

The Second Rodeo

Furniture maker finds a niche
carving wooden cowboy hats



BY KAY WEST
PORTRAIT BY KARIN STRICKLAND



MADE IN TEXAS

Brevard resident Kevin Felderhoff grew up in the Lone Star State and worked in the oil fields as a young man.



The meticulously finished hats typically start with a tight-grained wood like ambrosia maple. (Photo at left by Karin Strickland)



If at first you don't succeed, you try, try again — and again — 27 times, if that's what it takes to get it right. That's how many wearable wooden cowboy hats Kevin Felderhoff made before he finally got one to his liking. "It took me to about hat number 28 until one looked pretty good," he says. Since then, he's been on a roll, with about 70 full size-hats and more than 100 miniature

ones crafted in his home shop.

The hats weren't Felderhoff's first rodeo when it came to woodworking or Western wear. The Texas native says his interest in wood was piqued by his grandfather and then his high-school shop teacher. "We had a really good shop instructor, and in my senior year, I spent three hours a day in shop and built two

roll-top desks." The first went to his brother and the second to his sister, who use them still.

Felderhoff didn't consider woodworking as a profession, but instead roughnecked in Texas oil fields for a couple years before getting his degree in Industrial Technology from Texas State University. A company he was working for in college opened an office in Birmingham, Alabama; he applied, got the job, moved, and met and married his wife.

He kept an interest in woodworking, but when he discovered woodturning, he was hooked. The passion grew more intense when, in 2009, he and his wife moved full time to their vacation home in Brevard. "I joined the Carolina Mountain Woodturners Club and realized, holy smoke, these guys and gals can make things out of wood at a whole other level. Seeing their demonstrators really raises your game."

It was then that he first saw a wooden cowboy hat. "I thought, 'How in the world do you make a cowboy hat out of wood?' I've always been driven by what intrigues me, just wanting to figure it out."

In club member Nick Neiley he found a mentor. Neiley spent an entire weekend teaching the novice, who ended up with something he remembers "looked kind of like a hat."

Through the years, Felderhoff has honed the skills — and patience — it takes to make his popular specialty. The process begins with finding a tightly grained log of green wood — ambrosia maple is ideal — with no cracks or defects. Felderhoff halves the log and rounds it with a chainsaw. He then turns the wood on the lathe to reduce it to about 3/32 of an inch thick; a piece that begins at about 125 pounds pares down to about 10 ounces. After a couple days in a custom-made jig for bending and shaping, some fine sanding, and a few coats of polyurethane, the hat is ready for wear — or display, as many people prefer. "You really need a big round head to wear one," he says with a laugh.

Felderhoff isn't a one-trick pony; he also makes furniture, particularly of mesquite wood that he gathers up in Texas and hauls back to Brevard. "At this point, KLF Wood Designs is still a hobby. When I get out of my real job I'll transition to this full time — but for now, I enjoy making things, and hope other people like what I make."

Kevin Felderhoff, KLF Wood Designs, Brevard. Felderhoff's work can be found at **Firefly Craft Gallery** (2689-D Greenville Hwy., Flat Rock, fireflycraftgallery.com); at **Blue Moon Gallery** (24 East Main St., Brevard, bluemoongalleryandframe.com); and on his website: kevinfelderhoff.com

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