

Woodstock welcomes woodworkers

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Jeff Parsons and Bruce Beeken have been designing and building custom furniture together for more than two decades.

This weekend, they will join about 50 Vermont woodworking companies to showcase their wares at the fourth annual Fine Furniture and Woodworking Festival in Woodstock.

Last year, about 2,000 people attended the two-day event. This year, attendance is expected to double, said Kathleen Wanner, assistant director of the 150-member, Rutland-based Vermont Wood Manufacturers Association. She expects the festival to draw people from throughout New England and New York state.

Items on display will cover the wood spectrum: furniture, bowls, toys, games and gifts, she said, naming a few.

"If it's made with wood, somebody makes it in Vermont," Wanner said.

The festival's goal is simple. "It's to make our residents and our visitors aware of the quality wood products that are made here in Vermont," she said.

Beeken Parsons, located at Shelburne Farms, builds high-end chairs, tables and other furniture. The company has participated in the last three woodworking festivals, the first of which was held at Shelburne Farms.

"Shelburne Farms is a spectacular site," Parsons said.

About 800 people attended the festival that year, Wanner said.

Locating the festival in Woodstock, with its convenient access to interstates highways 89 and 91, makes more sense to draw in a larger crowd, Parsons said.

Most of the people who attend are going to be entertained, he said. "It's not really a wholesale show. We, as an industry, would be thrilled if there were more wholesale buyers."

Most of the work Beeken Parsons does, however, is made-to-order, not wholesale. Parsons said his company has found a niche in the changing, global economy by employing an "intellectual component."

Instead of relying on mass production of a set number of furniture models, Beeken Parson, which has four full-time employees, focuses its effort on design.

Craig Anderson, 52, of Burlington also will attend the festival, playing his custom-made guitars. Anderson has been playing the guitar for about 40 years and building them for nine, mostly steel-string, flat-top, acoustic guitars.

Each guitar takes about 120 hours to make; he sells them for \$2,800 to \$6,000. "They're nice," Anderson said, noting he uses beams from covered bridges in Vermont for parts of the instrument.

Something new

There is a new element to the festival this year.

Vermont architects are being given VIP treatment, and getting a preview of the products made by the woodworkers. The hope is that some of the architect's future clients may be interested in filling their homes with local goods.

"They can furnish their homes right out of the Green Mountain State," said Sara Widness, the festival's spokeswoman.

Sixteen architects have signed on, she said.

"There is a very nice display of furniture down there," Parsons said. "There is some very exceptional work that is done here in Vermont."

The weekend festival will be accompanied by an annual product and design competition, which will run through Nov. 4. The competition will be exhibited at the Bridgewater Mill, Widness said.

Marsh-Billings-Rockefeller National Historical Park in Woodstock also is participating in this event. There will be demonstrations of a sawmill, weaving on a wooden loom and horse-drawn wagon rides through the woods.

Employing thousands

Woodworking employs more than 4,000 Vermonters.

Last year, 2,047 Vermonters worked for the furniture industry, earning an average of \$31,459, said Mike Quinn, Vermont's commissioner of economic development, citing Labor Department figures. Another, 2,283 people worked to produce other wood products, such as toys and plywood, earning an average of \$34,064, Quinn said.

The wood products industry, he said, is "a legacy industry for the state" and one that will continue to provide solid employment for Vermonters, despite the challenges of the global marketplace.

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