



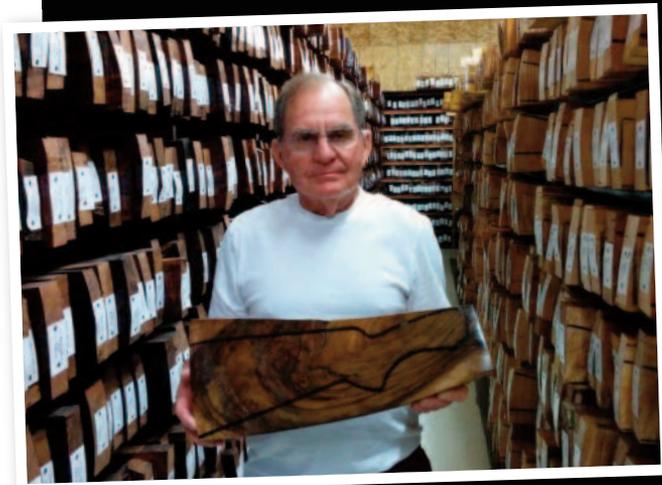
A REPORT BY DANA FARRELL

FROM STUMP TO STOCK

Ancient Romans called the walnut *Juglans Regia*, or “Jupiter’s Royal Acorn”. The Persians were probably the first to cultivate them, and considered their nutritious meat a

delicacy reserved for royalty. Traded along the Silk Road between Asia and the Middle East and eventually around the world by the sea trade, this nutritious food source, and the tree that produced it, became known as English walnut due to its global wide distribution via the British merchant sea routes. (In spite of the name, English walnuts have never been commercially cultivated in England.) Its slow growing, richly grained wood is highly sought after by craftsmen across the world – valued both for its strength and beauty.

English walnut is considered by many in the firearms industry to be the finest gunstock wood available, and California, with its fertile Central Valley agricultural area, has historically been the premier American source. With over 200,000 acres of walnut groves, the Central Valley’s Mediterranean-like climate and burgeoning commercial nut production trade sees an ongoing cycle of tree planting, nut production and removal of older trees. Trees become less productive around age 65, at which time walnut farmers



CECIL FREDI IN HIS WAREHOUSE FULL OF BLANKS.

replace them with younger, more productive specimens. Although no longer valued for nut production, the wood from these older trees is extremely valuable to craftsman of many stripes – not the least of which are those in the gunstock industry.

Godfather of Walnut

Cecil Fredi is a 75 year old Las Vegas wood seller who for the last 30 odd years has figured prominently in the American gunstock industry. Fredi, an engaging guy with an easygoing manner and a youthfulness belying his age, clearly enjoys his line of work. After graduating from the Colorado School of Trades as a gunsmith in 1960, he opened up a gun shop, where he says, “I had all the work I wanted for a minimum wage.” He “cashed it in” and went “on the bum” for five years, hunting in Alaska and guiding in Montana – basically living an adventurous young man’s dream.

One day, back in Vegas in 1967, he went to the Flamingo Hotel for the free drinks, and was hired as a slot machine mechanic. That spur of the moment experience turned into a 20-plus year career in the casino that eventually led him to the position of VP of Slot Operations. Staying in Las Vegas most of his life, he worked in the local gaming industry for many years, only taking up the wood trade later on in life. In the early 1990s he filled three outbuildings with wood before leaving the State on a three-year work assignment in the Louisiana gambling industry, with the thought that he would have a hobby upon his return to Vegas. His three-year Out-of-State job petered out after only six months, so he returned home and jumped into the wood business with both feet.

Vegas, he says, with its 100 degree heat and single digit humidity level is perfect for the gunstock blank business – it also doesn’t hurt that the city has a constant flow of potential customers, some forty million visitors per year filing through its entertainment and conference venues. As home to three of the shooting industry’s biggest shows – the SHOT Show, the Wally Beinfeld Antique Gun Show and the Safari Club International, Sin City is flush with firearm enthusiasts and professionals.

The Times, They Are A Changin’

It’s Fredi’s belief that the era of good California grown walnut is quickly coming to an end. With real estate values in the State spiking, farmers simply find it too tempting to sell their farmland at huge profit to developers or vintners wishing to grow grapes for wine production. “When a farmer has five or ten acres of walnuts and pulls them out because they stop producing, a developer sees that and says I’m going to give you more money than you could ever make growing walnuts. To be a player in the California grown walnut wood business you better have a partner – someone who lives up there, because when nut production starts going downhill, the farmer pulls them out. You’ve got to have

someone up there who’s friendly with the farmer. They’ve been burned by so many people – particularly the burl guys. Burl is where the money’s at,” he says referring to the burl produced where the trunk and the root meet (the section of the tree that is most sought after by others in the wood industry, in addition to gunmakers). “They poach burl there just like people poach a deer or elk – a farmer will go out and find his tree upside down with the burl cut off at night,” he says.

Foreign Source

Although it’s sad to see the source for good, domestically grown walnut dry up, luckily other little known and often untapped sources of wood are still out there.

Fredi has discovered a very high quality source originating in the Republic of Georgia – a small, Black Sea nation bordered by Russia, Turkey and Armenia, that is very friendly with the US and importation-friendly. Fredi got hooked up with a couple of Georgian brothers whose father owns a sawmill back home in the Republic of Georgia, thus opening the floodgates for a source of good, albeit foreign sourced wood. The men’s first foray into the American market happened by chance after they brought a 40 foot container of wood blanks to sell in the US after a customer from another country reneged on a 7000 piece order. The

first load wasn’t too great, says Fredi, because the men didn’t yet know what to look for in good wood – but they’re learning. “They have the product, but they don’t know the product.” He adds that the wood is there, it’s just been a matter of teaching the supplier how to cut it, and what to look for in a quality piece of wood. Fredi explains that initially the supplier didn’t know how to color cut them (sawing off the end of the log to reveal the presence of color). He’s doing his part to educate the Georgians in what to look for in a good piece of wood, and it’s paying off nicely for him in return by improving the quality of his inventory. He’s planning a visit abroad this year to get a firsthand look at their foreign operation.

“They’ve sent me pictures of these huge burls, and they have the opportunity to get very, very old trees,” he says enthusiastically. “A 100 year old English tree in California is exceptionally old, but in the Republic of Georgia you’re talking two, three, even five hundred year old trees. A big one in California is three feet across – they’re talking six and eight feet over there. These trees are often not grown for crops – they’re in the backyard, barnyard – they’re just all over.” You can hear the excitement in his voice. Most importantly, he says, his source has been 100% honest to deal with – something he says is not easy to find.

Fredi does most of his business over the internet. He stocks over 10,000 blanks ready for sale that are dried, planed, sanded, finished and patterned (the outline of a gunstock drawn on it), and probably another 10,000 that are still in the drying stage. Go to his web site at www.gunstockblanks.com or contact him via phone or email and



BURL BLANK.

tell him what you're looking for. That same day he can send you photos of blanks showing both sides – with finish and a pattern. "What you see is what you get. You're going to see both sides, you're going to see the pattern, you're going to see pretty much 95% what it's going to look like. I'm trying to move a lot of wood, because I've got a lot of pieces. I'm not trying to sit on a dozen beauties and price everyone out of the market. Pickin' a gunstock is like pickin' a wife – nobody should do it for you," he says.

Putting It To Use

Neal Bauder is a southern Michigan stockmaker and custom gunmaker extraordinaire whose body of work speaks for itself. Working alongside some of the country's best American Custom Gunmaker's Guild members, Bauder has been making beautiful custom rifles and handmade stocks for over 30 years, and has used Cecil Fredi as a source of wood for much of that time.

A well rounded craftsman who lived in Alaska for close to 30 years over the course of his career,



GIL ASHE'S PERSONAL K GUN GETTING A NEW STOCK.

Bauder's done just about everything gun related – restored vintage leverguns, built custom safari rifles and hand carved eye-poppingly beautiful stocks for Perazzis, Krieghoffs and just about every other high grade target gun out there. He says his business history with Fredi is rooted in more than just a source of pretty wood. "Cecil is a great guy to work with and a real straight shooter. I never have to worry when doing business with him," says Bauder. "He's got a huge inventory on hand of great wood that is very reasonably priced."

A lot of Fredi's Georgian walnut has ended up lately on Bauder's duplicating machine, before finding its final home on high

grade guns around the country. His focus these days is on making stocks for sporting clays guns, and in fact he's been working this past year with shooting instructors Gil and Vicki Ash – both on clients' guns and their own personal shotguns. It's a high profile, solid vote of confidence in his stock making ability. He recently restocked both Gil and Vicki's own Krieghoffs with beautifully figured walnut from Fredi's inventory, after having first made pattern stocks for them to shoot and fine tune. Many of Ash's clients also hire Bauder to carve new stocks, working through the process of tweaking their gun fit using a pattern stock during clinics and private lessons with the Ashes. While their subjects shoot the pattern stock, the Ashes make note of any adjustments needed to improve fit and point of impact, and create a spec sheet of dimensions that is sent along with the stock back to Bauder, who makes those changes, then sends it back for the client to shoot to make sure

everything is just right. Once the client shoots the pattern stock for a while, and they and Ash are double-dog sure things are dimensionally perfect, it's sent back to Bauder one last time for duplication, using the final piece of wood. Because every step is done in-house, from duplication to checkering, to final finishing, Bauder says he has complete control over the end product and can maintain the highest level of quality and consistency. A picture is worth a thousand words, and just one look at his work is proof positive to the quality of his craftsmanship and the exacting standards he holds himself to.

At the request of Ash, Bauder has recently been making custom walnut combs for Blaslers, Krieghoffs and Guerinis that are about three tenths of an inch lower than factory dimensions, to give the user more adjustability options and allow the lowering of point of impact. If Ash finds he needs to lower a customer's POI, it can be as simple as removing their original comb and popping on a replacement.

In addition to full stocks, Bauder also does refinish jobs, custom checkering, Isis recoil reducers, rust bluing and performs a variety of other wood and metalwork for both shotguns and rifles. ■

You can find him on the web at www.nealbaudercustomgunmaker.com

NEAL BAUDER AT THE STOCK DUPLICATOR.



REPLACEMENT COMBS FOR ASHE'S CUSTOMERS TO LOWER POI.

