

Custom Furnishings Business Still Booming



Machine Age Lamps crafts one-of-a-kind stools, lights, bars, wall décor and casual furnishings using parts from a wide range of industrial, farm, automotive and firefighting equipment.

Shawn Carling's business model is a beacon of light, quite literally. In an age when young and middle-aged people scoff at their parents' antique furniture, lighting and household décor, Machine Age Lamps has created and sold thousands of handmade steampunk lamps and other items over the past 15 years. The unique furnishings are crafted using salvaged steam gauges along with parts from farm implements, ships, planes and industrial equipment.

Since the FARM SHOW 2016 update, steampunk builds by Carling and his team have gained international recognition. Their work is now featured in James Boags Bar in Tasmania, Gordon Ramsey's Bread Street Kitchen in Hong Kong, and Walt Disney's Tropical Hideaway. They handled all the lighting in Dierks Bentley's Nashville bar and created lighting and tables for Epic's Galactic Headquarters in Madison, Wis.

Carling's designs are all one-of-a-kind, uniquely crafted, signed and numbered with a copper ID plate.

"We're now up to design number 4,700, and we probably made 500 prior to numbering them," he says.

Farm Show first featured Carling when he was working out of his Lakeville, Minn., garage. An article appeared in Vol. 37, No. 3, with follow-ups in Vol. 38, No. 3, and Vol. 40, No. 6.

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Ramsey's Bread Street Kitchen in Hong Kong, and Walt Disney's Tropical Hideaway. They handled all the lighting in Dierks Bentley's Nashville bar and created lighting and tables for Epic's Galactic Headquarters in Madison, Wis.

All lighting has industrial-grade UL electrical components. Several years ago, he began creating casual tables, bars, wall décor and other clever furnishings with the same distinctive character. Parts and pieces represent agriculture, firefighting, nautical and automotive themes.

He's licensed to sell designs at Barrett-Jackson Auctions and also produces one-off automotive designs for Carroll Shelby licensing. Several of those designs are displayed at the Shelby Heritage Center in Las Vegas.

Nearly all of his items have some type of steam gauges, piping, metalwork and rugged wood that are carefully assembled and finished like fine furniture.

"I find most of the components at estate sales and auctions, and people also call and offer different items," Carling says. "Right now, our warehouse is full."

The success of Machine Age Lamps relies on quality designs, word-of-mouth advertising, and appearances at art shows, the Minnesota State Fair, and other events. Carling says he's never spent much on advertising besides sending out a periodic newsletter and keeping his website updated with studio-quality photographs. His displays have earned numerous awards, and he's been featured on several TV shows and news segments.



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"I worked in the corporate world for several years and never had this much fun. Now, every day is like a Saturday with an endless stream of creativity and exciting ideas."

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Woodbender Does Custom Work For Restoration

By Lydia Noyes, Contributing Editor

Shirk's Woodbending of Narvon, Pa., specializes in transportation components and custom work made through steam bending.

"Steam bending is a time-honored woodworking technique that harnesses the transformative power of heat and moisture to reshape solid wood," says owner Curvin Shirk. "This method is both a craft and a science, one that bridges the gap between traditional artistry and modern application. By understanding both the process and its many uses, we gain insight into why steam bending remains an essential part of fine woodworking."

Steam bending involves exposing wood to moist heat, typically by way of a steam chamber, until the fibers become pliable. Steam chambers work like a pressure cooker, heating wood to 230 F at 5 psi.

"We've honed the steam-bending process through decades of experience. The softened wood can be gently bent around a form, where it's clamped and left to cool

and dry," he says. "The wood will retain its new shape without additional fasteners."

Not only does this preserve the integrity of the wood, but it also allows for elegant, organic curves that are nearly impossible to achieve otherwise. Steam bending also reduces waste, as it uses less material than carving or laminating curved shapes.

Not all wood is suitable. Success depends on the wood's structure, moisture content and grain orientation.

"We primarily use hardwoods like oak, ash and maple, known for their flexibility and resilience," Shirk says. "Each board is hand-selected for straight grain and minimal defects, which ensures smooth bends and reduces the risk of cracking or failure."

Most of his wood comes from small sawmills in Pennsylvania. Lumber from other retailers has been kiln-dried, meaning it cracks instead of bends.

After boards are cut to the required dimensions, they're placed in a steam box—an

enclosure where hot steam circulates around the board.

"The timing can vary, but our general rule is one hour of steaming per inch of thickness," he says. Immediately after steaming, the wood is removed from the box and transferred to a bending form or jig. "We do this quickly, as the wood cools and stiffens in minutes."

The wood remains clamped to its form until completely dry, a process that can take several hours or days.

"Then the wood is sanded or trimmed, according to the project's needs," Shirk says. "The final product reflects both the precision of the technique and the natural character of the material."

Shirk primarily makes parts, not complete products. "Our specialty lies in crafting bent wood elements for the transportation industry—a field where both strength and precise form are essential," he says.

"Steam-bent wood is integral to tradi-



Buggy felloes in pans fresh from the press.

tional carriage shafts, providing resilient, shock-absorbing connections between horse teams and carriages. We produce custom wagon wheel parts, where curved wooden segments ensure a seamless, sturdy wheel that rolls smoothly across any terrain. We've also provided wood trim for automotive restorations."

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Beekeepers Offer Honey Tasting And Classes

Dry Creek Beekeeping, founded in 2023, aims to share the joy and knowledge of beekeeping through immersive experiences in the world of bees.

"My son Chase started as a beekeeper at age 13," says co-owner B'Ann Dittmar. "He grew interested in the insects when a bee expert visited his middle school. They offered to mentor any students who were interested in beekeeping, and Chase jumped right in. He used his birthday money to buy a package of bees, and we purchased the hive and equipment for him."

Dittmar shares that Chase was quickly able to harvest honey and sell it to friends and family.

"Within a year, he'd started a beekeeping YouTube channel. He continued with beekeeping through 4H and as a high school FFA project, winning state and national awards along with college scholarships."

His skills caught attention.

"People began reaching out for mentor-

ing, and Chase realized he loved to teach," Dittmar says. "We began talking about opportunities to teach people how to become beekeepers and give them more exposure to honeybees through fun, educational tours. That's how our business was born."

"I've taken some honey sommelier and judging classes, and I teach full-sensorial honey tasting classes for our business. I also teach a 'Bee Serenity' tour that focuses on the health benefits of being in nature and around bees," Dittmar says. "In contrast, Chase is more interested in beekeeping, and he manages our apiary. It's the perfect fit for us to work together."

She shares that Chase offers a "Beekeeping Experience" tour that educates guests on honeybees by allowing them to see inside the hive.

He also teaches a three-hour "Beekeeping Bootcamp" for budding beekeepers. In it, Chase shares information on bees, their biology, their roles in the hive, and how they make honey. Then, he takes guests through

a guided honey comparison tasting. Finally, guests put on beekeeping suits, and Chase takes them out into the apiary to see the bees at work inside the hive.

"We have 30 hives," Dittmar says. "Every two weeks, Chase checks the health of his colonies by looking for potential pests and diseases, making sure they aren't overpopulated, and ensuring the queen is alive."

Work picks up in the summer to ensure the hives remain healthy and don't swarm.

"By Labor Day weekend, we're harvesting honey, which is very labor-intensive work. We anticipate harvesting 1,500 lbs. of honey this year."

The pair also participates in numerous collaborative events with other local businesses in the community, including honey and mead tastings, a foodie tour and beeswax candle-making, among others.

"Anyone interested in beekeeping for agritourism should work with their local Small Business Development Center to figure out a business plan," she says. "I'd recommend lots



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of research on competitors and on similar businesses to determine what aspects they want to pursue, based on their personal expertise and passion."

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