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ART

True to the tree

Library to unveil Elm Table

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John Updike wrote about it. Others simply admired it. Even death couldn't kill its beauty and grace. The elm tree's silhouetted bare branches arched from the thick trunk and over the East Street-County Street corner, ever thinning, until mere twigs pierced the sky, stretching out ward, upward.

Now a round, honey-colored coffee-style table made from its wood does the same thing in the Ipswich Public Library reading room — its myriad elements, from legs tapered on three of four sides to the starburst top — keep the table reaching beyond its physical limits, unclenching into the space around it.

The Friends of the Ipswich Library came to Manchester-by-the-Sea custom woodworker Fred Rossi with a request to make a table from the beloved elm tree and he jumped at the chance.

Not everyone did.

"There was so much in the newspaper about the tree and how much it had meant to the town and the people in the town, I talked with the board and they thought it was a good idea to get some of the wood and make a table out of it," said Dorothy Johnson, Friends of the Ipswich Library member and past president.

But Johnson couldn't find a woodworker to do the job.

Luckily Johnson found Rossi through Janet Craft, keeper of the elm tree wood — Craft had seen Rossi and his work at an art show and passed along his card.

"For me, how often do you get a chance to work with a tree so notable and so well known," said Rossi, who gets the cultural, historical and emotional importance a community can bestow on a signature tree like the elm. "It's like in Manchester where there is a horse chestnut tree in front of the library. I took horse chestnuts from the tree when I was a kid and my kids took horse chestnuts from there. You don't get a chance to work with that kind of memory very often."

Rossi incorporated this sense of history into the table with 18, half-inch brass buttons he imbedded into the tabletop. The first button lies at the table center, where 16 pie-slice-shaped pieces meet and radiate out to the edge from the center. The first button symbolizes the tree's sprouting



Fred Rossi sits with the coffee table he made from the American elm that stood at East and County streets in Ipswich for 200 years. WICKED LOCAL STAFF PHOTOS / KIRK R. WILLIAMSON

180 years ago. The 17 other buttons correspond roughly to significant events in Ipswich history.

The way Rossi designed the top, each of the 17 other buttons hit on each joint, where the elm pieces meet.

"The tree was 180 years old," said Rossi. "The top is a 36-inch diameter on an 18-inch radius, so each inch equals 10 years in the tree's life."

The library friends wanted a table that would, as Johnson said, "connect the life of the tree to the history of Ipswich."

And that is exactly what Rossi made.

The friends capitalized on the brass buttons with a brochure board member Kate Porter designed, tying specific events to each button.

Bead 2 corresponds to the decline of the lace-making cottage industry in Ipswich that had sustained much of the community until the mid-19th century when mechanization eliminated hand-made lace.

Another bead commemorates the first fried clam served at a Depot Square restaurant in 1880, said Johnson.

Bead 6 signifies the Crane family buying the property that would become Crane Beach and house the Crane Castle in 1910, the Crane family inviting Ipswich school children to a summer picnic to celebrate their son's birthday in 1911 and the family's large contribution to build the Cable Hospital in 1916.



Fred Rossi's coffee table made from the American elm that stood at East and County streets in Ipswich for 200 years.

All of this took careful calculation on Rossi's part.

Cutting, slicing and then piecing it all together again began for Rossi when he went to the Herrick Saw mill in Rowley. What would become a finished table was a log 10 feet long by 4 feet in diameter. Herrick squared the log to 36 inches across. Rossi then had the log quarter-sawn. This technique literally quarters the log and cuts the wood on a diagonal, as opposed to the more common flat-sawn approach that simply cuts the log horizontally.

The quarter-sawn cut leaves more of the log unusable than the flat-sawn cut, but it also creates a more dynamic board because it

exposes the grain's many facets, creating more depth and sparkle in the wood.

Quarter-sawn boards are also far more stable than flat-sawn wood because the grain lies vertically. When the wood expands or contracts with weather, each grain line expands individually, up and down, so the expansion barely affects a finished piece. Flat-sawn wood expands horizontally. Each grain slice expands or contracts into the next, multiplying the change across the whole board, sometimes swelling and buckling at a joint or leaving a gap between boards.

Rossi had never worked with elm before because, "You can't get

it." Dutch elm disease has wiped out most elm trees and, therefore, the wood is scarce. But Rossi said he knew what he had as a raw material and he wanted to display it and present it to maximum effect.

"When I delivered it, I had so many people say, 'I knew it would be pretty, but I didn't realize it would be this nice,'" said Rossi. "The wood was old growth, so I knew it would have the grain pattern if I could get it quarter-sawn."

"The table is work of art and a piece of history and it's just a lovely thing," said Johnson. "The design is beautiful and craftsmanship is beautiful."