



Photos by Marty Heisey / New Era

Much of the recycled wood used for Dan Dennis' furniture comes from a network of salvagers. "I take the stuff nobody else has a use for," the artist says.

Furniture with a story

Dan Dennis' furniture is part artwork and part Lancaster County history lesson

By **MARY BETH SCHWEIGERT**
New Era Staff Writer

DAN DENNIS HATES TO waste history.

Like many Lancaster Countians, Dennis feels a twinge of regret when he sees an old barn being torn down.

But most people wouldn't think of turning old barn boards into furniture.

"Every time I see an old building going down, that's a piece of Lancaster County history being erased," Dennis says.

"It's kind of sad to me."

Dennis, a former waiter who's traveled the world, recycles wood from crumbling area landmarks to make unique, almost sculptural cabinets, chests and tables.

Dennis views his art as reincarnations of the past, a second chance for boards with history and character that are too short, or too old, for other uses.

Most of the wood Dennis, 37, rescues from the chipper comes from Lancaster County barns, log cabins, homes and floors, all more than a century old.

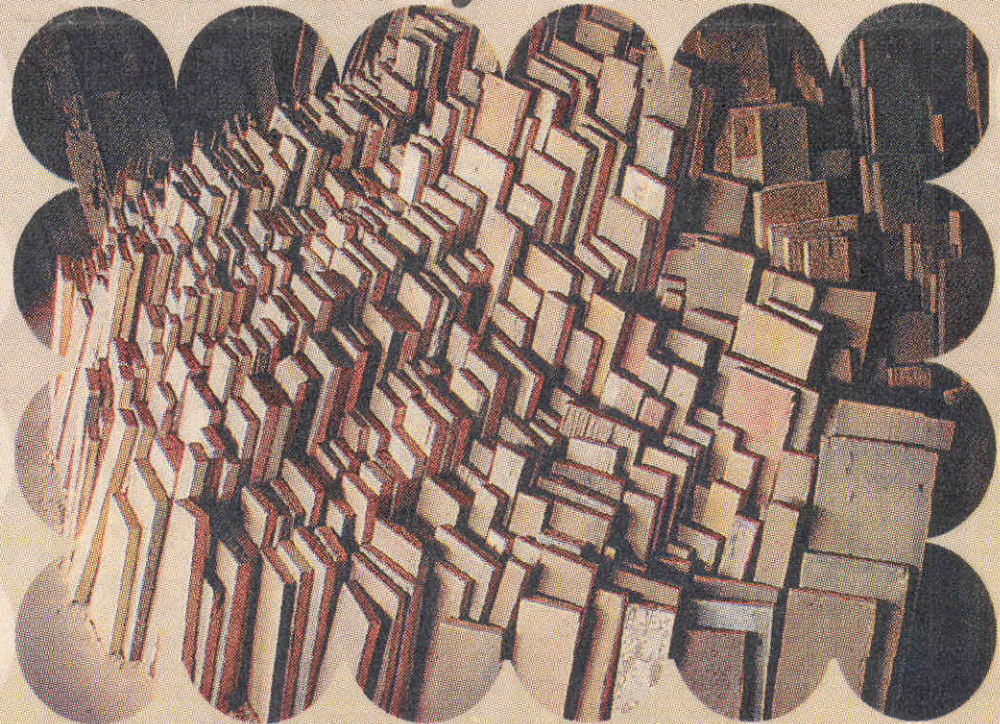
Dennis, who calls his two-year-old business Lancaster County Barn Art, gets about half his materials for free. He networks with salvagers and barbers with the Amish, helping to tear down barns in exchange for the wood.

"I take the stuff nobody else has a use for," he says. "I'm not proud. I've Dumpster dived many times."

Dennis won't waste even the smallest scraps. He tosses them into the stove that heats his Litzitz workshop, which is, appropriately enough, in an old red barn.

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Dan Dennis was born in Tokyo, to missionary parents. His late father, Dick,



Even the smallest scraps of recycled wood are used — for heating the Litzitz barn in which Dennis works.

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later served as chaplain at the Water Street Rescue Mission.

The middle of six children, Dennis was always something of a rule breaker. On his report card, teachers often noted: "Dan does not follow directions."

Dennis has no formal training in woodworking or art, unless you count seventh-grade woodshop and a college clay class, where he earned a "D."

But the freedom of art always appealed to him more than the rigidity of math and science.

When Dennis was 14, his family moved to Rothsville. After graduating from Warwick, he traveled in England, Egypt, Israel and India, holding down such odd jobs as manning public toilets on an Israeli beach.

His steady gig over the years was waiting tables in fine restaurants, including Lancaster's former Gallo Rosso and J-M's.

After 11 years of part-time classes, Dennis graduated from Millersville University in 2002, with a degree in English literature and philosophy.

About seven years ago, Dennis, who had worked briefly in construction but never made a piece of furniture, spontaneously built a TV cabinet. He used wood scraps from his shed, including old shutters for the doors.

"I saw something like it at a fair, and I thought, 'I could do that,'" Dennis recalls. "Today, I'd probably want to burn it."

From then on, he experimented with furniture-making in his spare time.

Dennis gradually grew tired of waiting tables. Unlike furniture making, he saw no tangible result after a night of work.

"I realized it was kind of soul-destroying," he says. "Ultimately, there's not anything very satisfying about it."

So Dennis devoted himself full time to furniture.

Dennis works in a barn behind his Lititz home. His mom, Millie



Artist Dan Dennis sells his furniture at craft shows. Details include curved edges and rustic hardware (below).

Smucker, owns the property, so, he notes with a grin, the rent isn't outrageous.

"I'm not a rich person," he says, "but I'm a happy person."

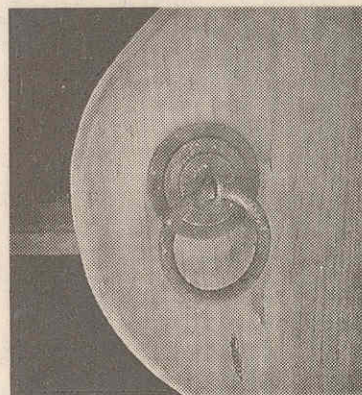
In warmer months, Dennis, a member of the Pennsylvania Guild of Craftsmen, hits the craft-show circuit. Winter is reserved for commission work.

On cold days, he works in the drafty barn wearing long johns and layers of shirts. The summer heat can be stifling.

The barn is crammed with stacks of boards, neatly organized by size and type of wood.

Dennis prefers white pine — it's soft and carries a nice finish. Luckily, it was a popular barn wood over the past couple of centuries.

He might also use yellow pine, oak, poplar and occasionally, ma-



ple, sycamore or hemlock.

"I'm not too choosy," he says. "It's all what I can salvage."

Dennis' furniture sells for \$550 to \$1,250.

He makes seven or eight basic

FOR YOUR INFORMATION

For more information on Lancaster County Barn Art, call 626-2458 or visit lancobarnart.com.

American Pie, Philadelphia (www.americanpiecrafts.com), and Home and Planet, Bethlehem (www.homeandplanet.com), also sell Dennis' pieces.

Dennis will appear at these 2005 shows:

■ Patriot-News Arts Fest, Harrisburg: May 28 to 30

■ 59th Annual State Craft Fair, Franklin & Marshall College, Lancaster: July 29 to 31

■ Mount Gretna Art Show: Aug. 20 to 21

■ Holiday Craft Fair, F&M: Nov. 26 to 27

furniture designs — mostly cabinets and tables — but gives each piece its own personality.

He starts by making a box. "What happens in that rectangle is different every time," he says.

Dennis subscribes to a Japanese theory, which, loosely translated, means "the beauty of imperfection." In other words, he won't scrap a piece with one too many nail holes.

"There's a fine line between shoddy craftsmanship and building something strong and unique that has flaws in it," he says.

With a belt sander, Dennis unearths the original wood, often buried under layers of paint and age. Tung oil gives his pieces a dark, weathered finish.

Dennis often hides "surprise" shelves or ledges in his furniture. He writes a brief history of each piece, including the type of wood used, its age and original incarnation.

The crowning touch of personality: a quirky name, like "Dharma."

His school days are long past, but Dennis still follows no one's directions — except his own.