santa Cruz, California, and he is the harvest master for the BBTP. There are two things that make Gary the right man for the job. Firstly, his work in the construction industry means that he understands machinery and how to lead a team. Gary is also one of the most successful wood artists in the United States. His energy and know-how will prove invaluable.

I follow behind in John McFadden's pickup, bouncing all over the back country roads in the turbulent wash of the motor home. John is our photographer and in the back is all of John's equipment. I'm here from Brisbane, Australia, to record and write about our time in Georgia. I only heard about the project from Mark a few weeks ago and I flew into Florida yesterday. Mark is good at convincing people to do what he wants. Despite visiting the USA more times than I can remember since 1969, I have never been this far south before and I am fascinated by the countryside.

At the tail end is John himself, driving a rental truck loaded with every piece of equipment imaginable, from a range of chainsaws to heavy rigging tackle, and from studio lighting to folding tables. Originally from Texas, now John lives in Minnesota, but spends a lot of his time working with Mark on a range of assignments. I've long admired John's photography and he is gifted with an insatiable desire to create unique images.

As we track and backtrack from state highways to small country roads, we cut through a large slice of the extreme southwestern corner of the state of Georgia. I am fascinated as the country unfolds because a few weeks before Mark had sent me a copy of *I Can Go Home Again*, a book written in 1943 by a favorite son of Blakely, Arthur G. Powell. He was a famous judge who lived and worked in Atlanta, but his book was about the very country we were driving through and particularly about Blakely, where he was born in 1873.

I wanted to see if the land still resembled his description from those wartime years. Just like us, he had travelled from Florida and he speaks of the countryside in glowing words:

In the pastures the cows grazed, and pigs grunted and rooted the ground. Roosters crowed and hens cackled in the barnyards. The farmhouses were neat and well kept. On the brow of a hill stood a modern brick schoolhouse. Here and there the steeple of a newly painted church rose above the grove of a country churchyard.

I see that we are travelling through good land. The soon-to-be picked cotton looks like it will be a good harvest, the forests are thick and healthy, and we often pass trucks loaded with pine logs on the way to the mill. All the signs of a healthy countryside are still there, but somehow it is not like the picture Powell painted. Instead of newly painted churches, we pass a lot of tiny, run-down roadside chapels in sore need of paint. Many of the farmhouses we pass are derelict and their barns lean all awry in that sad way of wooden buildings returning to the earth. We see old trailer homes surrounded by weed-filled yards full of rusting car bodies. Occasionally we pass a shack with a few people sitting on the porch watching the cars go by. The air of depression is at odds with the quality of the land.

Like many rural areas in the post-industrial era, we are passing through collateral damage of globalization. Powell had described how in his lifetime he had seen this part of the USA "...rise from primitive conditions to a state of prosperity and culture." Sadly, we are seeing the same country after decades of reversals.

THE TEAM ASSEMBLES IN BLAKELY

Soon we arrive at Blakely, the administrative seat of Early County and the focus of the project that has brought us from far and away. The town has about 5500 citizens, but my impression is of a much smaller town as we drive through sparse housing. Soon we pull into the central square, which Powell had described:

The courthouse square, or the Square, as it was commonly called, consisted of four acres, which means that there was about four hundred feet of frontage on each side of it. The courthouse stood in the center, and along the sides of the Square were stores, offices, hotels, livery stables, and dwellings.

My first impression is that not much has changed. The grand courthouse, built in 1905, has been beautifully restored and could grace a much larger city. However, as we drive around the Square it soon becomes clear that the community Powell described has taken some hard knocks over recent years. Some businesses seem to be doing well, but there are empty store windows and down the side streets I glimpse derelict buildings. It is a first hint of why Charles Rice was so sad about the decline of his hometown.

We peel off from the town square and a short block away find a vacant lot where a tall, distinguished man stands beside a car waiting for us. "Good morning, I'm Jim Murkeson," he says, "and I'm the Sheriff around here. I've come down to make sure everything is OK." It's a good start. Later I learn that Jim has been Sheriff for 25 years. He is a man deeply committed to his community and a thoroughgoing gentleman.

Soon we are joined by Stanley Houston, Charles' lifetime friend and self-proclaimed "bird dog" for the Early County project. Even though he has his own business, it soon becomes apparent that

Stanley is the man to ask if you want anything done. He's always there when you need him and his never-failing courtesy is confirmation for me that what I've heard about southern folk is true. They really do believe in good manners.

Others start arriving and in no time the large slab of concrete where the J. B. Rice Plumbing & Electrical Co. used to be is filled with people introducing themselves, all taking advantage of a lull in the rain. Mark is making sure everybody meets everybody and he introduces us to Chris Smith, another key member of the harvest team. He is a fine furniture maker from Florida, a quiet, unassuming man, but he will prove to be a tireless worker and he brings a lifetime of expertise to the project. Local contractor Jim Carver is also there with his team of workers. People are really eager to start work and the energy level is high.

I notice one man quietly standing back and Mark takes me across to meet him. "I'm Steve Cross," he says with a broad smile, "Nice to meet you." We shake hands and I've been introduced to one of the most colorful characters I've ever meet in my life. I believe it's impossible to render Steve Cross's speech in writing, but when he says, "Nice to meet you," it takes three times as long as the average speaker to finish the sentence. Each vowel rolls along, up and down, exploring every possible nuance of tone and color. I find it soothing music.

While everyone completes the introductions my eye is drawn to the tree standing in the background. I recognize it from photographs and wander over for a closer look. It slightly leans across the Big Ditch and is flattish on one side where it had flanked the building that used to be there. When I lean over the edge of the Ditch I can see that there is a lot more of the tree out of easy view. Soon we will discover that there is a lot of wood down there.

The film crew, Director Ken Brown and cinematographer Greg Andracke, arrive in their rental van after flying into Atlanta from New York. Some of us know Ken already from an exhibition project the previous year in Chicago. He is an Emmy award winning producer/director with a string of impressive credits. It is the first time we have met Greg. We are all curious to meet this tough-looking man who has a reputation for filming in hotspots around the world for major television productions. In fact he is fresh from Afghanistan, something that will provide us with many interesting mealtime stories. Greg is an Oscar-winning documentary maker and we soon learn that many films we know well were shot by him.

Mark already prepared a plan for the site and he is pleased to see that, courtesy of Stanley and his local team, power, water and waste disposal have been laid on. Also, the Big Ditch has been dammed to keep the base of the tree free of water. Across the road there is an old wooden warehouse where the heavy equipment has been stored. Once we are sure where everything is, Gary maneuvers the motor home onto the site and as the rain returns, we all take a collective breath. The work begins.

BUILDING BRIDGES

Under Mark and Gary's directions, locals Billy and Felix Davis attack the brush surrounding the tree with enormous enthusiasm, clearing the way for the first stage. While others lay out tools, Gary shows why Mark chose him as harvest master. He disappears inside the warehouse and soon emerges driving a thundering long-reach forklift called a Tele Handler that has a 10,000 lb lifting capacity and can extend up to 54 feet. It will prove to be our most versatile tool. He parks the Tele Handler, then returns for the Zoom Boom, a telescoping man-lift with an 80 foot-high reach that will be used, among other things, for the film crew to work from. Next he emerges from the warehouse with a John Deere backhoe/loader for the light dirt work and a John Deere excavator for the heavy digging. It's like a charge by the mechanized cavalry and I am pretty impressed by the easy way he jumps aboard any equipment and fires it up. I've worked with Gary before on art exhibitions, but I haven't seen this side of him.

In pouring rain Steve Cross pulls up in his truck loaded with lumber. Mark and Gary have designed a bridge and Steve has pre-cut all the components. While Mark supervises the unloading, Gary gives clear instructions and the visitors and locals jump to it together as if they have been doing it for years. The tools are unloaded, the wood is laid out and people swarm all over it. Within a remarkable two hours a footbridge has been constructed and is swung across the Big Ditch. It immediately becomes clear how much easier it will make everybody's tasks. Mark explains: "The Big Ditch is really impassable and it's a long walk around to the other side, but we needed access to both sides. Also, we needed a place where people could safely watch what was going on. We did it together, visitors and locals, and everybody worked really well. It was a kind symbolic of how the project would go."

It was astonishingly fast, but it was not a rough job. Even while the bridge was suspended in the air and some of the team were underneath screwing braces into place, Chris was balancing on the teetering topside, carefully planing the handrails smooth. Once the bridge is in place, Gary and Chris give it a final inspection. "I don't like that rough edge there," says Gary, pointing to a handrail that has a less-than-perfect edge. "Neither do I," says Chris. Within moments they have taken the handrail off, turned it over to hide the imperfection, then attached it to the bridge again. It is a joy to watch their determination to do the job as well as they can.

As work proceeds, Ken and Greg prowl, filming constantly to capture every unrepeatable moment. John is everywhere taking photographs, lying on his back in the mud, climbing machinery, ever watchful for unlikely angles.

The smaller trees and saplings around the burl tree are soon cut away and the site is cleared enough for work to proceed, but a lot of mud and debris have accumulated on the large slab. We are all mightily impressed when a fire truck arrives and with their heavy hoses the firemen blast the site clear in minutes. It is a wonderful example of how the community supports what we are doing, even though at this stage most of them are not quite sure what is going on. Around about now I start to hear the rumors about the tree. One man watching us work says to another, "I hear that tree is *real* valuable."

When Charles and Catherine Rice arrive with their son Barton and his family, work pauses while introductions are made all round. Everyone gathers on the bridge for John to take a historic group photo. With eighteen people on it the bridge sags noticeably. Gary and I exchange eye rolls, but the bridge passes with flying colors. It's a good beginning.

As evening approaches, I watch Mark and Charles in a quiet moment while they stand in front of the tree and feel its rough surface.

"It's pretty amazing isn't it?" says Charles.

"It is," agrees Mark, pointing to the thickest part of the trunk. "This wood here will be utterly spectacular."

"Is it just these little knobs here that will be burl, or is it all wonderful wood throughout?"

"Well," says Mark, "that's what we're going to find out!"

THE OFFICIAL WELCOME

That evening we gather for a welcoming southern barbecue dinner. Charles and Catherine Rice are there with the Early County team, as well as local dignitaries who are important to both the 2055 project and the Burl Tree project that exists within it. We are welcomed by Mayor Ric Hall, a man with a wry sense of humor delivered with southern charm. He explains why the town is excited about the Early County Project. I start to understand more about the breadth of what the Rice family is trying to do. Later the Mayor tells me that many communities would dearly love to be able to revitalize themselves in such a way, but they just can't afford to.

We all settle in for dinner and I have my first taste of corn flatbread, pulled pork and '*nana puddin'*'. I am as pleased with the experience as the rest of our crew. Mark outlines the BBTP, then invites Charles up to present him with a mounted photograph of Charles' childhood home in Blakely. Charles is astonished because the home is long gone and he had mourned the lack of a photograph. Stanley had tracked down one surviving photograph that showed the house partly falling down, but Mark was able to digitally manipulate it to recreate a perfect image. The stunned look on Charles' face is wonderful. This is a project that will tap deep into personal stories.

GETTING TO KNOW BLAKELY

The next day the sun rises in a clear-washed sky and the town of Blakely is bathed in glorious fall sunlight. It is Sunday and as the Burl Tree site is directly opposite the First Baptist Church, Mark decides it would be respectful to take a day of rest from using the heavy machinery.

Mark, Gary and John decide to work at reorganizing equipment and setting up the computer systems for processing images in the mobile home. Ken and Greg are invited to tour Blakely in the Early County Project truck. I'm used to seeing big trucks in the US—huge-wheels, rumbling engines and macho exhausts—but when I see this truck, my jaw drops. The monster machine has been funded by the Early County Project as a rolling billboard to help publicize what they are trying to achieve. It is used at local football games, homecomings and other events to fly the

Early County banner, and a more attention-getting vehicle is hard to imagine. Catherine, in a rare blunt moment, tells me she has named it the Big Ass Truck. I ask Charles where he got the idea for this publicity machine. "Being a business type," he says, "I suspected it would take something more than a web site and brochures to reach the 14,000 folks in Early County, and even more outside the County. I figured if The Big Ass Truck couldn't draw attention nothing would!"

To my delight, Charles invites me to spend the day with his family. It is a special opportunity to find out more about the opportunities they are offering to the local community. After showing me a number of properties that the Early County Project has purchased, we drive through Blakely Commons, a new housing development with sixty brand-new homes. As we cruise the tidy streets Catherine tells me how much it means to them to see this project completed: "There were so many homes that had fallen into such disrepair here," she says. "This is so beautiful and people are taking great pride in their new homes. We hope people will take that pride into the schools and their futures." Charles has donated land to the small community for use as shared parkland and playgrounds, and as he explains why he feels it is so important to provide a good environment for children to grow up in, I can hear the echoes of his own happy childhood in Blakely. He wants to know that children can still have a childhood to remember here.

Next we visit the J.B. Rice Youth Center that Charles and his family established in 1981 in memory of his father. When his mother passed away in 2004, Charles wanted to do something in memory of his mother and that idea planted the seed of the Early County Project.

It is a short drive to Kolomoki Mounds, once the center of a thriving and significant native American settlement. It's now a state historic park covering some three hundred acres. Scattered around the site are seven earth mounds that were built between 1000 and 1700 years ago. As we walk through the woods beside the biggest mound Charles describes how they used to ride their bicycles out there when they were children. "We found Indian arrowheads every time we came here," he says. He describes how they did what all country boys did in those days—they swam, fished, rode their bikes and played in the woods. The family spends a happy few hours playing on the vast plaza that spreads from the foot of the mound. It is an enormous area and when we climb the mound for a family photograph I start to get an idea of how much earth was moved to create this fragile structure. Later I learn at the small onsite museum that it must have taken over two million basket loads of earth to build the mound.

When we are walking across the grass Charles tells me how he used to try to ride his 1945 Flathead Harley up the temple mound when he was 13 years old. "I'd start hundreds of yards away over there at that smaller mound and accelerate to top speed, probably around 70mph," he bends his knees and sweeps his hand to show the track he took across the plaza, "but I could never get all the way to the top. Half way up it'd just flip over and we'd slide all the way back to the bottom. I must have been about 90 pounds and that bike would have been around 350 pounds." He pauses, looking slightly guilty. "Of course we didn't know much about the history of the mounds back then." Charles' regret for his youthful disregard of the special nature of this site is obviously sincere, but I can see the memory of flying across the plaza and thundering up the mound is still fresh in his mind.

As we walk back to the car Charles tells me about his bullet car, a racer made from an aircraft fuel drop tank that his father built for him, and the risky adventures he got up to. "I wasn't afraid of anything," he proudly tells me. "I drove that thing with no licence, no tag and no lights, 100 miles from home and back!" Catherine laughs at this: "He's a big boy with toys," she says. "Everything is speed, speed for Charles and I think it started with that bullet car." Later I learn that Charles now rides a Ducati 996RS motorcycle with a top speed of more than 210mph! All those years ago the 13-year-old daredevil risked his life thundering across the plaza at Kolomoki Mounds, convinced he was invincible. Remarkably, sixty years later, Charles is still getting his speed kicks.

That evening we all gather at the Sweet Georgia Brown restaurant—more wonderful Southern cooking. One of the most charming customs I've seen here is the special way people have of saying grace before meals. Instead of formal prayer, it is more of a personal chat with God to offer thanks. It's also a chance to do some pretty good PR with the people listening, and once more Stanley lets us know how much everyone appreciates all the good work that is being done. It's a peaceful moment of reflection and I use it to think about how these personal moments are gone from most family tables and what a loss that is.

During the meal I catch up with Ken and Greg and they tell me about their day in the Big Ass Truck. "Wow!" says Ken. "Stanley drove us everywhere. What an experience! The door was so high I didn't know how I'd get into it, but when it opened, three chrome-plated steps popped out. When I hopped into the plush leather seat the FOX business news was playing on a wide-screen TV smack in the middle of the dashboard. Greg and I were the only ones aboard and wherever we went heads turned, and smiles and waves greeted us. If anyone looked with a blank expression, Stanley hit the customized BAT horn and that got a smile, especially from the kids. I felt like I was riding shotgun."

Later I learned that the six-door BAT weighs 26,000 lbs and is 28' long and 9.5' high. It has an onboard communications and entertainment system that includes every imaginable electronic device and it can put on a dazzling sound and light show of its own. Any concerns I felt were calmed when I learned that the BAT is much more environmentally friendly than it appears because it has been converted into a Hydrogen Hybrid with a closed hydrogen-producing system. There's no doubt it does the job, as Brad Hughes, who drives the BAT, proudly tells me, "Every time I stop and people start snapping photos, it's an opportunity to tell people why I love the place where I live and what's being done to improve our community."

Mark joins us and tells us about their much quieter day. "Gary and I walked around the tree a lot. It was a relaxed time for just the two of us to do some critical planning. I'm pretty experienced with aerial burls and Gary's had a lot of experience working with root burls and getting them out of the ground unharmed. We have to be careful not to pollute the stream when we move the tree and he knows how to do it without a lot of ecological impact." I'm starting to think that there never was a tree so carefully discussed and examined. Mark also tells us that there was a constant stream of visitors to the site, all curious about what is going on. "I talked to them all about it. It's important to let people know what we're doing."

After the meal when we are walking to the car park, Charles looks back to where Stanley is thanking the restaurant owner. "You know," Charles says, with affection written all over his face, "without Stanley this project would never have gotten off the ground. I love Stanley Houston," he says. "It's hard not to." Amen to that.

STUDYING THE TREE

On Monday the perfect weather continues and we are all on site before sunrise to catch the early light for the cameras. Mark explains: "The hour after sunrise and the hour before sunset is when you find the 'glory light'." He looks up at the light-dappled surface of the tree. "This light is as good as I've ever seen." The filming of the entire tree has to be finished this morning as a local contractor will soon arrive to take down the limbs. Although most of our interest is focused on the burl-covered trunk, there is a lot of wood in the branches and they will be carefully cut and stored on pallets.

Mark and Gary quickly ride the Zoom Boom up among the branches, getting as close as possible to every branch and fork to decide how the best cuts can be made. It is the first chance to look closely at the branches, checking for faults and hollows, as well as to identify the prime wood. They huddle above the rest of us in intense conversation, pushing as close as they can to every part of the tree. Earlier Mark had told me why they are getting such an early start: "We had such a great day yesterday looking at the tree, but today we need to get up close with the Zoom Boom. Gary and I both know a lot about trees and about burls. We speak the same language and we pool our knowledge."

While most of us are looking up at the Zoom Boom, one of the local crew sidles up beside me and asks in a quiet voice, "Hey, I heard that tree is worth half a million. Is that right?" I try to explain that it is hard to put an actual value on the tree, but it would be nothing like that. "Yeah, right," he says.

Mark and Gary descend from the Zoom Boom, then start scrambling around in the mud at the base of the tree, probing and banging on the sides. Mark emerges from the ditch, wiping his hands: "Well, we agree that there probably isn't a big taproot. That's important because if there is, it's going to be much harder to get it out of the ground." "Yeah, we agree on that," says Gary, "but we don't agree on whether the tree is solid or not. I think it might be hollow, but Mark doesn't. Let's hope he's right."

The two of them are joined by Greg in the Zoom Boom and with Mark directing he films the foliage and bark of the tree as they are brought into sharp relief by the slanting light. The rest of us stand below, craning our necks up at the small group perched on the end of the long arm as it lurches, mantis-like, across the ground. Mark's voice floats down to us: "A little more to the left...a little more...that's it! See that Greg? That's what we want."

Mark's intensity mounts. Down on the ground he urges Greg and Ken to get as much footage as they can, all the time pointing, guiding and suggesting. John is busy catching those last-chance images of the standing tree. I overhear snatches of gleeful conversation between John and Mark as they both photograph the tree under the changing light of the rising sun. "Look at that!...Oh boy!...Isn't that great light?"

When Mark is satisfied that we have made the most of the early light, we all take the short walk to the Funny Girl restaurant on the town square. Stanley has arranged for the owner Heather to look after us during our time in Blakely and this morning's breakfast is proof that she has enormous pride in her work. Every day we are delighted by her new offerings and her bustling good humor.

When we all walk back to the burl tree, cars are already cruising by, drivers slowing to take in the scene, heads swiveling as they pass. Others walk by, politely keeping back, but obviously curious about what is happening. I enjoy listening in to their conversations and a common topic is the value of the tree:

"You know, I heard that tree is worth \$500,000."

"I dunno, I heard it's more like \$750,000."

Mid-morning a man approaches us and introduces himself as a local high school teacher who teaches forestry, and he asks if he can bring his class down to watch. When the large group of students arrives they politely line up, full of that energy that comes from an excuse to get out of class, but also full of curiosity about what we are doing. Mark explains the project to them and they rush him with questions. It's a good moment because if the project goes as planned it should have more significance for these young people than anybody else there. The teacher tells them it's time to go, but one young man puts up his hand. "Is it true," he asks, "that the tree is worth a million dollars?"

Work is briefly suspended while Charles' grandson Stephen is given a ride up in the Zoom Boom. He shows a lot of the brightness and curiosity that Charles must have had at that age, and because he is so quick and so polite, nobody minds taking time for him to have this once-in-a-lifetime experience. The wide-eyed glee on his face is enough thanks. Barton and his son John also take a quick ride, but then time runs out and we all clear the way for an important moment.

Charles and his family gather with Mark and Stanley, facing the tree and the place where the old J. B. Rice shop stood, and local pastor Fred Daniels offers an emotional benediction and speaks of all that the tree symbolizes. Charles is clearly moved and he reaches out for his wife's hand. Later I ask him about it: "I was very emotional," he says. "It was like a time warp and a thousand images flashed through my mind. So much emotion and so much history.....and such a beautiful prayer and dedication."

THE SHOW BEGINS

The tree service contractors have arrived and we all take a collective deep breath. Mark knows that these first cuts will irrevocably determine what can be made from the wood, so he has produced a cutting plan indicating where to cut. Usually such operators only have to worry about getting the wood down to ground as quickly and efficiently as possible, so it is an interesting challenge for them to cut to a predetermined plan.

As the contractor's cherry picker swings up to join the Zoom Boom and the Telehandler, from below it looks like we are watching a get-together of overgrown insects. The smallest limbs are

lopped and quickly chipped, but everything above a few inches in diameter is lowered carefully to the ground. The foliage disappears into the machine and emerges as a pile of mulch, and I am struck with the thought that if it hadn't been for strange circumstance the whole burl tree might have been joining these branches in anonymous oblivion.

Mark and Gary once more maneuver as close as they can so Mark can direct each cut. The heavy sections of branch, each weighing hundreds of pounds, are tethered to the Zoom Boom and they swing alarmingly in an arc through the air as the tree service operator cuts them through. Mark leans in close to take photographs, but is never in danger. Later he told me, "Those guys were incredible! I'd tell them what I wanted and they were able to do exactly right every time. It was like a ballet watching those limbs swing in the air."

While Greg films from below, Gary calmly steps across empty space from the Zoom Boom to the tree, then shows exactly where a cut should be made. Later I ask Gary about this aerial bravado and he says, "Well, I guess when you work hundreds of feet up in the air like I do on building projects, you get used to it!"

After the branches are lowered to the ground they are stacked on the heavy duty pallets that Chris has been making in the warehouse across the road, helped by the Davis brothers. Chris is a quiet achiever and often we only realize he is there when something that is badly needed appears as if by magic. By the end of the day all the branches are cut and the ends are waxed to prevent splitting. The branches don't have any burl on them, so it is a large amount of straight-grained material that might be used for fine cabinet making. The wood is all moved to the warehouse and as the doors are closed I see Mark taking a satisfied look at the stacked wood. It's a good start.

That night we enjoy another enormous meal at the Funny Girl restaurant. It's time to swap stories over a beer and Greg keeps us entertained with his recollections of working with famous reporters. Most of all we lean close while he tells us what it was like during his recent time in Afghanistan. Local Jim Carver follows with stories of his time in the Middle East with the Marines. I sit back and look around at the intensely interested faces. Not for the first time I marvel that I am in a place very far away from my world. I am getting new insights into America and feel very grateful for the opportunity.

At the end of the meal some of us go back down to the site to discuss tomorrow's plan. John and Mark go into the mobile home, but I see that a police car is parked next to the tree, so I go over to talk to the deputy. He tells me that Sheriff Murkeson has detailed somebody to be on duty there every night. I'm impressed with this further evidence of community support. "Have you ever guarded a tree before?" I ask. "I can't say I have," he replies. "Do you get bored?" "Well no, I get out and walk around every now and then." I am starting to get some idea of why the townsfolk are convinced the tree must be *really* valuable.

Back in the mobile home, John is seated in front of a bank of computer screens, surrounded by a wall of memory banks and processing equipment. He's busy making backups of the movie footage that was taken that day. Mark is on the other side of the table sorting still images that he and John have taken. I sit and transcribe notes and we all work contentedly till late in the night.

DIGGING DEEP

It's early Tuesday morning, and the team gathers by the tree. Silhouetted by the rising sun, the massive trunk of the tree looks strangely imposing now that it has been shorn of its foliage and branches. Its lumpy, gnarled surface gives an impression of extra weight. The trunk now resembles a large letter "Y", with an elongated lower part and two short arms where the major limbs were cut. The impression of weight is enhanced by the fact that it is very solidly embedded in the bank of the Big Ditch. Somehow, the crew has to lift that whole trunk out of the ground with as much of the root system intact as possible.

It's time for creative and careful use of the digging machines. The Zoom Boom is attached to the top of the trunk with a chain to prevent unexpected movement, then the contractors start carefully scraping away the topsoil and the accumulated trash of decades. Bricks, lumps of metal and concrete all are lifted into the dump truck. I imagine the people who threw these unwanted things away thinking, "Nobody'll ever notice this back there behind the store. I mean, nobody ever goes there...."

With Mark supervising, Chris and Gary are busy with the local crew, working their way towards the roots with shovels and pickaxes, occasionally stepping back for the digger to scrape dirt away from what they have exposed. They want to expose as much as possible before they call on the enormous crane that has arrived. Gary repeatedly climbs down right beside the heavy swinging digger, delicately guiding every scrape of dirt and once more I marvel at his rapport with the operators.

I talk with Jim Carver, the contractor for much of the work, about our day at the Kolomoki mounds and I mention Charles and the Indian arrowheads he collected. Jim tells me that Greg Baxley, one of his workers, has an enormous collection. "He's got a nose for 'em," said Jim. When I am introduced to Greg, he happily invites me to see his collection. It's another new experience to look forward to.

The hole deepens and the root ball is increasingly exposed. The major roots are widely spread and decisions have to be made about where to start cutting these roots to free the tree from the soil. It's painfully slow work and by late afternoon Mark calls a halt because the tree has to be left standing overnight and any more soil removal will make it unsafe. As evening approaches the tree stands ready for the next day's work, the lifting of the tree. A barrier is erected around the now-enormous hole and the site is left in the care of the Sheriff's Department.

Word appears to have spread that burl trees might be valuable and we hear that there is an oak burl tree on a farm not far out of town. In cool evening light we drive out to inspect the tree. At first glance it is a fine specimen, even bigger than the Blakely tree. Mark and Gary sound the tree with a large metal bar, resoundingly thumping the sides, but instead of a solid 'thunk', there is a flabby-sounding 'spludge'. The tree is hollow and largely rotten, but we are not surprised as trees like this often let in water, then rot from the inside out. We stand back, disappointed. It's a shame nobody found this tree before it started to rot. The unspoken fear is that the next few days will reveal the Blakely tree is also rotten inside.

THE MAIN EVENT

The morning sun lifts the dew from the grass as the 60-ton crane is brought into position early on Wednesday. The tree is attached to its enormous hook with soft loops that will not damage the wood when the strain is taken. As he has done for every stage of the process, Mark has Greg filming him while he explains what is happening, why work proceeds the way it does, and what to expect next. Stanley and I are watching and he wryly comments to me, "You know, Mark is one of the nicest guys I've met, but when you work with him he's gonna let you know he's in charge. That's the only way he can get what he does done!"

Heather delivers welcome morning coffee and sweet rolls, and while we tuck in Greg Baxley walks up, holding a large bag in his hands. "You wanna see some arrowheads?" he says. He opens the bag and lays out a wonderful selection on the bench, spreading his hands over the delicately shaped flints. "Y'all can take what you want," he offers. The crew gathers around and soon we have each chosen our own special souvenir of Blakely. Mr. Baxley looks very pleased. It's a very generous gesture and confirms my impression of the kindness of people here.

While we are drinking our coffee, people start speculating about how heavy the tree is. "It's gotta be 20,000 lbs," says one. "No way!" says another. "I'd say no more than 12,000." Because the crane can weigh its load, somebody suggests we run a competition to see who can guess closest to the weight.

With the trunk securely attached to the crane, Mark and Gary watch carefully as the tree is jiggled by the Zoom Boom. The whole root ball and attached earth moves. "We were right, there's no taproot!" Mark laughs. Gentle lift is applied by the crane and Gary swings into action with his 5-foot, carbide-toothed chainsaw, cutting through grit, wood and soil. As daylight gradually appears between the root ball and the bed of the Big Ditch, it becomes clear that Mark is right and there is no taproot. "Boy, that's a relief!" he says. "I was sweating on that."

Everyone immediately wants to know how much it weighs, so work is suspended while the operator climbs into the crane to check. It comes in at 19,000 lbs. Congratulations are offered to the winner, then somebody points out that we were estimating the weight of the tree, not the tree and the dirt! It's true, there is still a huge amount of dirt imbedded within the root system and while it is still suspended over the Ditch, the team sets to with hand tools to clear as much of it as possible. Eventually we find that with the bulk of the dirt removed, the trunk weighs 16,000 lbs. The debate over who really won continues.

There is a beautiful moment as the trunk is raised from the ditch, slowly spinning in the gentle light. Everyone pauses to watch it rise and swing gently across the slab. We stand back while the tree is gently laid down on its side and there is such a sense of reverence about the slow movement that I can't help feeling it is being laid to rest.

Mark and Gary go into one of their huddles. Once they have made their decisions about where to cut, Gary trims the smaller roots away. The crew take it in turns to gouge away at the dirt with crowbars and pickaxes, gradually clearing the dirt. It's a slow, hand-blistering process as Mark insists that damage to the roots is minimized. "There's going to be some interesting possibilities with these shapes," he says.

The work of removing the dirt will take hours, so Ken, Greg and I visit the high school to see some of the woodshop students at work and talk to them about their impressions of the Burl Tree Project. When we arrive I am happy to see that the students are busy turning wooden pens on lathes. We interview some of them for the camera and ask them what they hope they will do in the future. I am impressed by their polite responses and by the clarity of their plans. One young man, appropriately named Turner, tells me that he'd like to pursue a career in woodwork. Maybe the Burl Tree Project is already planting mental seeds, so I ask them for their thoughts on the project. One young woman shyly asks, "Is it true that tree is worth over a million dollars?"

They deserve an answer to that question, so I explain to them that burl trees are found all over the world, but that the Blakely Burl Tree is unusual because it is a pecan tree and none of us has ever heard of pecan burl tree before. "But," I explain, "just because it's rare doesn't mean that it's really valuable. Some burls are valuable and a whole burl tree can be extremely valuable, but because we've never seen pecan burl, we don't know yet what it's worth."

The looks of disbelief on their faces are a clear answer. "So," I explain further, "I suppose you want to know why we're working so hard to get that tree?" Heads nod, so I explain the history of the site and the plans for making art works to be shown in a museum there. "It's not so much the tree that's valuable," I say, "it's what can be made from the tree that is going to be valuable. And you know," I add, "there is a value that can't be measured." "What's that," one young man asks. "It's what it symbolizes," I say. "What it can mean to the town." I see them exchange glances, so I can only hope that as the project evolves and the art work starts to return to the town, they will understand.

When we return to the site, Mark has called a halt. Most of the dirt has been removed from the root ball. Also, the hole in the ground has been filled and there is no evidence that a tree was ever there. Tomorrow will be our last day on this site and it will also be when we first cut into the trunk to see what is inside. Mark ends the day, as always, by thanking everyone for their hard work. "Tomorrow will be great," he says. "We finally get to see what we've got." He smiles broadly, but later I see him sitting quietly with a far-away look on his face. Mark has a lot riding on what happens tomorrow.

THE TREE'S CHARACTER REVEALED

Thursday is our last day in Blakely and as we gather for our early morning ritual of Heather's coffee and sweet rolls everyone seems much more relaxed. On the first day there was a lot of sizing up going on as the locals tried to decide what on earth we were doing there. Now everyone has worked so hard on harvesting the tree and there is a lot of joking and laughing together. The project has worked its magic on us all.

Soon Mark and the crew start water-blasting the last of the dirt and gravel from the root system. It's dirty work, but the halo of water droplets beautifully catches the light, and both John and Greg make the most of the photo opportunity. Finally the whole root system is cleaned and the tangled wood is fully uncovered for the first time. It's a rare view into the secret life of a tree. We've seen root systems before when trees have been blown down by the wind, but none of us has ever seen a root structure so completely revealed with practically no damage.

Once again Gary and Mark huddle in intensive discussion about where to cut and then Gary wields his giant chainsaw. He cuts the arms of the Y-section free and they are lifted away. When a tree is still standing and you look up at the branches, there is little sense of the real size and weight of what is suspended above you. You only get a feeling for how big they are when you stand next to pieces like this and hear the lifting straps creak with their weight. There is a lot of very good wood in both of these pieces.

We are approaching, both literally and figuratively, the heart of the project. To fully reveal the grain where he has just cut, Gary skates the chainsaw across the top of the tree to plane the surface. The first glimpses of figured wood are revealed and Mark leans in close to see what it is like. There are smiles all around.

Gary prepares to make the most significant cut of all. He intends to entirely remove the root ball in one cut—this will be the moment when we learn if the tree is hollow or solid. While everybody stands back, Gary braces himself and leans into the saw. It's a long, heavy cut, but finally, with an enormous thud that shakes the concrete slab, the massive root system falls and Mark rushes forward to see what is inside. He smiles at everyone. "I told you it was solid!" he says. His optimism and confidence are rewarded, but I am sure he'll sleep better tonight than he has for a while.

Gary planes the base of the trunk with the chainsaw, revealing the rich colors and patterns of the wood, then Mark caresses the surface with his hands, almost reaching into the wood to feel the richness contained inside. All of the effort so far has been aimed towards this moment. We all take turns touching the wood and trying to describe what it looks like. There are bright, russet-red slashes of color that look like random brush strokes and all of us agree that we have never seen anything like it. They are like a cross between burl and bark inclusions. Mark speculates about the color: "Maybe it's from the mineralization in the water in the Big Ditch. Whatever caused it, it sure is beautiful. I can't wait to work with it!"

Mark and Gary take turns at cutting the root ball into workable sections. Mark explains that he envisages sculptural forms made from these pieces and he eyes the roots carefully for a long time before he decides on each cut. After the pieces are put on pallets and carried away to the warehouse, attention turns to the trunk. Shorn of its roots and branches, it is weighed at 6,000 lbs. Steve Cross's truck is not exactly new and as the trunk is carefully lowered onto it, the springs groan and creak. After it is carefully secured, everyone lines up to watch Steve set out for his mill. As the truck disappears around a corner, I ask Mark how he feels. "I feel good," he says. "It's gone so well. I expected a lot more problems, but everyone was so professional. Everybody was great and now we can move on to the next stage."

Unexpectedly, there is a feeling of anti-climax hanging over the site. After so much focus on the tree, suddenly it is gone and as the site is cleared up there is little evidence that it was ever there. I suspect the residents of Blakely must be thinking, "So that's it? It's all over?" Mark spends a lot of time telling people that this is only the start and that they have a lot to look forward to. I hear him talking to Stanley: "You know, that wood is really something. I can't wait to see what it looks like once we start sawing tomorrow."

Once the site is cleared and the vehicles are packed for the short trip to Steve's mill, we take the time to thank everyone for their help. They all say the same thing, something I have previously heard only in television programs: "Y'all come back now." I can see that they mean it and I start thinking about how wonderful it will be when we all gather here again at this place to see the art that has been created from the Burl Tree.

THE SAWMILL

THE SUPER AX

It's our first day at Steve Cross's sawmill. A piece of the Burl Tree is suspended on straps from a forklift, and Mark and Gary are debating where to take the first cut.

Mark: We can saw through the top of the crotch so the next cut gives us a nice cross section.

Gary: Well....that first cut....I hate to go down to the core...

M: How about we come across like we were making a table? It'd be a foot or maybe eleven inches down.

G: Yeah, and once we have that first cut we can see what the grain's doing if we want to flip it to cut the other direction.

M: Where's gonna give us the best vertical grain?

G: That'll be this section here and this section there, but we'll be going through the crotch is the only thing.

M: You know, I think that's a good argument for plain sawing....at least through the crotch down to the core.

G: We could take a bunch of vertical grain out of this side and still leave that crotch section. It's gonna be a little bit difficult though.

M: I'd like to know what we're getting....what's the best figure?

G: That's the one we're gonna go to school on, being such an unusual...you know, the top off here might make a very nice section for turning or sculpture.

M: Also, we wanna find out what we're getting into with these big inclusions here. Like you say, we're gonna learn on this one. You know, if I was doing this with a chainsaw, I'd want to cut like this and pull that off, but that's no good on the sawmill, so...

I've been listening to them talk like this for six days already and my attention starts to wander. I look around at Steve's property, from the house near the woods down to the road to Iron City that cuts across the bottom of his land. As I watch, a file of cotton picking machines chugs along the road to their next contract. I walk away from Mark and Gary and everywhere I look there are derelict machines: old buses, cars, trucks and forklifts. Scattered around the property are stacks of sawn lumber of every width and thickness imaginable. That's what Steve does, he's a fifth-generation sawyer.

While Mark and Gary continue their discussion, Steve joins me for a tour of his domain. In Blakely, Steve was deeply involved in the process of harvesting the burl tree, but his natural courtesy and shyness prevented him from pushing himself forward. In contrast, Steve lights up

with enthusiasm as we walk around his own land. He wants to show me all the things that define his world. He shows me the house he built, where he lives with his wife and three children. We walk amongst the stacked wrecks of cars and he tells me, in a masterly understatement, that he "renovates and reconfigures used equipment that others might call junk." Steve shows me his grandfather's steam engine, his Volkswagens filled with old chainsaws, the bus that has been in a head-on collision, and fork lifts everywhere in every state of decay, disassembly and disrepair. Steve is obsessed with forklifts and the miracles he can work with their salvaged hydraulic rams.

In the crisp fall air we circle back to the sawmill. Mark and Gary seem to have reached agreement about what to do, so Steve joins them. I stand back and try to take in Steve's *piece de resistance*, the Super Ax Sawmill. From afar it looks like an old steamship sailing across the flats at full steam. Closer up it is more like a cross between Water World and Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory. The platform of the saw is made of nine semi-trailer beds, lined up to form a vast working surface strewn with a museum's load of antique hand tools that Steve uses to make adjustments to the saw. The mill itself rears overhead and the first thing that catches my eye is the stacked forklifts that act as counterweights to stabilize the whole structure. There are ladders that seem to go nowhere and on the top there is a beer keg used as a fuel tank. There are axles, connectors, platforms, turnbuckles, and hydraulic lines running everywhere. I can see that when Steve has painted a wheel, he paints every spoke a different color! When you see the turnbuckles and chains that hold it all together, you might be tempted to think it is all just add-ons, placed to correct faults and problems. In fact Steve had the whole thing planned in his head before he started and knew exactly where each component would be. "I didn't need to draw it," he says. "I would have finished building it before I had it drawn." The mill head can cut 60" diameter logs and Steve believes he can accommodate larger logs if required. The 32" diameter band saw wheels run on semi hubs and are dynamically balanced with lead shot in liquid-filled tubes.

Mark and Gary guide the first log into position for cutting and it's time for Steve to start his mill. He sits on a tractor seat and pulls handles and levers. He is surrounded by indicators to show how many inches he's cutting, gauges, little magnets with measuring tapes attached, buttons, levers, and even a little bobble-headed doll that wobbles as the machine fires up. Steve waves his hand at the buttons and shouts to me over the rising noise of the mill, "The big red one is the stop button!"

Steve becomes more alive, looks around with a huge grin on his face, then becomes a picture of intense concentration as he throws the lever to feed the first log into the mill. When the log runs forward on the laser-leveled tracks, the whole monstrous machine whiffles and snorts, fuel feeds from the beer keg fuel tank, lubricating water sprays everywhere and sawdust jets out into the air as the blade slices the log. Steve plays the saw like some ancient pipe organ—pulling levers, pushing knobs, adjusting feed, and coaxing the Super Ax to work its magic.

Everyone falls into the time-honored rhythm of the sawyer: run the log back, turn it, run it through the saw again, flip the newly cut fitch aside, run the log back....but just when I think it will go on like this for the rest of the day, Steve decides he is unhappy with the tracking of the saw. He engages a hydraulic ram and—to our absolute, gobsmacked amazement—the whole saw gets up and walks! Alternating hydraulic rams lift the tens of thousands of pounds on huge feet and he walks the saw closer to the log to avoid a bump on the opposite side. Then, with a sigh

and a whistle, it settles down and continues the cut. Amid all this commotion the blade runs as smoothly as a hot knife through butter.

For several hours Mark and Gary are furiously busy lifting and turning logs, lining up cuts, moving sawn timber and exclaiming loudly as more and more amazing wood grain is revealed by the long saw cuts. As the wood is progressively cut it is moved to a storage shed and carefully stacked. While all this has been going on Chris has been sweating away in the background, preparing spacers to allow the wood to dry uniformly. We all lend a hand and soon the sawn timber starts to mount up. This stacked wood is a testament to Steve's raw genius. I don't recall a more entertaining day for many years.

REFLECTIONS

As a woodworker myself, I'm occasionally caught up in the thrill of the flying sawdust and the scent of freshly cut lumber, but the very best thing about my role as writer for the BBTP is the chance to watch people closely, especially when they are too busy to notice I am watching. Of course, in this case watching other people work is only an honorable occupation if I end up with something worthwhile to say about them.

I've met so many interesting characters over the last week that I find it hard to keep up, but on our second day at the sawmill, there is relatively little distraction because there are no people passing by every few minutes, no speculation about million-dollar trees, and, sadly, no sweet rolls from Heather. The noise of the mill drowns conversation, while the steady rhythm of sawing the tree offers space for private thought. Mark and Gary continue their verbal jousting about how and where to cut, so I step back and think about the people I have been watching for several days.

There is no doubt that Mark is an obsessive man, but it is in the best meaning of the word. His wish to guide every step of the Project comes from a determination to get it all right, and he has succeeded. We have hardly deviated from his preplanned timetable and he has been on top of every stage of the work. However, the stress has been very high for him and he has pushed himself to the limit every day. When the interior of the tree was finally revealed, Mark visibly relaxed. He had staked his reputation on his predictions about this tree, something few woodworkers would have done, but he was proven right.

Now, at the sawmill, Mark has a chance to enjoy the work and he bounces around, full of ideas, full of excitement. I know that when he was young, Mark and his father Mel used to do incredibly exciting things for a boy. They built log cabins in the woods, Mark wielded chainsaws from the astonishingly young age of ten, and his father's early trust in him fostered remarkable self-confidence that has followed him throughout his adult life. His lifetime of experience working with burls was tailor-made preparation for this job.

When Mark first began to assemble the BBTP team, I suspect Gary was the first on the list. Gary had already been working in wood for twenty years when he met Mel and Mark Lindquist. Gary inherited his can-do work ethic from his grandfather, who was a carpenter, and his father, who was a blacksmith. That's why he recognized kindred spirits in Mark and Mel. Gary likes to acknowledge the influence both of the Lindquists had on him. Watching him for over a week, I

have learned that he is incapable of sitting still when there is something to be done, but even when Gary has been cross-eyed with exhaustion he has stayed upbeat. I don't recall ever hearing a negative word from him.

The more I think about how hard everyone has worked, the more impressed I am. John McFadden has been like a jack-in-the-box, popping up unexpectedly and sometimes in the most unexpected places, climbing machinery or throwing himself down on the ground to look up at the image he wants to catch. John is not a large man, but every time I see him he is carrying packs of camera gear, hauling computers, scrambling, scrambling everywhere. This morning as we headed out to the mill, I helped John with his cameras. It was a real shock when I hefted his backpack as it must have weighed at least eighty pounds. Every night he works late, helping lay down computer backups of the film Greg has taken that day. Often he calls me over to see a still image he is particularly proud of. I recall that at that first welcoming dinner in Blakely I had told the gathered residents they would be "gobsmacked" by the images John and Mark would create. The images John shows me are confirmation of this. The final results are something I am looking forward to.

While I am sitting on the shuddering deck of the Super Ax thinking about how to represent all of this work in writing, Chris Smith joins me. With somebody so quiet it is easy to underestimate his achievements and I think back to when I visited Chris in his furniture studio in Florida before we came to Blakely. Chris has chosen a calm life in a house and studio surrounded by woods. It is an island of quiet contemplation, filled with his own woodwork. Every piece he has made confirms how much he understands the essential nature of wood and of the tree, and he uses this knowledge to express a simple philosophy of life. I can't shake the image of a beautiful hand-towel rack that I saw in his bathroom. It was an unpretentious piece of jointed branch that seemingly grew out of the bench top, arching over to allow the towel to be draped lightly on it. It helps me understand why the pallets that Chris made for storing the wood are so well made. As he sits beside me now, covered in sawdust and with sweat soaking his shirt, I see that gentle art can require hard work, and that Chris is up to the job.

Later I walk up to the house and find Stephanie, Steve's wife. She is driving posts in the ground to build a fence to keep the wildlife out of their vegetable patch. We compare experiences of lost crops, me to Australian possums, her to roaming deer. While we are talking Steve rushes by with a broad grin on his face, apparently on some urgent errand and I see her smiling as he passes. "Steve's in his element right now," she says. "He really loves to share his passion with everyone and because he cuts such large pieces, nobody could have dreamed up a more perfect project for him."

I ask her about their life here and she laughs:

"This is just bliss. I couldn't dream up a better place to live and a more amazing man. He's thoughtful and he just loves the children. He doesn't know how to say no to them or raise his voice. It's not just for the kids, it's for me too. He is an amazing, wonderful husband and father."

Nearby, the three children are running here there and everywhere. The two boys, Steven and Oliver, and daughter Julia are a home-schooled brood who live surrounded by woods, an

extended dog and cat family, a child's paradise of junk and machinery, and loving parents whose life is dedicated to giving them the richest experience possible. All of this is as far from the techno-world of the average city kid as you can imagine.

The never-tiring wood team keeps sawing and a whole day passes, from the glory light of early sunrise, to the gentle tones of a fall sunset. In anticipation of this perfect light, John and I sneak away to take photographs along a beautiful creek near Steve's home. As we work our way along the banks of the creek to get the best light on the water, I stop to look around. The huge cypress trees push weird, rounded knees of wood up through the wet soil, and the trees arch overhead. Swaths of Spanish Moss create a translucent curtain that the light bleeds through to create an other-worldly atmosphere. As John disappears around a bend in the creek, I am left alone, surrounded by the murmur of the stream. Not for the first time, I wonder how I came from the other side of the world to be here.

THE FILMMAKERS' PERSPECTIVE

Sunday morning I'm driving to the mill with Ken and Greg. It's been hard to find time with them because their work is so intense that it tends to isolate them. Filming is a continuous process and when your eye is clamped to a camera viewfinder for hours at a time, or you are concentrating on holding the sound boom just out of view like Ken does, it is hard to indulge in conversation. Also, during breaks at the tree site they often disappeared to film interviews with local people and to capture locations around Early County as background material. Now, as we drive along narrow winding roads through fields of unharvested cotton, I listen to them talk about the quiet landscape.

Ken and Greg are both New Yorkers and their conversation tends to abrupt repartee, pretend-aggression and an air of worldly weariness. I can't imagine a bigger contrast with the gently-paced manner of the Georgians we are among. It's hard to impress New Yorkers, but after watching them work for a week, I can see that they love this project.

Ken explains what it was like when they first arrived: "I'm a big-city guy with minimal knowledge of rural America and agricultural communities, and it was really like being in a foreign country. Fortunately we speak the same language—more or less. Occasionally I can't understand what somebody is saying and recently when I look at the footage we've taken the thought has crossed my mind that we might have to use subtitles! But I've been really charmed by how well they've treated us. I can't help thinking about the second night we were in Blakely when Stanley was saying grace before a meal. He said, 'We thank you Lord for bringing these high-caliber people to our little town.' That kind of respect is pretty nice."

Greg agrees: "You know, as a New Yorker I always have a bias about New York being the best place in the world. But in Georgia the people welcomed us so warmly and when you see how supportive they are, you can't help but think these are really fine people. Take Steve Cross for example. When I first met him, I thought he was speaking another language, but once I began to understand him, I found a man who is brilliant. That saw of his, if it was packaged up all slick it could probably be sold for hundreds of thousands of dollars, but he put it together with his own ingenuity."

I ask them how they came to be involved in the BBTP and Ken tells me how he started filming studio potters about ten years before. "I found the people had a certain glow and humor, a kind of magnetic quality, and they all seemed to have many friends and collectors. I loved their world and I've continued making films like that. I met Mark last year when we made the film about the Icons exhibition in Chicago that involved Mark and Gary. When Mark contacted me about this Project, the pictures he sent me were very intriguing. The tree had a real mystique about it, almost a mythic quality. I almost felt there was some spirit in this tree that was calling out to people and I suppose I was one of them!"

Greg is new to this world of wood art and it's a radical change from his recent work in Afghanistan, filming for a major television network. He has already told us about his experiences around the world, so I ask how he came to be here in this quiet place. "I heard about the BBTP from Ken," he says. "I didn't even know what a burl was, then I saw the photographs of this gigantic tree in Blakely, and the plan to take it down and turn it into works of art. I was really jazzed up because in my career I've worked on everything from the Popes and their art, to covering wars and mayhem. Somehow in my later years I've come to like covering art much more than mayhem."

"We're lucky," says Ken. "Greg's very difficult to book. I was actually shocked when he said he'd take this project on. I've been trying to get him for a long project for at least a dozen years, and this is the first time he's agreed. That's another thing that makes me feel this tree was exerting some kind of magnetism on people, even a guy like Greg who gets called by network news and big documentary producers."

I ask them what it has been like for them working on the Project. Ken laughs: "Let's face it, we started out as a couple of New Yorkers with chips on our shoulders. But we've been having such a great time and the work has been fascinating. At one point Greg said to me, 'I want to be sure all this footage is saved because I think I'm doing some of the best work I've ever done in my life.' That's pretty impressive from someone with Greg's experience."

When I ask them about the days spent cutting the tree down, Ken says: "I got such a kick when Mark showed his cutting plan to the tree crew on the first day. They clearly hadn't expected that. I suppose it's usually just 'one-two-three' and off they go with the wood, but his plan was so meticulously done that they realized they were dealing with somebody who knew exactly where he wanted that tree cut. Also, Mark told them, 'None of this tree is to be lost, we want every last shred of it.' I'll never forget when Mark was finished and Jim Carver, the local contractor, turned to the crew and said, 'I want everybody to take their thinking caps off and put their following-order caps on! We've never done anything like this before, so if anyone has any doubt whatsoever about what to do, they have to ask Mark.' And it worked because a really disparate group of contractors and machine operators and farmers all cooperated so well. If you stepped back to look at what we were doing you could say it was the strangest thing, but I believe they were all pulled into the energy that surrounded that tree. It showed me how much people are drawn to a dream."

UNDERSTANDING THE WOOD

When we arrive at the mill we find Steve under the bed of the Super Ax, using jacks to level the whole machine. He drags himself tiredly out from underneath to greet us and we learn that he has been working much of the night. "I wasn't happy with the way it was tracking," he says. "I knew I could do better." The concern on his face is obvious. Steve is on show in a way that he never experiences in his regular life and he wants to do his best for the Project.

The sawn wood is starting to mount up. One of the most important things that Mark wants to find out is how the wood will behave as it dries. There are woods that dry uniformly with little or no warping, while others twist and distort to the extent that they are unusable. Some timbers are prone to cracking, which is why Steve has treated the ends of the logs with wax to slow the loss of moisture through the cut sections. Pecan wood can be used for quality cabinet making and I saw some excellent pieces that Chris has made when we visited him, but because nobody has seen a pecan burl before, it is not clear how this wood will behave.

Mark and Steve have agreed to cut some very thin sections to see if the wood is suitable for veneer. Veneer, or thinly sliced sheets of wood, can be glued to the surface of less attractive timber, making a valuable resource go further. It can be used to create impressive tables, wall paneling, decorative inlay and a whole range of other uses.

Mark chooses a section of log to cut for veneer and as the thin flexible sheets peel away from the log we can see that Steve's night-time work has been worthwhile. With such narrow cuts, even the slightest deviation will render the wood useless, but Steve grins broadly as the log runs straight and true. We all pitch in and stack the veneer carefully, separated by stickers to let the air circulate and dry the wood uniformly. Almost immediately, however, the veneer starts to distort. Maybe it is not best suited to thin cutting, so Mark decides to leave these pieces for now and he will decide later what they can be used for. After consulting with Gary and Steve, Mark decides it's best to cut thicker sections that will have enough structural strength to allow the wood to dry without moving too much. It's all part of the learning curve with this unique tree.

So far the cut wood falls into several categories, including the thin veneer sections, sections up to a few inches in thickness, and thick slabs that resemble heavy bench tops. All of these are complete "slices" of the log and bark has been retained on both sides of each piece. Mark wants the art that is made to reflect the natural qualities of the tree as much as possible and this bark can be retained as a reference to what was the outside of the tree.

Mark has also decided to cut large blocks from key sections of the tree, such as the crotch areas. This is where the most interesting grain occurs and these pieces are going to be suitable for sculptural forms. The smaller branches have been left largely intact as they can later be either milled, or cut into smaller blocks for carving or turning. The root sections remain as convoluted masses of twisting wood, waiting for the right people to create one-of-a-kind works from them.

All of this is why Mark and Gary confer so much about every cut. There is an old adage in woodworking, "measure twice, cut once," meaning that you can't put it back once it is cut, so you had better be sure. While I watch these two burl masters, I decide the rule here is "discuss

twenty times, start to cut, change your mind and discuss it twenty more times.” There are no other Blakely Burl Trees and any mistake will mean the loss of irreplaceable material.

TRUSTING THE VISION

Ken and Greg continue their dance with the wood and the woodworkers, Ken holding the sound boom to capture every word, Greg with the weighty camera hefted on his shoulder. He lunges in to get a close-up, then backs off to take in the broader view, circling widely with Ken floating beside him attached by the umbilical cord of the sound cable. I know that Greg, in his mid-sixties, is the oldest member of the team, but I haven't seen him back off once. The sun is hot, but he seems to revel in the physical demands of the work. His concentration is complete, flowing from his firmly planted feet, up through his whole body to his eye clamped to the viewfinder. All of this is impressive, but I am even more impressed that every night it is Greg who leads us on the search for a friendly bar where we can wind down. I wish I could bottle his energy.

This mass of raw material Ken and Greg are capturing is only the start of the process. When we all go home, Ken will bury himself for months in his studio in New York, slowly assembling a pastiche of sound and images from the vast jigsaw puzzle that they have recorded. It will be a solo effort requiring enormous patience and expertise.

There is a pause while Mark and Gary confer over the next cuts, so Ken comes over to sit with me in the shade of the forklift that hangs off the side of the Super Ax. He tells me, “I just said to Greg that this reminds me of Moby Dick. Mark is Captain Ahab and the Burl Tree is the whale. Mark is on this quest and it's almost like he has been possessed by a vision which might not be entirely evident to the rest of us yet, but we have this faith in him so we do what he wants. We all came from all over the world because of Mark's vision for this ugly tree!” I like this image.

LAST DAY AT THE SAWMILL

Today we start work a little later. The pre-dawn rising and working through to dusk every day have been tiring, and the crew are allowing themselves to slow down a little. This is our last day at the sawmill and there is relatively little work left to do here. During a pause in stacking wood Steve takes me a little way off to show me something. There is a pond behind some trees and he leads me to a large log that is partly submerged in the water. When he tells me that it is black persimmon, I am mightily impressed because I know it to be a remarkable wood for turning.

One of the most prized pieces in my personal collection of turned wood is a gold-inlaid incense container made in black persimmon by a Japanese turner acknowledged as one of the great masters of his craft. When he gave me the piece he told me it was his favorite wood. I told Steve this and he, in turn, seemed very impressed. He said he was keeping the log for a special occasion and he had sunk it in the pond to prevent it from cracking. I could see that it was enormous and privately wished I could have a small piece to make something.

Back at the storehouse the burl tree wood is finally all stacked and covered. Once the site is cleaned up, it's time to move to Mark's studio in Florida. We are starting to fall into a recognisable routine, like a circus on the move. People set to their different tasks, and the vehicles are quickly loaded and secured. In a modern version of tent-peg pulling, we watch while

Gary sits in the cockpit of the amazing mobile home and retracts all of its extended legs and walls, folding it back on itself like a huge beetle. Finally the convoy is packed, goodbyes are said, reassurances are offered about our return, and we are ready to leave.

As we drive in a column away from Steve's house, he stands by the side of his driveway, waving to each of us in turn. As I pass, he flaps his arms and plaintively calls out to me, "What'm ah gonna do now?" We turn onto the road and I look in the rear-view mirror to see Steve still there, waving slowly until we turn a bend and are lost to view. As I drive on I am sure he is still standing there, thinking about what we have done together.

Steve's usual work of sawmilling is significant, but I understand why he has particularly taken this project to heart. Firstly, he was there before the rest of the team when Stanley invited him to advise on what the Burl Tree might be used for. He was the one who thought of inviting Mark to look at the tree. Also, he was offered deep respect by the team for his local knowledge, his expertise and, best of all, his irrepressible good humor and enthusiasm. If he is going to miss us, we are all going to miss him just as much. There is much to reflect on as we backtrack to Florida along the same roads we travelled on such a few busy days ago.

THE STUDIO

ARRIVING AT LINDQUIST STUDIOS

We arrive late Monday afternoon at Lindquist Studios in Quincy and as we drive across the fields we are greeted by the exuberant sounds of barking dogs. Mark's wife Kathy keeps several dogs and the animals are excited by the arrival of so many strange vehicles. Some of them run back and forth excitedly, barking in belled tones as a group welcome. The alpha dog puts on a territorial display, bracing his legs and barking the shorter, sharper challenges that ask us what we think we are doing there.

We pull in beside the rambling complex of buildings that once was used for processing shade tobacco. It is an incongruous structure, stuck out in the middle of nowhere surrounded by gently sloping fields that were once productive tobacco farms. The buildings date to the early 1900s, but resemble something much older, like an urban 19th century factory. Mark has subdivided the huge spaces and added outbuildings to create a rambling rabbit warren containing their home, three separate galleries, photography studios, computer rooms, and workshops of every size and type imaginable.

A large gallery at the entrance is filled with Mark's photographs, paintings, and small sculptures, another with his large-scale sculptures. Two upper levels are reached by a clanking one-hundred-year-old industrial elevator, and they contain what seems to be acres of precious wood stored for future use. There are also dozens of partly finished sculptures gathering dust until Mark is ready to complete them. Everywhere is storage, storage and more storage.

One workshop is filled with metal and wood lathes, surrounded by stacks of drawers filled with every accessory imaginable. Another space contains Mark's futuristic robotic setups that enable him to work enormous pieces of wood with little physical effort. It is a tool junkie's paradise, the result of two lifetimes' accumulation by both Mel and Mark, a remarkable collection of functioning machinery and things that "might be useful one day."

It's time for dinner so we drive into town to eat at the West End Grille where the steaks are thick and the sauces are hot. As we settle in with the menus, I sigh and, not for the first time, look down at my waistline. This has not only been a life-changing experience, but a body-changing time as well. But before we can order, we hear a shout from across the room and look up to see Steve Cross weaving his way through the tables to us! He has followed us down only a few hours after we left and knew we would be eating here. Of course everybody laughs and welcomes him, but we have to ask why he is here. He grins broadly and says, "I might have a surprise for you." He won't tell us any more and so we happily share dinner with our unexpected and most welcome guest.

When dinner is over Steve says, "It's been real good seeing y'all again, but before I go home I've got something for you in my truck." We follow him across the car park and he whips a tarpaulin aside to reveal a large, freshly cut piece of black persimmon! He can barely contain his glee when he sees the looks on our faces. "I thought y'all might like to try a piece," he says. It's impossible not to feel deeply moved by this gentle man. This time it is our turn to watch sadly as Steve

returns home to complete his round trip of five hours just to make us happy with a piece of wood.

When we arrive back at Lindquist Studios, we sit on the porch with cold beers in our hands, telling Kathy about what we have been doing. It makes me think about how much we have been surrounded by men and I start wishing I could share this moment with my wife Yuriko. Somebody says, “why don’t you call her?”, so I take out my laptop and soon we are all gathered around, listening over the Internet to her distant voice from Brisbane, 9000 miles away on the other side of the world. She is surprised and delighted to hear from us all, and laughs at our stories. Later I think about how this is a foretaste of the international nature of the Rices' and Mark's dream. If the dream comes true, threads of creativity will link artists all over the world with the town of Blakeley. I can't help thinking of a large map in the Blakely Burl Tree Museum with lines drawn to show where the wood travelled to and how it came back to south Georgia.

WORKING IN THE STUDIO

Today Mark and Gary will start work on a piece together. They have brought a large section of the tree from the mill to create a sculpture that will not only express their collaborative vision, but also show the potential of the rest of the tree. They also want to learn how the wood can be worked, and how it behaves as it is cut and dries. It is work that will have significant implications for the rest of the BBTP.

The piece of wood has been chosen for its interesting grain and it still has a lot of bark attached. Mark and Gary agreed on this part of the tree because Mark wants the art made for the museum to reflect the “treeness” of the project. In other words, when people look at the art, they will not just be looking at something made of wood, but at something that reflects the unique nature of the Blakely Burl Tree. In future, when visitors to the museum see film and still images of the tree before it was removed, they will be able to relate the art to the site where it grew and where they are standing when they look at the art. Mark and Gary want to create a sense of time and place, a creative connection to all that happened in and around the Burl Tree right up to and including its careful removal.

After so much time looking at the tree and agonizing about every cut, it's time for these two artists who know each other so well to perform their magic. It is fascinating to watch how they relate to each other in this space that means so much to them both. Clearly it is Mark's domain that he has created over so many years, but Gary has a history here too. He had already been working with wood for more than twenty years, successfully selling his sculptural vessels, when he met Mel and Mark. Gary came to Quincy to work as assistant to the Lindquists and to learn as much as he could from them. Mel was already in his mid-80s and Gary says, “We hit it off right off the bat. Mel was like a grandfather to me. When we were working together in the studio he would use some old-time saying to convey a thought or an idea. It would usually make me laugh and he'd smile and nod his head. I cherish the time we got to spend together.”

Mark also mentored Gary in many ways, as Gary explains: “Mark really worked with me on sculpture. He made me go to the library and study artists like Jean Arp, Max Bill, Brancusi and

others. Then we'd have discussions about the artists and their work. It really helped me focus on my sculptural forms and the direction that I've taken."

Mark worked with his father from the mid-1950s till Mel passed away in 2000 and it is impossible to understand Mark's life without including that influence. Mark is always quick to acknowledge his father: "When I was young Mel taught me everything I could imagine about being in the woods, about forestry and wood lore, and about working with wood. Somehow we managed to get past the baggage of being father and son, and we were able to traverse a special kind of professionalism."

As I look around me I see signs of Mel's presence everywhere. His lathe and tools stand where he left them, and even though he passed away nearly ten years ago it is as if he just walked out yesterday, with his cap still hanging on a nail where he left it. Now, as I watch these two friends manouver the large piece of wood into the studio where they will carve it, I can almost see Mel nodding in approval.

Mark and Gary want some private time in the studio to begin work on their wood, so I tell Mark that I'd like to make a piece from the wood Steve gave us to thank him for his help in the project.

"Can I use a lathe to turn a bowl for Steve?" I ask.

"Sure," said Mark. "Why don't you use Mel's lathe?"

He says it so casually that I think maybe I've misheard.

"Mel's lathe?"

"Sure."

"I didn't think anybody uses that any more...."

"Well they don't, but you can use it...and his tools too."

That stops me in my tracks. Because I know how much Mel meant to Mark and how the memory of his father hangs over everything Mark does, I'm deeply moved...and worried! I'd better not mess this up.

I cut a section of the black persimmon and begin to turn a bowl. It is hard going because the wood is still wet from being submerged. Now, after days of watching Greg and Ken filming Mark and Gary, I find myself under the lens as they record the making of this gift bowl. I think, "OK, everyone is going to look at this when I'm done. If I screw up it will be recorded in high definition. And Mel's looking over my shoulder to see if I mess up his lathe!" I take a deep breath, determined to succeed with a piece of wood that should have been left for a year to dry. Slowly, as I take ever finer cuts, the true nature of the wood starts to show. It is a deep chocolate shade and when I have finished turning it I use Mel's buffing system to bring out the full depth of the color. The piece will work. I breathe a deep sigh and hope that Steve and his family will like the bowl.

Mark and Gary emerge from their seclusion to tell us they've started their sculptural bowl, so we gather around the roughed-out piece. Mark has mounted it on one of his robotic systems, a motor-driven chucking system that allows him to move it to any position for carving. They explain where they are heading with the piece for the camera and then continue with the carving. Gary wields a small chainsaw as a carving tool and the still-wet wood peels away under his sweeping strokes. They pause to discuss what is being revealed.

"I think you can go here," says Mark.

"You mean...?"

"Let me show you."

Mark takes over, and rounds off part of the wall of the vessel.

"Oh, I see," says Gary.

They are making a vessel about two and a half feet across with bark retained all around the rim. It is going to be deeply scalloped, which means the curves are very complex. The contrast with all the days that Mark and Gary have been cutting the tree is wonderful. From, "Maybe we'll..." and "We might...", there is a new feeling of immediacy: "If I do this...see?" Every cut is an irrevocable step in the process of creativity and I can see they are imbued with new energy. This is the life of many wood artists—days or weeks of preparation, planning, and visualizing, and then comes the payoff, the explosion of creativity. As their piece slowly emerges it is a such a pleasure to watch Mark and Gary almost dance around the wood.

THE STUDIO LIFE

Usually the outside of a wooden vessel is made first, then the inside is cut to conform to the exterior. Mark and Gary are doing the exact opposite. They have carved the deeply scalloped interior and Wednesday morning they begin matching the outside to it. They seem to be working instinctively, but I know that every cut is the result of years of experience—decades in fact. Both of these men know exactly how the other thinks and the work flows smoothly.

I have been amazed to watch them work so hard for so many days because I know that neither of them should be doing hard physical work at all. Both Mark and Gary have suffered major injuries in the past that limit their movement. Since a terrible car accident many years ago Mark has suffered lingering problems that can leave him prostrate with pain. Gary has screws and plates in his neck that cause agonizing flare-ups. Almost every day I have seen deep pain etched into their faces, but there have been no complaints and they have continued relentlessly with the work.

Mark takes a break to spend some time with the film crew, so Gary starts smoothing the curves with a rotary cutter. He pauses to check progress and I ask him how it's going.

"This is a fun job," he says, "Time just slips away and that tells you how enjoyable it is."

When I ask what the wood is like to work with, he smiles happily. "Well, so many times you have great expectations when you are harvesting a piece of wood, but then it ends up being rotten.

With this job we didn't know exactly what we had until the tree was cut, so there was a high level of anticipation. We wanted it to be a good piece of wood. Now I can say that it's a great piece of wood!"

I describe the thoughts I had yesterday about Mel, and Gary looks around: "Well, there's something about being in this studio. When I was working here, Mel would often stand close by and look over my shoulder. While I'm working on this piece those memories are very sharp. I feel like he's looking down from wherever he is and having a good laugh at us enjoying the whole process."

He carves some more, then stops to add something he has just thought of: "You know, while we were cutting up that tree at Steve's place I was already chomping at the bit. I was imagining pieces I could make, so having a chance to immediately start on a piece with Mark caps off the whole experience. Gathering the material was pretty exciting, but making this sculpture is like unwrapping a magnificent thing."

Gary starts carving again, so I leave him with John still relentlessly snapping photos. In the photographic studio Mark is being filmed. His narrative ranges far and wide, covering the whole history of the BBTP then blending in the story of his father, his own work and Lindquist Studios. As I listen I realize that for Mark the BBTP seamlessly fits into his whole life adventure. All of the events of his life seem to have prepared him for this task: his experience working with wood, particularly burls; his photographic skills; his computer savvy that has enabled him to use images and ideas to promote art; his years of negotiating with top-end galleries and events to present his art at the highest level; his network of friends who can help him with work like this.....the list seems endless. But most of all it is Mark's fierce determination that carries him through. I watch him speak with intense concentration to the camera. In the best sense of the word, Mark is probably the most single-minded person I know.

WINDING DOWN

Towards the end of the day Mark and Gary agree that they have taken the sculpture to the point where it needs to be bagged up, crated, and shipped to Gary's studio in California. There he will oversee the process of drying the wood before the final carving. It is amazing to think that the water still in the wood is from the Big Ditch and it will be transported across the country to be dried out in California. A huge lump of wood has been reduced to something easily lifted by one person and when Gary is finished with it, the vessel will only weigh around thirty pounds. That piece will take pride of place in the museum as the very first ever made from the BBT.

The day winds down in an anti-climactic process of sweeping shavings, putting away tools, checking and double checking that all has been done. A final beer in the long twilight on the porch and we talk through the remarkable events of the last two weeks. There are lots of laughs and the beer tastes better for it.

That night we drive to the West End Grille again for a final meal of fried okra, blackened fish and enormous shrimp, all washed down with more cold beer. Life is good. Not for the first time I sit back and soak up the uniquely American energy that flows around me. Sport constantly runs on the big screens and once more I shake my head at the stop-start nature of the game they call

football where hardly anybody ever kicks a ball. I comment on this, but nobody is impressed. In this enormous and complex land, where even the World Series involves only one country, other cultures seem very far away.

I can see through into the kitchen where the staff are throwing huge steaks on the grill and filling enormous salad bowls with enough vegetation to feed a horse, all the time laughing and joking loudly. The restaurant is filled with that American brand of can-do energy, a kind of “watch-me” professionalism where skills are on show and pride at a job well done is openly celebrated. I can’t help thinking that is exactly how the Burl Tree team has gone about their work. It’s very different to the more understated way of working where I come from and I marvel both at how familiar American life seems to me, yet how foreign I feel here.

THE 30,000 FOOT VIEW

From the plane I am looking down over south Georgia. It is a jewel-like landscape, a carpet of deep green with countless lakes, rivers and creeks glittering in the slanting evening sunshine. I am on the way home to Australia, a twenty-two-hour journey that will take me to the other side of the world and across the equator to summer in the Southern Hemisphere.

After farewelling Greg and Ken who had to drive to Atlanta, for most of the morning Gary, John, Mark, and I sat around talking. The conversation was of the “how about when...” and “did you see...” variety. Certain people cropped up in the conversation all the time: Charles and Catherine Rice who made it all possible and enjoyed the adventure as much as any of us; Stanley Houston, the kindest of men; Jim Carver and his crew of workers who helped remove the tree. One name mentioned more than most was Steve Cross. In many ways Steve represents the best of the BBTP. He was always happy, always enjoyed the company of others, and took the greatest delight in everything that we did. He and his saw, that Mark described as “a giant robotic dinosaur,” were prime players in the adventure.

Gary summed up very well how we all felt at the start: “At first it all seemed a bit surreal, but we hit the ground running. That bridge set the tone for the whole project. When we got there we only talked for about 15 minutes and then everybody got to work.”

Mark agreed: “I knew that a quick project like that would bring the team together. That bridge was kind of symbolic for the whole project, all working together to cross obstacles. Even the rain was a challenge at the start, but it was as if all the doubts disappeared when the bridge was laid, the sun came out and the skies cleared. It was absolutely phenomenal.”

It occurred to me to ask what will happen to the bridge.

“Everybody in Blakely wanted us to leave it there,” said Mark, “but it doesn’t really meet the required standards. Since everyone seemed to be so enthralled with it, we decided to keep it, just in case it can be incorporated into the Project in the future.”

I can’t help hoping that we all get to stand on the bridge again somewhere.

“I really enjoyed working with all those guys in Blakely,” said Gary. “They took their job seriously and they were extremely good at what they did. Being in a place like that kind of restores your

faith in American people. So many times it seems like all we get is bad news, but when you get there into the heartland of America, these are real people.”

The feeling appeared to be mutual. I remember how, on the first day we were at Steve’s mill, a woman approached us while we were eating at a restaurant in Colquitt, some miles from Blakely.

“Excuse me,” she said, “but are y’all the folks makin’ the movie over at Blakely?”

“That’s right,” said Mark.

“Well,’ she said, “I just want to tell y’all how much we appreciate what you’re doin’. It’s a fine thing and it will mean so much to us around here.”

As I look down on the unfolding landscape my thoughts return to the unlikely series of coincidences that led to the Blakely Burl Tree Project—the amazing tree, its location on the site of J.B. Rice’s shop, Charles’ and Catherine’s plans for the land and their role in the community, the realization of the rare and special nature of the tree, the seemingly chance meetings that brought Stanley, Steve, and Mark together, and on and on. But I also think that these things would have amounted to nothing if people had not been open to the idea of doing something special. Shakespeare famously wrote, “All things are ready if our minds be so.”

The Blakely Burl Tree can be a unique focus for the creative energies of so many people, both in Blakely and around the world. I like to think of the bright young students I met at the Blakely High School. If the simple process of cutting down the tree has been so stimulating, how exciting will the rest of the project be! When I was in Blakely, few of the people I met had ever been out of Georgia, so the BBTP is going to open up a wonderful new view of the world for them. I was delighted by the way people responded to having an Australian there. I can’t begin to imagine how much they will enjoy the inevitable visits from other foreign lands when the Blakely Burl Tree Museum opens.

My eyes close and I dream of the big lumpy tree and people smiling when they say, “Y’all come back now y’hear?”