

## BURNING QUESTION

BY JULIE KESSLER

### Q: WHAT HARM ARE ZEBRA MUSSELS TO LAKE MICHIGAN?

**A.** "The Attack of the Zebra Mussel" sounds like a horror movie, right? Turns out the little monsters are very real, lurking in Lake Michigan.

What's so monstrous about a mussel the size of a fingernail? Maybe nothing, if there were just a few. But these striped-shell pests reproduce rapidly and attach themselves en masse to critical areas in the lake, affecting everything from tiny living plankton to big business.

The mussels first hitched a ride into the United States on a transoceanic vessel that had taken on ballast water at a European port in 1988. The Lake County (Ind.) Health Department reports that just one year later they had wiggled into Lake Michigan. Zebra mussels will attach themselves to any solid surface – even each other – with stubborn tenacity. Not so good when the solid surface is a water-intake pipe at a power plant or public water supply, where they can reduce the flow of water by up to two-thirds. A Michigan-based paper company has spent more than \$1 million removing just 400 cubic yards of the mussels.

The predators also suck up plankton, reducing food for certain fish species. They kill snails and clams by clamping onto them in huge numbers. That means less food for whitefish, yellow perch and sunfish, lowering their population and their availability for commercial fishing.

Have you noticed areas of Lake Michigan where the water seems much clearer? A report in the Illinois Natural History survey says that at one place, for example, water clarity

increased from 13 to 31 feet.

Makes for neat viewing – but it indicates the ecosystem has been drastically altered because zebra mussels are gobbling up microscopic plants and animals that form the base of the lake's food web (the "good stuff" that made the water look murkier than it does now).

The mussels' only natural predators are diving ducks, but their appetites can't keep up with the population explosion. ■

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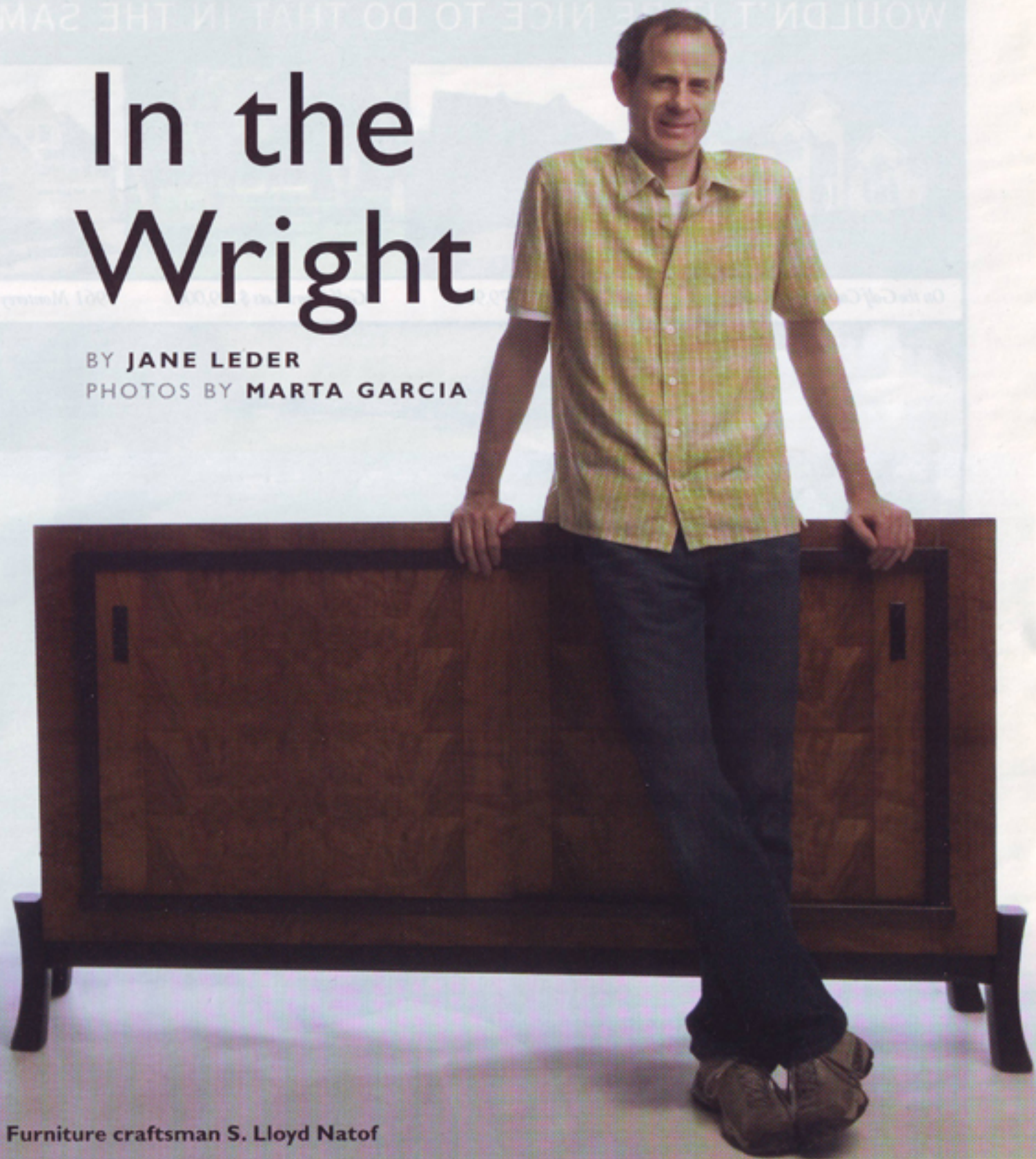


zebra mussel

## In the Wright

BY JANE LEDER

PHOTOS BY MARTA GARCIA



Furniture craftsman S. Lloyd Natof

"I was exposed to unusual furniture as a child, but I didn't see it that way," says S. Lloyd Natof, whose boyhood home in Virginia was filled with the lamps, buffet tables and other furniture of his great-grandfather Frank Lloyd Wright. "I thought my friends' homes, with all that neo-Colonial stuff, were the ones with the unusual furniture."

Natof never met Wright, who died in 1959, six years before Natof was born. Still, if talent is in the genes, it's no surprise that he, like his famous ancestor, has become a furniture designer with a singular style. From his second-floor atelier in Chicago's West Loop, he custom-makes tables, beds, bookshelves and other pieces – just a handful a year – that are stunningly beautiful objects with exotic grain patterns.

As a boy, he visited Taliesin, Wright's estate and studio near Spring Green, Wis., where the architect imagined and tested ideas. For Natof – whose grandmother was Wright's daughter by the first of his three wives – Taliesin was and remains a sacred place. "Taliesin is profoundly beautiful – the architecture, the setting," he says. "My jaw is on the floor the entire time I'm there. Even as a young kid, I felt deeply privileged to be a part of the community in my small way."

### Chicago

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The idea of becoming a furniture maker never occurred to young Natof, who had a musical bent. That changed in 1986, while he was a flutist majoring in jazz studies at DePaul University. He needed furniture for his apartment and, short on cash, set out to make a bookcase and a futon frame.

Though armed with tools his father had given him for Christmas, he didn't know the first thing about furniture making. He read everything he could on the subject and rented machinery at a nearby outlet. "All the work was very simple," he says, "and I somehow muddled my way through."

Natof was hooked – and suddenly playing the flute for a living seemed a lot less appealing. "Working with my hands was seductive," he says. "I could spend all day building furniture, but I couldn't spend all day practicing the flute." And there was something else: "Furniture making is a tangible medium; you have something to show for your effort. But once you play a piece of music, it disappears. Ultimately, I found furniture much more interesting."

Just shy of graduation, Natof dropped out and set up shop in his current, 2,000-square-foot workshop on West Monroe. Since then, he's built a healthy business making furniture on commission. "I'm doing just a handful of really special pieces a year," he says. Some are built-ins that can take months to finish, others are elaborate dining tables that can run up to \$20,000. Since 1995, he has specialized in using veneer, which he handpicks, to create pieces of distinctive beauty. "I look for grain that is unusually swirly, non-linear, or striking in some way. I'm less interested in furniture that looks like boards put together. I want it to look like a sculptural object."

**A glance around Natof's** workshop reveals a range of samples, from expensive, detailed pieces such as a bubinga veneer two-door tansu (above), based on an early 19th-century Japanese design (\$5,325), to simpler forms from his J-Line that sell in the range of \$1,000. All of Natof's pieces are topped with exotic, lush wood veneer such as laurel, African mahogany, bubinga and Indonesian rosewood.

The technique of adding a thin layer of wood to another material has a long tradition, stretching from the Egyptians to the reign of Louis XIV to the Art Deco period in the '20s. "There's a lot of crappy Ikea furniture made from veneer," Natof says, "and then there is veneer furniture on display in the Louvre." Natof is drawn to veneer because it allows him to wrap the wood around corners and otherwise capitalize on its flexibility and expressive grain patterns to create objects of art as well as function.

On some pieces, such as a buffet with laurel veneer (\$5,120), he takes the design even further, cutting the veneer into brick-shaped pieces. On others, such as a sideboard made of bubinga veneer (see photo on previous page), with African mahogany legs and ebony pulls (\$4,980), Natof allows the distinctive grain of the veneer to speak for itself.

What would Frank Lloyd Wright think about his great-grandson's work? "That's an interesting question?" Natof says. After some musings about Wright's own furniture Natof proffers a conclusion. "I think Wright would be surprised at the attention that I pay to small details, but would definitely appreciate the craftsmanship."



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