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WILLIAM OXLEY
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OHIO FOREST INDUSTRY PROUD OF NEW THOMPSON LIBRARY WOODWORK

By Adam Conway, Superior Hardwoods of Ohio



Adam and Emmett Conway in the West Atrium of the OSU Thompson Library. Note the uniformity of the wood panels.

The history of the State of Ohio can not only be read in the bound pages on shelves lining Ohio State University's Main (or Thompson) Library walls, but in the wood grain between the annual growth rings of its hardwood veneer paneled corridors and doorways, along the thousands of lineal feet of solid wood molding and trim, and across the surface of the quarter sawn tables in the main reading room.

Throughout the world's lumber and veneer business, Ohio is known for its high quality white oak. It is estimated that Ohio's forests grow approximately 180 million board feet of

new white oak timber annually. Climate, soil, and average temperatures combine to produce ideal environments for the species' consistent growth. Sometimes, Mother Nature outdoes herself. The trick is to know it when you see it.

In 1941, after receiving a forestry degree from "the school up north", my grandfather began work as a forest ranger in the Zaleski State Forest. At the end of 1949, the Division of Forestry would be separated from the Ohio Agricultural Experiment Station (OAES), a part of The Ohio State University, and become part of the new Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR). Not looking forward to the politics of the new department, my grandfather took an offer to be part of the expanding Department of Forest Research, within the OAES. His job, at the request of State Forester Mr. Ovid Alderman, would be to compile an "extensive timber inventory of all the existing state forests." Grandpa had documented that he would ultimately walk over five hundred miles on cardinal directions and sample one-fifth acre plots at 30 chain intervals. His job was complete by December 1950, and his inventories are still referenced by ODNR today to evaluate growth rates and timber management practices. Grandpa's later years were spent working on his Christmas tree farms, traveling the world with grandma, and lecturing all who would gather to hear stories of Ohio's natural history.



Adam Conway's son Raleigh standing with the 324 year old white oak log from a Licking County farm in 2004. Wood from this tree inspired the use of white oak for the renovation of the OSU Thompson Library.

My grandparents raised six children to respect and appreciate the outdoors. My father grew up hunting grouse in the same southeastern Ohio forestlands his dad had managed decades before. In the 1970's, after receiving his bachelor's degree at Ohio University, Dad started in the lumber business with a logging crew and small circle mill. He often worked with my grandfather, who continued to write his memoirs as "The Olde Forester" and manage timber privately for many years after leaving the Division of Forestry. In the 1980's, my father began manufacturing and exporting white oak to Japan. In the late 1980's, the Nagoya Castle's floor was replaced with solid oak cut from our mills in Ohio. International markets were opening up, and the worldwide appetite for American hardwoods had established itself permanently.

In the late 1980's and early 1990's, I attended The Ohio State University and studied in the very library "stacks" we would one day have the opportunity to help transform. After graduation and four years with an international lumber trading firm, my wife and I returned to Ohio to join the family business my father created almost thirty years prior. Today, our family has four modern band mills in Ohio. We have imported finished wood products, exported our products, and worked with architects, distributors, and manufacturers in almost every facet of the industry. We have worked in cooperation with the ODNR Division of Wildlife to open 2,500 acres of our private land for public hunting and recreation, and were proudly the first Forest

Legacy Program participant in Ohio with one of our properties along the Muskingum River. We manage land and harvest timber in Ohio, West Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Kentucky, and recently earned Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) Chain-of-Custody certification from the Rainforest Alliance's SmartWood program. We have been actively involved with the Ohio Forestry Association longer than I can remember, invested in education programs for youth in schools, and staff professional foresters to service company programs and provide information on timber management related questions to the general public. It would be the sum of these three generations of experience that would make our relationship with the Thompson Library project so personally and completely rewarding.

The week before Christmas in 2004, a severe ice storm blanketed central Ohio. Thousands of trees were lost as tops collapsed under the weight of the ice. That winter, a local Licking County farmer decided to salvage the damaged timber he had on his farm and hired a local logging company to select cut his trees. I was called to buy the harvested white oak, red oak, walnut, cherry, and poplar.

Annually, we process thousands of white oak logs in our Ohio sawmills. That cold, snow covered day, I walked up to the most perfect white oak log I had ever seen, the kind of log you see in the distance and you don't quite get your truck into park before the door opens and your left boot hits the ground. The

texture was soft and even, the color was light pink under a fresh cut, the heart was centered on both ends, and it would be forty three feet to the first limb. This was the tree you hear about, but never see. A five inch cross section of the log, cut twelve feet up from the base, is still in our barn. We would later determine that the tree had been a sapling in the year 1680. The cross section showed 324 years of Ohio's history in its growth rings. This was not a log to be shipped overseas. This was something special. The quarter and rift sawn lumber from the tree was kept together and continues its life as flooring and fine furniture in a private residence in Granville, Ohio, not more than ten miles from where it stood for more than three centuries in the forest.

It would be a two foot long, half-finished piece of quarter sawn lumber from this tree that I would find myself holding in the office of architect George Acock two years later. I'll never forget his expression



Emmett Conway, Jr. explains how to prevent wood from bending at the new shelves built for Special Collections. Tom Shuman, Forest Manager Zaleski State Forest, Bob Boyles, acting Chief and State Forester, ODNR Division of Forestry and Adam Conway look on.

as he looked at the piece of wood now on his table. He knew it when he saw it. Mr. Acock asked of its origin and invited me to look at a project they were proposing. As the illustrations began to unroll, it was immediately apparent that he was working on the Thompson Library, and had sketched his vision of the Main Reading Room. Hearing his passion for the project was one of the most inspiring conversations I've ever experienced. I'm sure he had no idea of his influence.

It would be another year before the award for the trim package would be granted and almost a year after that before the lumber, veneer, and panels would be needed. After meeting with Doug Mock of Mock Woodworking, and convincing him to give us a chance to supply the white oak, we began preparation for the selection of material. Mr. Mock's woodworking company in Zanesville, Ohio has a long history of exceptional architectural millwork installations. Public libraries, federal courthouses, large retail, and other commercial projects routinely receive awards for Mock's outstanding manufacturing, installation, or design features. The Thompson Library would be no different. It would truly be a pleasure to partner with such an accomplished staff and organization.

Ohio State University has always worked closely with the Ohio Department of Natural Resources. From the beginning, we knew the Thompson Library deserved to have its panels and solids cut from trees grown on lands managed in our Ohio State Forest system. Purchases of ODNR timber spread benefits throughout the state as large portions of the proceeds from sales are returned directly to the local communities and school systems. Not only would the proximity of the resource and manufacturing help qualify for LEED green construction credits, but these were public lands that had been cared for and carefully managed for generations by dedicated state foresters and officials. Foresters, like 28 year veteran and now ODNR Division of Forestry Acting Chief and State Forester Bob Boyles,



White Oak, Zaleski State Forest. This tree was harvested for the Thompson Library remodelling project.

who walked the Zaleski tract we were cutting and shared his knowledge of the forest with myself and OSU graduate and Zaleski State Forest Manager Tom Shuman. These professionals and others like them serve as curators as much as protectors of Ohio's natural resources.

We purchased a bid tract of timber in the Zaleski State Forest from the ODNR in 2007. This was a tract of timber my grandfather would have cruised and inventoried more than sixty years prior. Consistency of color and texture were a priority for the millwork company and architect. The timber would be perfect for the library project as most of the white oak in this tract grew on the northern slopes of the hillside. Trees tend to grow slower and more evenly on the northern slopes since they are exposed to less sunlight.

Only white oak (*Quercus alba*) would be selected. More than 60,000 board feet of logs would be hand-picked to produce material for the solid trim and molding. The first cuts from the quarters of the largest logs would later become the solid eight inch wide components of the fifteen foot long tables in the Main Reading Room. All of the lumber was cut in our McArthur, Ohio sawmill. The material was then dried to eight percent moisture at Industrial Timber and Lumber's Dry Kiln facility, also in McArthur. The greatest challenge would be selecting the logs to be taken to Universal Veneer, Inc. in Newark, Ohio for slicing and clipping. More than 300,000 square feet of veneer was produced for the project. We received floor by floor layouts from the engineers at Mock to sequence the blue print matched panels. All of the panels were expertly laid out and assembled at Custom Plywood, Inc. in New Albany, Indiana.

The first set of drawings we received was for the eleventh floor. The room's 360 degree views south to downtown Columbus,

east across the Oval, and west and north to the Horseshoe and campus almost draw you outward in anticipation to one of the bay windows as you exit the elevator. The best veneer from two of our highest quality logs were used to complete the paneling on the eleventh floor. Each is sequenced clockwise as you move around the room. The specification of “comb grain” rift white oak veneer, the height of the room, and the angle of the walls meant that we would have to select the perfect trees for the layout. Most of the panels had to be matched and sequenced between 11 and 12 feet tall. The trees had to be cut perfectly, because the knife on the quarter round slicer at the veneer mill measured only 12 feet 4 inches. The entire job would be this complex.

Floor by floor, we would receive the drawings and select the veneer from logs yielding the most consistent balance for the room or corridor. Logs were sliced with different techniques to yield different effects in the appearance of the veneer. Room 202 respects the historic original design of the library with quarter sliced veneer and quarter sawn solids for molding and trim. Other areas reflect more modern design with clean lines of slip matched rift cut veneer on curved panels. Ironically, one of the final corridors completed now serves as a backdrop for the Hall of Presidents.



Left to Right Tom Shuman, Bob Boyles, Emmett Conway and Adam Conway admire the new white oak desks. New wall panels and the original door frames are visible in the background


These panels are composed of veneer from five trees cut highest on the hill at the Zaleski tract. The texture is a little more “hard”, as the trees had seen more weather over the last century than those growing protected and lower in the valleys. Their history can be read if you look closely between the growth rings. From a distance, the panels blend seamlessly.

The countless historians, architects, designers, contractors, state foresters, millwork companies, dry kiln operators, veneer manufacturers, custom plywood manufacturers, timber crew operators, and every employee of Superior Hardwoods of Ohio, Inc. walked a little taller those days we used our skills for the new library. We all seemed to have some reason to give of ourselves, not to an individual, but to something more profound: to pay respect to this larger shadow that, for many of us, had once stood tall over our shoulders as we passed through those most critical few years of discovery. We knew the results of our work would remain long after we had passed, and that maybe students and alumni walking its corridors would find some inspiration and irreversible pride that comes from forever being an Ohio State Buckeye.

Adam Conway is Vice President of Superior Hardwoods of Ohio, Inc. based out of Wellston, Ohio. He is a 1995 Ohio State University graduate with a Bachelor's Degree in Economics, and lives with his wife and two sons in Granville.

Photos courtesy of ODNr Division of Forestry and the author.


Learn more about the Thompson Library and the recent renovations on the web at <http://library.osu.edu/about/locations/thompson-library/> and click “About Thompson.”



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