



# Harvesting HERITAGE

A growing trend uses local tree trunks and small sawmills to power local businesses and produce superb lumber for beautiful, unique furnishings

STORY BY SHANNON HAFNER

While mythical lumberjack Paul Bunyan felled forests in Wisconsin and Minnesota, those logs were in reality rafted to Iowa. Between the 1850s and 1900, the cities of Lyons and Clinton quickly arose as the “Lumber Capital of the World.” Huge log rafts were floated down the Mississippi River from those two states, cut into lumber at Clinton, then shipped to a growing nation via river and railroads.

In the 1880s and 1890s, Clinton boasted 13 millionaires, more per capita than anywhere in the nation—they were all lumber barons. One Clinton man, William John Young, built the largest saw mill in North America in just 20 years. The opulence ended by 1900, as northern forests were depleted and sawmills closed.

Read on to see how a new breed of small craft lumber mills in Iowa is building on this heritage.



Typically destined for a shredder, neighbors asked the tree service to save these bur oak logs from a residential tree in a Des Moines neighborhood. The logs went to a portable sawmill and the lumber was returned to the same neighbors and air dried in a garage of a hobby woodworker to make keepsake furnishings for neighbors.

The demand for Iowa-produced craft beers, farmers-market-fresh fruit, vegetables and herbs expand every year and a new trend is emerging to satisfy cravings for locally milled lumber from area trees. The result is exquisite hardwoods for artisans to create handsome home goods.

Trees help cool our homes in summer, provide habitat and food for wildlife and beautify our towns. Every tree that shades our yards, parks and streets has a story. Lovingly planted and nurtured, they grew for decades—sometimes more than a century. Trees celebrate local history and lore. A community tree gives value at every stage of its life. Its story does not have to end when a tree is removed due to disease or storm damage. Its beauty can endure through unique heirlooms that reflect the homeowner or town.

Upcycling harvested wood from our communities celebrates local history and extends the tree's story for future generations to cherish. Instead of chipping into mulch or

chopping for firewood, there is a growing trend to divert that wondrous wood to a local sawmill to mill logs into lumber.

Urban wood is a plentiful, local, renewable resource with unique character. Woodworkers, designers, artists, homeowners and business owners can create customized looks with rich colors, unique grain patterns, knots, or branching patterns found in community trees for bookcases, tables, mantels, flooring, trim or cabinets.

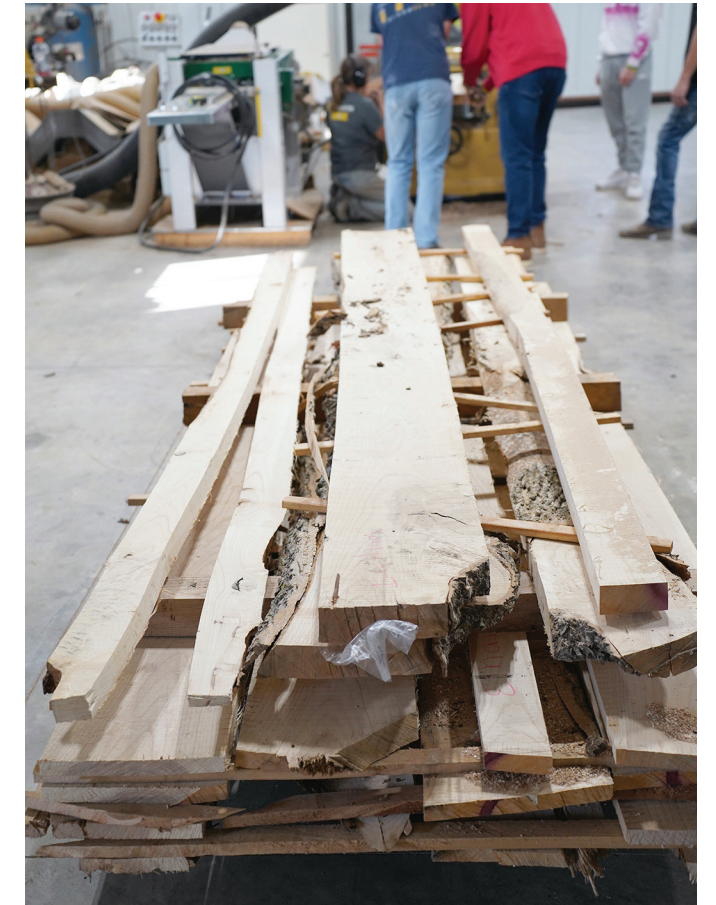
Different parts of a fallen tree can be separated into piles for reuse and to reduce waste. Portions of trees are best converted to wood chips, compost and mulch—think twigs, branches and limbs. But trunks, if not hollow, can be rescued and lumbered.

The DNR forestry program is working to connect people all along the supply chain to build community, business and consumer interest to embrace this untapped potential. Here's some stories of how homeowners, communities and businesses are crafting fallen trees in their locales.



### INSPIRING THE NEXT GENERATION

Last summer, diseased ash trees were removed from Earlham High School. The tree trunks were taken to nearby Bear Creek Hardwoods, a sawmill owned by Monty and Becky Button. It was a perfect opportunity for the school's construction technology teacher, Tim Harskamp, who took his class onsite where students learned how to mill and plane boards from those very ash trees. Different board sizes were custom-milled to meet the needs of each student's projects to repurpose their school's fallen trees. Students built end tables, coffee tables, a welding table, a TV stand and a planter box. "This hands-on experience introduced my students to different construction skills and professions," Harskamp says. "My students were so excited to go to the sawmill and learn from Becky and Monty." Harskamp and the Buttons plan to continue this unique learning opportunity to future construction technology students. The Buttons started their sawmill business in 2014 to repurpose



ABOVE and LEFT: Last summer, diseased ash trees were removed from the grounds of Earlham High School. The tree trunks were taken to nearby Bear Creek Hardwoods, a sawmill owned by Monty and Becky Button. It was a perfect opportunity for the school's construction technology teacher, Tim Harskamp, who took his class onsite so students could learn how to mill and plane boards from those very ash trees. Custom milled boards fit each student's design project and the students learned about new skills and business opportunities.

unwanted, dead, or diseased trees into usable quality lumber, which they dry in their own kiln.

### LOCAL WOODWORKER UPCYCLES NEIGHBOR'S TREE

Tim Hall lives in a Des Moines neighborhood surrounded by large, old trees. His neighbor was doing home renovation work, including work on the driveway. A giant bur oak tree in her yard had fought health issues for 10 years. It was time to take the tree down. Hall asked the tree care company to leave the main stem of the tree in one long piece instead of cutting it into firewood. He hired a local portable sawmill to cut the stem into boards. Hall taught himself how to dry the lumber in his garage. "I've got lots of beautiful wood from Iowa's official state tree for my woodworking projects," says Hall. "It's great to have a piece of my community." He made a couple of end tables for his neighbor. The neighbor has since moved, but was thankful to take these special heirlooms to her new home.

## LOCAL LUMBER FOR DIY PROJECTS

Woodworkers, DIYers and homeowners can find the perfect wood for unique projects at Habitat for Humanity ReStores in Des Moines and Iowa City. The lumber is produced from local trees and processed by local sawmills. This wood is for decorative, not structural, use in homes, since it is “ungraded” for construction standards. All income from these lumber sales aids Habitat for Humanity in building and refurbishing homes for in-need families. Urban lumber can also be purchased directly from sawmills. Find a directory of Iowa sawmills at [iowadnr.gov/UrbanWood](http://iowadnr.gov/UrbanWood).

## CORALVILLE TRAIL FEATURES BOARDWALK FROM DERECHO DAMAGE

After the 2020 derecho damaged bur oak and shagbark hickory trees in the Clear Creek Greenbelt in Coralville, the tree trunks were removed and hauled to a local sawmill in Tiffin and cut into boards to build a new, beautiful boardwalk for that same greenbelt. Bur oak and hickory are naturally rot-resistant, and their lumber is excellent for long-lasting, outdoor use. Repurposing these trees back into their original location is a fitting tribute and also promotes health and wellness for the community with the recreational improvements.

## FALLEN CHERRY TREE UPCYCLED INTO BEAUTIFUL DINING ROOM TABLE

After a beautiful cherry tree fell onto an Iowa City home, the homeowner and a local sawmill preserved the memories of its beauty. Paul Koffron, owner of Koffron Hardwoods & Cabinets in Tiffin, used his portable sawmill to cut boards the homeowner had made into a dining room table. “So many people don’t know what to do with a log,” says Koffron, who often rescues trees from the Iowa City landfill before they are shredded into mulch. These rescued trees are put to good use by diverting them from the landfill to supply local sawmills and made into beautiful boards to craft into wonderful wood products.

## DAVENPORT FUNDS BEAUTIFICATION PROJECTS

The City of Davenport Public Works Department fully utilizes city trees that are removed. Small debris is turned into compost. Debris unsuitable for compost is shredded by city-owned grinders for mulch. Wood suitable for firewood is sent through their firewood processor and sold for public use. Solid logs are set aside and milled into lumber by a local portable sawmill operator and air dried. This lumber is sold to the community with some used by the city wood shop to make products for municipal use. All proceeds help plant more trees and support city beautification projects.



ABOVE, TOP: Woodworkers, DIYers and homeowners can find the perfect locally grown and milled craft wood for unique projects at Habitat for Humanity ReStores in Des Moines and Iowa City.

ABOVE BOTTOM: After a beautiful cherry tree fell onto an Iowa City home, the homeowner and a local sawmill preserved the memories of its beauty. Paul Koffron, owner of Koffron Hardwoods & Cabinets in Tiffin, used his portable sawmill to cut boards that the homeowner had made into an elegant, solid cherry dining room table.



ABOVE: Trees along a Coralville greenbelt suffered mightily during the 2020 derecho, but logs from those damaged trees were locally milled into lumber and the trees returned in the form of a new boardwalk made of naturally rot resistant bur oak and hickory from where they once grew.

## CITY OF AMES REDUCES WOOD WASTE, PROVIDING LOGS FOR LOCAL BUSINESS, HOME IMPROVEMENT PRODUCTS

City of Ames crews remove trees damaged by wind and disease and provide the trunks to a local business, Iowa Home Crafters, for home building projects. Keeping logs in longer lengths decreases the time city crews must spend cutting up trees with less wood debris to haul to their tree pile. Iowa Home Crafters process logs with their portable sawmill and dry the wood in a kiln they built themselves. They sell some lumber to the public, as well as provide custom milling and drying. Every log they acquire from the city is numbered with its history recorded. As a log is sawed, each board is coded so they can share the story of each piece of wood—where it came from in town, why it was turned into boards and how old it was. 🐾



## TREE-CYLING: A NEW WAY TO CELEBRATE EARTH DAY'S 52TH ANNIVERSARY

Wood accounts for more than 10 percent of the nation’s annual waste material. According to data from the early 2000s, more wood was being landfilled from urban areas than harvested from national forests.

Easy ways to support community craft lumber:

- Select local lumber for home improvement projects from area sawmills and the Habitat for Humanity ReStores in Des Moines and Iowa City.
- Choose arborists, tree care companies and sawmills that reuse wood responsibly.
- No two wood grains are exactly alike, but each tree species has unique qualities that set its wood apart. Learn more at [iowadnr.gov/UrbanWood](http://iowadnr.gov/UrbanWood).
- Explore the children’s playhouse constructed from urban lumber at the Greater Des Moines Botanical Garden. Originally built for the 2021 Iowa State Fair, it showcases seven species common in towns—white oak, elm, honey locust, maple, hickory, eastern red cedar and black walnut.

## POWERING NEW LOCAL BUSINESS, CRAFTS

The DNR’s forestry program was awarded U.S. Forest Service funds to help communities improve sustainability. By networking with local businesses, DNR foresters help promote local sawmills and wood product sales while recycling wood from urban tree removals. Pilot projects help communities explore options to responsibly use wood from their fallen urban trees. Workshops for small business sawmills were held to share the expertise of wood professionals, including selecting and sourcing logs, sawing with band and chain sawmills, air and kiln drying, sterilizing wood to kill insects, identifying Iowa’s top wood species and marketing finished boards.

According to the U.S. Forest Service, wood from our nation’s urban forests could produce nearly 4 billion board feet of lumber each year. Learn more at [iowadr.gov/urbanwood](http://iowadr.gov/urbanwood).