

There is probably no more useful piece of furniture in our cabin than the table. It is technically a “round oak dining table,” but its uses are multiple, and it is almost never just standing there bare and unadorned. Sometimes, of course, it is as its name indicates. We have all of our meals at this old table, its oak top the repository for knives, forks, and spoons, plates and glasses. Handmade place mats—woven from the first curtains we had in the cabin, after they had retired from their intended purpose—mark our places. Serving dishes and butter plate, salt and pepper shakers—all of the things we associate with a meal. So, at those times, it lives up to its name. It really is a dining table.

At other times, though, the oak table does not stand there with no purpose but waiting for the next meal. Usually, there is a woven table runner in the middle. Today, it is a cotton runner we bought in Töcksfors, Sweden many years ago. The stripes of green, red, beige, and blue contrast nicely with the shiny oak. On the middle of the table sits a polished slice of pudding stone, and next to that, this year’s Advent candles.

They deserve a mention, too. The four Sundays before Christmas each year, many people observe the season by lighting Advent candles. But, probably, most of those folks, once Christmas has passed, take out the stubs of candles left in the holder, polish the copper, glass, or other metal holder, and store it away until the next year.

We used to do that. But, when our Advent candle holder needed replacement, we decided to make a new one each year from wood. When Christmas is over, the candle holder goes into the stove, providing one last service.

Sometimes, Runo has bored holes in a nice piece of planed plank for the Advent candles. But, in recent years, we have decided—exhibiting one of those quirks that sometimes make people shake their heads and wonder about us—to just find an unusual, pretty, or “different” piece of stove wood for the Advent candle holder. This year, it is blue beech. The blue/gray hue of the bark, the solidity of the wood, its smoothness—all add to its charm, at least in our eyes. And, that is all that matters.

Right now, I am writing this piece at the table. There are two small coffee cups on the table, and I can hear the water beginning to reach the boiling point, ready to make a pot of coffee in the French press pot. There is a coffee cake thawing in its plastic freezer bag. I forgot to take it out of the freezer before we went to the barn for our morning chores, so it is now on the heat register, hopefully completely thawed just at the moment the coffee is ready.

This round oak table was in the farm house from the time the house was built. As I understand it, Lars and Cornelia bought the table from a furniture maker in Grand Rapids.

It is unusual. I have never seen a base quite like the one on this table, although there must have been many of the same design. We called the legs “dog heads and claws” when we were small, but it is more likely that the animals portrayed in the legs of the table are mythical. Although there are a few details related to dogs—primarily the chewed up places that border collie

Nellie carved out in the 1990s.

A neighbor—one to whom all things translated into dollars and cents—once said to my mother that she could get some “real money” for the table. Her answer left him speechless.

“I’d have to buy another table, then, wouldn’t I?” she said. “Guess I’ll just keep the one I have.”

There is another old table here on the farm. This one stands in the farm house at the present time, but we will bring it up here for more Christmas Eve seating.

That table, a rectangular drop leaf kind, is not made of oak. Its legs—each hand turned on a lathe—are walnut. The top, with a big gouge on one leaf, is cherry. None of the legs are quite the same. One is a bit smaller, another has a slightly different turning.

I remember that table in my grandmother’s house. It was varnished with a dark, nearly black finish. When my mother brought the table from Grandma’s house, the first thing she did was to strip the varnish from the top and legs and reveal the wood. Then, she finished it with a clear varnish. I don’t know if she had any idea what kind of wood was in the table before she worked on it.

That table was made by my mother’s mother’s maternal grandfather, a man of French descent who was not, as far as I know, a furniture maker. Other details of the origin of the table are lost in the mists of time.

On Christmas Eve, both tables will be lit by candles, covered with dishes, and, best of all, surrounded by extended family of all ages visiting and enjoying the holiday together. Tables could not ask—if, indeed, they had that power—for a more meaningful way to spend the holiday evening.