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COVER STORY

*Lost Canyon Woodworks might be far from civilization, but the couple that runs it is thinking big for the future*

BY BRIAN CALDWELL /  
SENIOR WRITER

David Nelson has a diverse résumé. He's been a school teacher in Vermont and Minnesota. He's restored and built houses and fixes cars in his spare time. But for the last 18 years, he and his wife Caroline have settled on building custom furniture and cabinetry in Florissant, Colo.

Florissant is a few miles west of Pikes Peak and about 50 miles from what most of us recognize as civilization. The shop and the Nelsons' home sit on 20 beautiful acres, framed by two ponds, rolling hills, thousands of pine trees, elk herds, deer and other wildlife.

Lost Canyon Woodworks has discovered a niche producing jukeboxes and iceboxes. But more on that later. David's shop is a better place to start. He has this thing about organization and certainly put a lot of thought into the shop's layout and function before hammering the first nail. He concealed the dust collection system under the floor. Every tool and spare screw is practically within an arm's reach. It's spotless. If the Nelsons didn't already have a beautiful home next door, they could live in this shop.

"I think the thing for David and I is that there is a passion about trying something different, seeing if you can do it and that is why we kind of get a lot of things done. We build a house and do work at the same time — design it, market it, all because we just love it," says Caroline.

## Caroline and David Nelson

**Owners of:** Lost Canyon Woodworks

**Location:** Florissant, Colo.; an hour's drive west of Colorado Springs. In reality, the middle of nowhere.

**David on the shop's locale:**

"I love to be able to walk to work. I do frequently look out the window and think this is really nice, this is really

beautiful. I count my blessings. I have the shop that I always dreamed about; there are very few things that I can think about that I don't have. It's hard to explain how remote this is to a lot of people."

**Type of work:** Custom furniture, jukeboxes, iceboxes

**Shop size:** 3,500 sq. ft.



PHOTO: BRIAN PAYNE/REDUX PLUS



(From left) While residential furniture, above, has been a good market for Lost Canyon, entry doors have also been popular. At right is a carved door with stained glass. At night the light from inside is visible as a warm glow on the outside.



### From teaching to woodworking

David Nelson has been “banging boards together” since he was seven years old, encouraged by an uncle who was into woodworking. Although his first “real job” was as a teacher — first in Vermont, then in Minnesota — he’d spend his summers in construction. By 1987, he was done with teaching.

“I started out restoring Victorian houses and then we started doing cabinets,” says David of his first business, The Old House Restoration Co. in Duluth, Minn. “I got hooked up with a woman who owned several houses and she wanted to have things look as appropriate as possible for Victorian houses.”

After meeting and marrying Caroline, who does all of the shop’s finishing work, the couple moved to Colorado in 1988. David focused on restoration work and then caught a big break at the Breckenridge Ski Resort.

“We got a big project in Breckenridge in 1995,” he recounts. “We were doing kitchens, and entry doors were popular, and I met this developer in Breckenridge who was doing a 25-condo unit up there. We did all the kitchens and front doors for that project. It was called ‘The Woods’ and each door had a different name of a tree.”

“And then some of the owners, when we met them, wanted furniture to match the cabinetry they had inside of the house, so things took off,” adds Caroline.

Besides building custom furniture, kitchens and baths, Nelson also discovered a new market — building jukeboxes. With the assistance of carver Charles Hensley of Colorado Springs, the two have been building jukeboxes and other projects since the early ‘90s. The jukeboxes sell for \$20,000 to \$25,000 apiece.

“I have always been fascinated with jukeboxes and slot machines and mechanical things like that,” Nelson says. “I think it hit me in 1990 when I saw this five-CD changer and thought, ‘I wonder if you could make a jukebox out of this.’ Then I discovered that there was a 100-CD changer made by

NSM and so, in 1991, we built our first jukebox. We took it to the Consumer Electronics Show in Las Vegas and it didn’t exactly take off, but we got a lot of interest in it. After placing an ad, we

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sold three jukeboxes and I thought that was great. At the same time, I was busy with Breckenridge so we didn't do a lot more with it, but now we're thinking we want to do some more."

"He is really talented," says Hensley of Nelson. "We've done hundreds of projects over the years; I would guess probably 40 to 50 doors and all kinds of carvings on cabinets, staircases, wine racks, jukeboxes; just all kinds of things."



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**Another cool idea**

If you thought jukeboxes were a bit off the wall, imagine building iceboxes. Nelson has discovered a market for an icebox cabinet containing a refrigeration unit.

"This goes back to the Victorian thing," Nelson says. "We did a house in Duluth that actually had a walk-in cooler that was just really neat. It had brass hinges and quartersawn oak. And I had a friend that had a small icebox and I always thought that if you could make it workable, it could fit into an old-style kitchen.

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"They use to put blocks of ice in them that would melt and maybe last for two or three days. I've done a little bit of research and around 1910 or 1920 they did have refrigeration units in them ... there is a huge market out there and people are always looking for an alternative to the modern white box or stainless-steel [refrigerator]. I don't really know where it is going to go. We just really enjoy doing different things; we'll see what happens with it."

And if jukeboxes and iceboxes aren't bizarre enough, Nelson is considering what can be done with Magic Chef ranges from the 1930s.

"If you could find one now that is restored, it's like \$25,000," he says. "The idea is that [customers] would be able to buy their own appliances and put them into our cabinetry; so we'll see where it goes. You don't have to sell too many of these things if you're in the \$20,000 to \$25,000 price range for jukeboxes."

**The 'perfect' client**

Nelson has obviously benefitted from a wealthy clientele. He says his favorite customer is somebody who has "this unshakeable notion" of what they want their kitchen to look like. They bring pages from design magazines and say they want it to look "just like this."

"That's about as good as it gets," he says.

He uses several design programs, including Google SketchUp (<http://sketchup.google.com>), Chief Architect ([www.chiefarchitect.com](http://www.chiefarchitect.com)) and Cabinet Vision ([www.cabinetvision.com](http://www.cabinetvision.com)). He used to do freehand drawings, but now realizes it is advantageous to provide 3-D renderings.

"I've found over the years that very few [clients] have been able to contribute to my designs. It's wonderful when people say, 'Well, what do you think this should look like?' and 'That is what I like.' But it doesn't always happen.

"I like working with architects; I have several good contacts with them. And contractors — the good ones are great. I also enjoy working with homeowners, but for whatever reason designers are another story. They are real flighty; they'll change their minds in an instant or if their clients indicate that maybe they don't like this, they'll say, 'OK, we'll do something else.' It's difficult."

**On the shop floor**

Nelson has equipped his shop with what he considers the best of old and new machinery. He has rebuilt and modified most of it, which includes:

- Powermatic 66 10" table saw
- Two Jet 17" drill presses
- Delta radial drill press
- Rockwell 14" band saw
- Sears 10" resaw band saw
- Shop-made lathe with a 10" bed and 16" swing
- Grizzly 12" disc and 6" belt sander



This knotty pine carved door features tempered glass; a reflection in the glass shows Pikes Peak and the forest below.

- DeWalt 12" sliding compound miter saw
- Kreg's Foreman pocket hole machine
- Grizzly 8" jointer
- Jet 22-44 oscillating sander
- Grizzly 3-hp shaper
- Grizzly 19" Extreme Series band saw

Nelson works primarily in two markets — Colorado Springs and Breckenridge — that he describes as two totally different design environments.

"In Breckenridge, it is definitely knotty pine, knotty alder, more rustic — they want knots to show. They like copper details and rusted metal has been popular. Down in Colorado Springs it is totally different. I'd say it is more cherry and oak, much more traditional."

And even though he lives in Colorado, his favorite wood is Eastern white knotty pine.

**What's next?**

Nelson admits he prefers to build pieces other than custom furniture. Jukeboxes and iceboxes are part of that scenario, but undoubtedly there is something else on the horizon. As to what that may be, it's anyone's guess at the moment.

"I would really like to see if we could get something to take off with the jukeboxes because I think there is a market out there for really high-end jukeboxes," says Nelson. "Right now, if you have all the money in the world, the most money you can spend on a [manufactured] jukebox is about \$7,000, unless you buy an antique one and they don't play any music. So I think we're going to experiment with some different things and see what happens.

"I just enjoy being fortunate enough to do different and varying things and not have to do the same thing over and over again. We seldom turn down projects because of how difficult they are. If it is interesting, I'd like to try doing it." ■

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