America's Strangest Lumberyard

By JOE ALEX MORRIS

We still can't get along without wood: Persimmon wood makes golf-club heads; granadilla, clarinets; the best policemen's billies are Dutch Guiana locust. And take *Manilkara bidentata*, which may save women a fortune in snagged nylons.

AT one point or another in what otherwise may be an exemplary life, almost every American male is seized with an irresistible desire to hew and shape and polish a piece of wood—to make a chair or a table or an ornamental bowl that will henceforth either disturb his wife's sanity or gather dust in an attic corner. Sometimes this impulse has no more lasting consequence than a bruised thumb or a sliced finger, and the victim returns quietly to his normal pursuits. But in many cases—one firm selling woodworking tools to amateurs has a mailing list of around 100,000—the subject never recovers. He becomes a wood enthusiast and spends much of his spare time fussing with an imposing array of tools and lathes in a well-lighted corner of the basement.

Under such circumstances, he is likely to join at least indirectly in the search for rare woods that has been going on since the first cave man discovered that a piece of mahogany makes a better war club than a branch torn from a poplar tree. In Biblical times, King Solomon so valued precious woods that he sent 80,000 axmen to hew the cedars of Lebanon for his temple, and modern experts believe some of them may have traveled more than 1500 miles across the Mediterranean to find the rare blood-red blocks of thuja burl used as decorative trim. The Egyptians of 3000 years ago imported rare ebony for inlaid boxes that were sealed in the tombs of the Pharaohs. Roman artisans at the time of Julius Caesar expertly matched unique woods, such as zebra and mahogany, to produce veneer and plywood tables more valuable than an emperor's jewels.

In the sixteenth century, lignum vitae from the West Indies was worth its weight in gold because, as "the wood of life," physicians believed it had great medicinal properties. In recent times, men paid with their lives for breaking a branch of the sacred pink-ivory trees, which were guarded day and night by Zulu warriors of South Africa.

Today, in an age of fabulous plastics and synthetic materials, the competition for precious woods goes on more vigorously than ever, as does the endless search in remote mountains and tropical jungles for new trees that excel in toughness or resiliency or beauty any of the estimated 25,000 species known to science. Some of the searchers are amateurs, collectors of blocks of wood as highly prized as rare stamps or coins, but most of them are scientists seeking substitutes for the familiar woods that are now in scarce supply because of excessive wartime cutting or because they are hidden behind the Iron Curtain.

Surprise is always at the elbow of the wood expert. Only recently researchers at the Yale University Forestry School, looking for a substitute wood for building navy ships, unexpectedly came up with a species called *Manilkara bidentata* that may save America's stenographers hundreds of thousands of dollars a year. The wood is practically impervious to abrasions and, if used for legs on office furniture, would eliminate the splinters which snag and ruin a girl's stockings. In addition to such practical discoveries, dealers in rare woods sometimes run into situations that smack of international intrigue.

Take, for instance, the strange shortage of Circassian walnut that developed soon after the end of World War II.

This kind of walnut grows only in Russia, where there had always been a good supply on which American manufacturers of furniture drew heavily. Immediately after the war, the Soviet Government was glowing with friendliness, peacefulness and eagerness for foreign trade. Yet, at that time, Moscow suddenly clamped an embargo on export of Circassian walnut and refused to fill profitable orders from America. This was a small thing and didn't mean much in the capitals of the Western world, which was then rapidly disarming in anticipation of permanent peace. But it struck an ominous note in the mind of a New York lumber importer named Monteath T. Dayton. Circassian walnut had long been used extensively, especially in Russia, for making stocks for army rifles. Therefore, Dayton argued, the Russians refused to export the wood because they were busy making rifles—in other words, they were not disarming as the rest of the world believed, but, on the contrary, were rearming at such a rapid rate that they would not spare even one shipment of Circassian walnut for the American credits which they desperately needed.

Thus, sitting in his office in a lumberyard in that part of New York City known as the Bronx, Dayton figured the answer to a vital international development that was to elude the diplomats of Washington and London for months to come. Turned out that he was right too. The Russian soldiers got their rifles, and Moscow never did let any Circassian walnut go abroad. At last report, all that Dayton's company had on hand was 119 board feet, and that was wormy and in short lengths.

It isn't every day that such portentous rumblings of international affairs echo around the headquarters of the J. H. Monteath Company, of which Dayton is president, but even in ordinary times the squarish, modernistic building hard by the Harlem River is one of the most unusual lumberyards in the world. Employees at Monteath's never know whether the next customer will be a brisk young United States Navy officer seeking a shipload of teakwood from Burma, a beret-topped Greenwich Village sculptor rummaging through the scrap pile for an unusual block of granadilla, or a small boy looking for a piece of balsa wood from South America in exchange for the dime clutched in his grimy fist.

Such a wide variety of customers has been routine for almost 100 years, since the company was founded in 1856, and in recent years Monteath's—with a volume of business averaging around $1,500,000 a year—has imported and exported more varieties of wood than any other company in the world. The manufacturer who (Continued on Page 170)

Lumber importers Monteath and George Dayton study veneer samples at J. H. Monteath Company.

Some woods smell terrible when sawed. This Monteath worker is near a piece of cut zebrawood.

PHOTOS BY LARRY KEIGHLEY

New York sculptor Chaim Gross is working on Brazilian rosewood—one of 30 varieties he uses.

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wants 3000 tons of Brazilian rosewood to make handles for cutlery, and the distinguished jurist who is looking for a selected piece of English limewood to turn on a lathe in his home workshop, are both familiar figures at Monteath's. So are the Park Avenue interior decorator and the maker of "antique" furniture, whose operations sometimes seem a baffling mystery to the company's hard-bitten wood experts.

Monteath's most remarkable experience with such specialized customers concerned an interior decorator who, for a handsome fee, was restoring an old Dutch colonial home that had been purchased by a Philadelphia broker. As the broker's wife understood it, George Washington had once stopped there and the British had fired some cannon balls at the house, although all trace of that historic incident had long since vanished. The original living room had been paneled in cherry, and one of Monteath's experts picked out a consignment of handsome cherry wood for the restoration. When it had been installed, he went around to see the room and found that it lived up to expectations—a gleaming, soft wall that made the room a thing of beauty.

Pleased with his contribution to the work, he was about to depart when the interior decorator arrived, carrying a smudge pot and accompanied by a strong-armed assistant who lugged a heavy iron ball and a short chain. The decorator put the smudge pot in the middle of the room, lit it and motioned everyone outside, closing the doors tightly. The Monteath man shuddered in horror as the black smoke began settling on the new paneling, but the worst was yet to come. After a short wait, the doors were opened and the assistant began swinging the iron ball against the now-blackened cherry wood that had been so painstakingly selected.

"I moaned with pain at every blow," the wood expert said later. "It was terrifying to see them destroy that wonderful room, and I left before I was overcome with anguish. But later I was too curious to resist another visit. The smoke had been rubbed into the panels, giving them an appearance of great age that was as authentic as the dents made by the cannon balls. You got the impression that the room had been tended with loving care for generations. It was beautiful!"

Most of Monteath's customers are more interested in the quality and beauty of precious woods than in antiquity, and successful conduct of the business calls for intimate knowledge of trees that grow in every part of the world. The company is not the largest importer, because some concerns specialize in a single popular wood, such as mahogany, but it handles the greatest number of exotic woods from such distant lands as Ceylon, the African Gold Coast, Australia, Japan, Switzerland, England and Latin America. Brazilian rosewood, for furniture and other uses, is usually the company's biggest import, running into thousands of tons a year. But Monteath's also may bring in a couple of thousand tons of mahogany, 500 tons of lignum vitae or of such African woods as zebra, padouk, ebony and limba; 1,000,000 board feet of teakwood; 100,000 board feet of Japanese oak; 100,000 feet of primavera, and, during the war, as much as 6,000,000 board feet of balsa wood for the Navy, a figure that has since dropped to less than 1,000,000 feet. In addition, exports of domestic woods may run to two or three million board feet a year, while the company also sells as much as 3,000,000 board feet of domestic woods in this country.

Just how the company was founded in 1856 is now a bit of a mystery, but the first—and last—Monteath in the business was a young New Yorker of Scotch ancestry who went to sea in the middle of the nineteenth century and stopped off at various ports in the West Indies and Central America. At that time, the clipper ships still put into New York Harbor and frequently, coming from far countries, brought in rare logs that were auctioned to dealers along Canal Street. Whether John H. Monteath became fascinated, as so many men do, by rare woods, or

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whether he merely saw a good business opportunity is not known to his descendants. But he became a dealer on Canal Street, prospered and later moved to Lewis Street, where the company remained for half a century before making a long jump in 1946 from crowded lower Manhattan to its present location at 2500 Park Avenue.

John Monteath had no sons to carry on the business when he died just after the turn of the century, and it passed into the hands of another branch of the family—the Daytons. Pres. Monteath Dayton and Vice-Pres. George Dayton, grandnephews of the founder, each have teen-age sons who are getting vacation experience in the yards, and Monteath's son-in-law, Francis Parisette, is hard at work in the business, which includes a big yard for sawing and drying lumber near South Amboy, New Jersey, and an interest in a busy veneer mill at Portsmouth, Virginia. The company's New York offices, which bear little resemblance to the traditional lumberyard, are paneled in rare woods—African figured mahogany, primavera from Guatemala, cypress crotch from the South, and figured white harewood from England. A cubicle off the main reception room where stenographers go for personal telephone calls is reputed to be the most expensive telephone booth in the world, done in matched panels of West Indian beeswing mahogany. The Daytons aren't sure just what it would cost to reproduce the telephone booth, because it is made of leftover veneer, but it wouldn't be so much as the $5000 recently suggested by a visiting wood expert.

George Dayton doesn't know what it would cost to reproduce his desk, either, although he's pretty sure nobody could do it for a reasonable sum, because he had to buy a whole consignment of mahogany logs from Africa in order to get the two that he wanted for the desk. The logs were sent to a New York broker on consignment by George Grant, a well-known Gold Coast shipper, and when Dayton saw eight-foot and twelve-foot lengths from the same tree he knew he had to have them.

"The two logs," he said later, "had both a soft heart and a crooked heart and what are called wind shakes, or thunder shakes, caused by many years of wavering and swaying in the wind. That isn't a sign of sound wood, but it may mean that the wood has character. I always think of that tree as being like a man with a weak heart. It had to have character in order to survive, to grow up, to stand on a knoll somewhere in the African bush and fight the wind and the tropical storms year after year—just as a man with a weak heart has to have character if he is going to overcome his handicap and live to a ripe old age. It was the long fight to survive that made this tree different. I bought the whole consignment to get those two logs."

There are experts in the Monteath company like Andrew Jackson Daugherty, who, after years of experience, can stand on the mill deck and pick out, before the logs are opened, the ones that will make lumber or veneer of unusual and highly expensive patterns. Even they make mistakes occasionally, but in this instance George Dayton had guessed right. When the logs were opened they had a combination cross-fire and fiddleback pattern, a grain highly prized by the makers of the world's most famous old violins. A dealer might open hundreds of logs without finding such a perfect pattern as went into George Dayton's big desk.

Monteath's normally have around $150,000 worth of rare woods in their New York yard inventory, but sometimes they're caught short. A manufacturer of kitchen cutlery walked into Monteath Dayton's office a year or so ago and said he'd like to have 3000 tons of rosewood at $100 a ton to make knife handles. Dayton said sure, but it would take a little time. A few days later he got off an airplane in Rio de Janeiro and hurried to the city of Victoria, where he boarded a narrow-gauge railroad to an Indian village called Colatina, deep in the mountainous hinterland. After that he had to ride a car over the worst roads in the world to get into "the bush." Some mornings when he shook his boots before putting them on he dislodged interesting-looking but unfriendly scorpions. Rosewood trees grow at an altitude of around 1500 feet, and a log sixteen inches in diameter is likely to have a ring of worthless sap about four inches thick around it. Dayton was looking for trees from which he could cut ten-inch-wide boards and, in all, he had to work with half a dozen different shippers in order to get 3000 tons. He figured that the manufacturer must have made about 18,000,000 knife handles by the time he used up that consignment of rosewood.

One of Monteath's biggest customers is the United States Navy, which since the war has been pretty worried about the supply of teakwood from the Orient for boatbuilding and especially for the decks of airplane carriers. Unrest and revolution have seriously interfered with exports, and it has now become fairly obvious that some substitute for the tough and weather-resistant wood has to be found. In recent years the big lumber companies have been co-operating with the Navy in a research program at the Yale University Forestry School to find substitutes for teak and other woods, and Dean George A. Garratt's experts have turned up ten tropical woods, some of which might be laminated to Douglas fir and used on carrier landing decks. Final returns, however, probably will not be in for some time.

The experimentation that is always in progress at Yale has brought the Monteath Company a few headaches, one of which came on recently in connection with discovery of what may be the hardest known wood. It comes from a medium-sized South American tree called Kaneelhart, which is almost five times as strong as white oak, nearly half as strong as aluminum and, according to the professors, "practically indestructible" in ordinary use. The Forestry School laboratory uses pressures up to 60,000 pounds to crush two-inch cubes of hardwood in tests, but the machine proved impotent with Kaneelhart and tests had to be made with a slighter piece of the wood.

No sooner had the newspapers carried a report on the new wood than Monteath's began getting orders for it. They didn't have any, of course, but it presumably will be on the market one of these days. Meantime, customers will have to be content with such tough varieties as partridgewood and lignum vitae, a dark-greenish wood with yellow and brown streaks that weighs up to 83 pounds per cubic foot.

Most imported woods arrive in the United States in the form of logs because they would honeycomb and check—a ruinous cracking—if they were sawed and exposed to weather before being properly dried. At one time

it was customary to square logs and fit them snugly in order to conserve shipping space, but that has long since been abandoned because it involved considerable waste. Once the logs reach the mill they are inspected for flaws and for unusual pattern and, incidentally, for snakes and tarantulas, which not infrequently are nesting quietly inside. Only the most experienced inspectors can be sure that a log will produce high-grade or unusual lumber or veneer, before it is opened. In African ebony, for instance, wormholes are sometimes so infinitesimal that they cannot be seen in the rough log. Such flaws can be a serious hazard to both the seller and the buyer of precious logs, as was illustrated in 1951 when, during one period, Monteath's losses in ebony imports ran as high as 80 per cent due to wormholes, although normally it would be closer to 10 per cent.

Supt. Frank Blakaitis presides over the Monteath yard at South Amboy, where precious woods are sorted and sawed and dried, and where their brilliant hues begin to emerge in all of the colors of the rainbow. Greenheart from British Guiana is the color of emerald. African padouk is blood-red. Amaranth from South America is justly known as purpleheart. Brazilian satinwood is bright yellow, holly is the whitest of the woods, and Gaboon ebony is almost pure black.

These colors can give a sawmill a wild touch of gaiety, but there are times when nobody wants to stick around to see the show. Some woods, to put it mildly, stink when being sawed and it is a favorite trick for old-timers to give an unsuspecting newcomer the "privilege" of manning the saw when there is a batch of zebrawood, for instance, to be cut. The stench soon drives all but the essential workers from the shed and leaves the newcomer to sweat it out in a horrible aroma. When boxwood is being sawed it gives off sweet, gaseous odors and fine sawdust that irritates the skin of many workers and sometimes causes their eyes to seal tightly shut when they go to sleep. Venezuela-boxwood odors are so strong that some persons are overcome, and a man with asthma might die if overexposed. Brazilian rosewood and cocobolo under the saw often cause workers to break out in a rash, as does bethabara, although not everyone is subject to such discomforts. Ceylon satinwood, on the other hand, smells like vanilla when it is being sawed, and Macassar ebony fills the air with a peppery flavor. The reaction of each individual to the effects of the various woods is likely to be different. Not long ago Monteath's sent a large order of cocobolo to a Philadelphia manufacturer who was making shuttles for use in textile mills. When they inquired later whether the order was satisfactory, the manufacturer said that the wood was fine, but the odors that it gave off while being shaped were so strong that he hadn't been able to go into his own factory for a month without breaking out in a rash.

Once the lumber is sawed most of it must go into the drying kilns for

periods varying from five days for poplar and pine wood to as long as three or four months for heavy cuts of oak, walnut or zebrawood. The drying process is difficult and complicated, but Blakaitis and Norman Higgins watch over the operation of the kilns with infinite patience and, as a result, Monteath's kiln-dries many varieties of rare wood that no other company dares to risk in a kiln. Green wood has a moisture content ranging from 25 per cent to more than 100 per cent. Balsa wood, for example, runs as high as 120 per cent—more water than wood. To reduce moisture to around 6 per cent is a ticklish process because a misstep might cause checking and, within a few hours, ruin a kiln load of lumber worth as much as $10,000.

There are five big kilns at the Monteath yard, handling up to 3,000,000 board feet of lumber a year. They are equipped with automatic humidity and heat recorders and thermostats, but it is also necessary for Blakaitis and his helpers to check them every day of the week and to test progress regularly with complicated weighing machinery, especially in the critical period when moisture is above 20 per cent and when an hour or two of incorrect temperature would ruin the entire load. The heat is varied from 110 to 185 degrees under controlled humidity conditions, depending on the wood that is being dried. Then the wood must go through a special steam bath to restore some moisture and distribute it equally, thus preventing warping. After a cooling period, it is ready for use.

Through the Monteath yards go scores of different woods—snakewood, once in great demand for walking sticks; boxwood, used for jewelers' blocks and producing a fine sawdust for cleaning and polishing clockworks; bubinga, an African wood for furniture; Sitka spruce, often without a blemish and used for ships' spars; Swiss pearwood and Australian lacewood for paneling and furniture; beefwood from Guiana, for violin bows and fishing poles; camphorwood from Borneo for cedar chests; persimmon wood for golf-club heads; granadilla from Africa for making clarinets—Monteath's has two men who spend most of their time cutting clarinet blocks—and Honduras rosewood for xylophones; ash for baseball bats and furniture; African avodire for fine interior work; hickory, perhaps to be shipped to Switzerland, fashioned into skis and returned to New York for sale in the most expensive sports stores; African limba for furniture; Dutch Guiana locust for policemen's clubs; Brazilian peroba for flooring; quebracho from Argentina for dye blocks, and apple wood for pipes.

There are about 100 woods on the Monteath listing, but that is because a list of several hundred kindred varieties has been reduced for convenience. Even then a new name shows up occasionally that will puzzle the Daytons. One customer wrote in to ask the price of Senoj wood. The Daytons had never heard of it and asked for a sample. When it arrived it was promptly identified as a kind of Central American rosewood. Monteath Dayton took another look at the trade name and came up with the answer—Jones spelled backward. What had happened was that a dealer named Jones had located a good source for rosewood and wanted to keep it secret from other dealers. Therefore, instead of giving its real name, which would have disclosed the source, he gave it a trade name that confused his competitors, at least temporarily.

Such a practice is not uncommon in the rare-wood trade, although Monteath's has always used the ordinary names, except in one instance. In that case, Monteath Dayton was shown a sample of Brazilian rosewood that he liked and ordered a considerable supply. When the wood arrived, however, it was not Brazilian rosewood, but another and less popular species of jacaranda.

"We didn't want to sell it as rosewood," Dayton explained later, "so we took some letters out of the seller's name and concocted a new trade name—Marnut. It's on the list and has been for some years. I think maybe we sell a thousand feet a year. And, at that rate, we unhappily have enough Marnut to last us until our grandchildren are running the business."

Dealers in precious woods spend a great deal of time searching for unusual patterns, and this is especially true at the Monteath veneer plant in Virginia, where huge logs are reduced, by intricate methods of cutting and sawing, to handsome strips of wood one twenty-eighth of an inch or less in thickness. Strangely enough, some of the most remarkable grains are found in tree stumps, and others come from the crotch of the tree or from burls, which actually are deformities on the trunk. Bird's-eye is also caused by a disease—an overgrowth of adventitious, or accidental, buds—that sometimes runs through an entire tree. It is these irregularities of nature, as well as the technique of sawing quartered wood and rift grain, that produce the most lustrous and expensive veneers. At times as much as 45 per cent of the wood may be wasted before the desired pattern can be achieved.

Because these rare patterns are largely due to a freak of nature, they are not always readily recognized. Not infrequently a sculptor will rummage through the discard or firewood pile at Monteath's to find a block of wood in which he recognizes possibilities of unusual beauty—and then pay perhaps fifty or sixty dollars for having rescued it from somebody's fireplace.

On one occasion a shipment of English oak came into Monteath's yards, was inspected routinely and five logs were discarded because an employee mistakenly regarded them as rotted and useless. A year or so later a New York manufacturer of expensive office furniture arrived, looking for oak burls. The company had none in stock, but Blakaitis happened to remember that he had seen five English-oak logs on the reject pile. He dug them out, and when the outside rot was removed the manufacturer paid $1000 for them—and made them into desks that sold for enough to make the price for the logs look like a fire-sale bargain.

The Monteath company deals in large lots of wood, but it also fills many special requests from amateur and professional woodworkers and wood carvers, some of the latter being artists in inlay work who spend as much as 300 hours' tedious effort on a single vase. They also get occasional requests from wood collectors, a unique band of men and women who gather hundreds and sometimes thousands of different specimens of wood from all over the world and who have now formed an international organization of more than 220 members known as the Wood Collectors Society.

The society was formed in 1947 at a meeting of about fifteen wood collectors at the summer camp of Harold Nogles, of Port Arthur, Texas, one of the leading American collectors of rare woods. Irwin Carls, of Pasadena, California, who has probably the largest collection—of 6000 specimens—is now president, and Archie F. Wilson, of Flossmoor, Illinois, is editor of the organization's monthly bulletin, which keeps members in touch with one another and lists woods for sale or exchange. The real collector is interested chiefly in specimens cut into blocks that are three by six inches, and one half inch thick, which he stores in big filing cases with each under its proper Latin name. Joseph Stearns, of Berwyn, Maryland, an expert wood technician, is one of the big collectors, with around 4000 specimens; and the society's most perfect collection of flawless specimens is owned by Orville Oaks, a Wilmette, Illinois, schoolteacher, who has about 2000 varieties. The greatest collection in the world, however, is at Yale, where there are 13,360 different species representing 2914 genera and 243 tree families.

One of the collector's choicest prizes is pink-ivory wood, which is tough but beautiful in delicate creamy-pink hues. The South African trees from which it comes are rare, and Zulu chieftains for generations have cut the trees only to make their own spears. They posted constant guards to enforce the death penalty for any others who touched the precious wood. One of the first outsiders to procure a piece of pink ivory was Rudolph Block, who wrote under the pen name of Bruno Lessing and whose hobby was fashioning walking sticks out of rare woods. The cane he made from the wood is now part of a collection of 1400 that he presented to Yale.

It is not known how Block secured the pink ivory, but some years ago Harold Nogles hired a man in South Africa to watch for an opportunity to get another piece. The chance came during an outbreak of trouble between the Boers and Zulus, the latter being forced out of one district and leaving a pink-ivory tree temporarily unguarded. Nogles' agent risked his life to cut the tree and smuggle out a log about sixteen inches thick and eight feet long. Covered with a tarpaulin, it was lashed to the deck of a tanker bound for Texas, where Nogles was waiting for it. Most of the log was cut into specimens for exchange with other collectors.

Neither Monteath's nor any other company lists pink ivory, which is strictly a collector's item, but they do fill a good many unusual requests for odd sizes of wood. Mail orders from sculptors and skilled wood carvers usually specify an exact size, such as eight and one fourth inches by eleven and one half inches, to conform to the work of art that the artist has in mind. Monteath's cuts these with special care, and usually everything works out fine—but not always. Not long ago such an order was received from a regular customer who is known at Monteath's not by a name, but by a number, because he has, for some years, been an inmate of a New England prison. The order was filled and mailed, but a week later it was returned with a letter saying that it had been cut incorrectly. Monteath Dayton checked up and found that, indeed, a mistake had been made. He dispatched another wood block of the correct specifications with a letter expressing his regret that the original mistake had been made. Not long afterward he received a reply from No. 18246.

"Dear Mr. Dayton," it said. "Thanks for the new wood block, and please do not worry about having made a mistake. We all do. That's why I'm here."

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