A CABINETMAKER AND HIS WORK: BY STEPHEN R. WILLIAMS

In our admiration for antiques we do not always remember that part of the reason for our admiration is based on the simple fact that the article has continued to exist until the present time. When in addition to that we find that the particular thing is still in daily use a respect is added to that admiration which can never be elicited by a mere antique in a glass case in a museum.

Old furniture may be beautiful—it often is homely—but age in furniture, whatever it may be, is a guarantee of a certain amount of honest handicraft as well as some care in preservation.

In the community of Shandon, Butler County, Ohio, now some years past its centennial, so many examples of unusually comfortable family rockers two or three generations old are to be found that it stimulated me to look up their history. They all turned out to be the work of one man, Isaac McClelland, and are still known as McClelland chairs.

Their maker was locally famous. He was said by other mechanics in the village to be so skilled a workman that he could do with a drawing knife finer work than the other carpenters of the vicinity could do with their planes.

His son gives me the following outline of his father’s history. He was born in Pennsylvania in 1805, his parents soon there-

A GROUP OF VAUGHN CHAIRS: MADE BY ISAAC MC CLELLAND.

after moving to the vicinity of Crawfordsville, Indiana. Here he learned the trade of cabinetmaker, working with an older brother. He lived most of his active life near Richmond, Indiana, and Shandon, Ohio, and dying at the age of 82, was buried at Hamilton, Ohio.

His method of making chairs is worthy of description in this day of machine-made furniture. The rounds were turned out of well seasoned hickory and the posts made out of green maple. The dry round with a supply of the finest glue in a depression on its end was driven into the green maple post, and as the post seasoned it drew tightly about the round. As a consequence even in the modern furnace-heated houses his chairs are solid and the rounds are tight. The seats were put in with canes split from swamp ash, and as his store of supply was kept in the neighboring creek the material was always flexible for weaving.

Many of these original seats are in the chairs after seventy years of service. Others have been replaced by the cane, which is the only material available in the market now for this kind of seating. It does not compare, of course, in durability with the coarser ash or hickory splits which when put in by an expert usually outlast the average owner.

The style of Mr. McClelland’s work on bureau, reel or sewing table, though he is said to have been a master in making them, cannot be illustrated because of lack of authentic material for photographs. The chairs,
however, can be shown. The photographs had necessarily to be taken under varying conditions at the several houses.

The chairs are in general of the ladder-backed Colonial type, but no two are precisely alike in the details. I shall illustrate a few of them, designating them for purposes of reference by the name of the original owner.

The John Evans chair, now in the possession of his granddaughter, has a combination ladder and spindle back. The worn-out seat is a recent one and the rockers appear not to be the original ones. The hand-grasp at the end of the arm and the flare of the top are more pronounced in this chair than in any of the others. It is also the largest of the rocking chairs.

The Francis chair, a slat-backed type, has had a series of rockers worn or broken and replaced. The top of the back has more of a backward curve than the other large chairs have. The hand-grasps are worn off squarely in front, said to be due to the pushing of the chair about on rocker ends and arms while in the rôle of a locomotive driven by the children of the house.

The Sefton chairs are probably among the latest made. The whole set, rocker and six upright chairs, is intact with the original seats still in place. The small chairs are shaped like the Francis rocker, with bent back flaring somewhat at the ends. The rocker is like the Evans rocker, but even more comfortable. No one who ever sat in that chair could forget the ease and the restfulness of the position. This chair is the only one of the larger ones which has not had the original rockers worn away and replaced, and it may be that this accounts for the extra comfort the rocker possesses.

The Vaughn chairs show the spindles introduced into the backs of the upright chairs and moreover a rocker of the same small size as the upright chairs. The central rocker is not certainly a McClelland chair. If not it slightly antedates them. One arm of this chair has been broken off and is bound to the upright by an encircling copper strip. The rockers in this case are worn to the point where the chair no longer rocks.

Last of all, because it is unique in the series, is the Gwilym chair. This is an upright arm-chair, made for a stout man who did not want to trust himself to a rocker. I am sure the chair never betrayed his trust. It is as firm and strong now when climbed over by his great-great-grandchild as it was the day it was delivered to him. The hand-grasps are of a different type from those previously shown and the uprights end in turned knobs. The seat, as is evident, has been replaced.

The parts of these chairs worn by use have gained a polish and luster which is very beautiful. The paint itself, where it is
THE WORK OF AN OLD-TIME CRAFTSMAN

THE SEPTON CHAIR, NO. 1.

still seen, has faded unobtrusively into the background and the only one of these chairs which has been newly painted looks disturbed as though it felt uncomfortable and ill at ease.

If one thinks of the furniture one has known in one’s own life it falls usually into two classes, the slender and easily racked type and the huge, scarcely movable pattern which occupies a permanent position in a room, only disturbed by the attacks of clean-

THE SEPTON CHAIR, NO. 2.

liness. These chairs are of the first type in weight and appearance, with the strength of the second, and they proclaim to the community Isaac McClelland as a workman that needed not to be ashamed.

THE GWILYM CHAIR.

rarely achieve a result which can compare in thoroughness of construction or beauty of design with the unpretentious bits of furniture made by a simple cabinetmaker three-quarters of a century ago? For not only is the average article on sale today in our department stores something which we do not even expect to hold together for more than a few years at the most, but its design is such that we hardly care whether it lasts or not, and frequently are glad when it wears out and can be thrown away and replaced by something else, equally bad, but for the moment—fashionable!

And there you have in one word, fashionable, the keynote to our failure, the root of our insincerity, the reason why we must, in honesty, turn in disgust from most of our modern furniture and hark back to the middle eighties for a chair that we can look upon with respect.

THE MOTOR CAR AND THE CITY MAN

WITh our recently awakened interest in country life, there is a widespread attempt among the “cliff dwellers” of our cities to get as much country as they can as quickly as possible. We are not good walkers here in America, and if we were there would be very little pleasure for the city person walking through the suburbs out to the real country, for the edges of most of our cities are ragged and unsightly, and usually unsanitary.

Unfortunately for the city people with moderate incomes, the bicycle is almost a