

## PIECES of HISTORY Art Shaw

### "NEW MOTIVES FOR COLLECTING"

With the return of fine weather has come the reopening of the auction sale season. From now until the beginning of December newspapers and sale bills will call people out to 6 or 8 sales a week in Leeds County. These events combine all the dramatic elements of a stage play or a poker game, with the jovial atmosphere of a country fair. There is no better place to observe the law of supply and demand in action or to hear the latest gossip. There is no other situation which would cause an otherwise sensible person to stand in the wind and rain and mud for hour after hour, and no other place where such atrocious food tastes so good. But, besides the obvious drama of every sale, a tragedy takes place which goes unnoticed by the majority of the witnesses.

Every summer the sales contain fewer and fewer of the really old "primitive" artifacts. Amongst the preponderance of "popular" antiques from Grandma's era, the experienced searcher may detect one or two items of museum quality. Much of the excitement of a sale is derived from seeing who will have the privilege of owning them. Most often these lucky (and wealthy) individuals do not acknowledge the responsibility that accompanies ownership. They load their treasure into their trucks and depart; leaving behind half of the cultural value of the artifact. A year from now they may recall that they bought it in Leeds County, but the name of the family that sold it will be lost, and so too will be a century or two of history.

Our auctioneers deal in the cultural treasures of the county (and country). These are the artifacts which were made by hand by our pioneers. Their origin is confined to about 120 years commencing with the arrival of the first settlers in 1783 and ending when the growing factories and spreading railroads brought standardized products to our doors. They

tell the trained observer what tools were available to the maker, what degree of skill he possessed, and, sometimes, what part of the world he immigrated from. Furniture is particularly interesting in this respect because its design allows for so much individuality and often reflects the elements of the furniture that the maker admired at another time and in another place.

Usually the degree of accuracy with which a cabinetmaker reproduced the formal styles, depended on the degree of formal training he had had in a large centre like New York or Boston. Such entrepreneurs catered to a wealthy and educated clientele and did not venture outside the largest towns in Upper Canada. Brockville accommodated a couple, and several located in Kingston when it was the capital of Canada West. Their furniture was finely built of native woods and veneered with imported mahogany and walnut. These pieces should be highly prized by their owners, but they are not distinctively native to Leeds County.

The countryside, on the other hand, was full of (artistically) untrained woodworkers who built furniture from necessity. The builders of the most primitive pieces were the pioneers themselves, who achieved the desired purpose with the least possible purchased hardware or glass, and only the tools that were necessary to their survival. (see "Pieces of History", Oct. 1980). Although innocent of any conscious attempt at design themselves, these instinctive craftsmen left us many beautiful pieces of furniture which are worthy of study by modern designers in search of inspiration. The much studied furniture produced in the various colonies of Shakers in the United States, which was religiously designed without ornamentation, is no more beautiful than some primitives to be found in Leeds.

Between these simple do-it-yourself-or-do-without pioneers and the educated do-it-for-money-and-make-it-fancy town cabinetmakers, was every degree of craftsman and designer from the carpenters who occasionally built a table (see "Pieces of History", March/81) to the full time furniture builders and chair and bedstead makers who may have apprenticed in town. The function of

their furniture was determined by their clients' lifestyles, and the design was a loose translation of finer furniture they may have seen in Brockville, or Albany, or Dublin, or Liverpool. Most carpenters probably built furniture on occasion, and those whose trade was joiner were probably responsible for a great deal of the country furniture that is now being sought so avidly. The big architectural cupboards, arched window sash and curved staircases were built on the site or in a small shop by these unassuming masters of wood. I often imagine such a man working away in his shop by the dim light of a small window. The interior of the shop behind him is occupied by his tools, his finished and half-finished furniture, and his wood stove, while outside, the snow drifts stand against the traffic of ideas between this remote artist and the world.

Whether he was James Earl, working at Elgin, or Patrick Davidson in Delta, or Joseph Bradley from Lansdowne, somewhere, someone still owns some of his furniture. The tragedy is that they bought it at an auction sale and don't know who made it, or where, or who owned it. There is also a lot of furniture out there that is owned by people who do know where and when it was made and what log cabin it occupied. We all share a responsibility to see that the history of that furniture goes with it.

Here are some ways that you can help preserve that heritage. Do not sell or pass to a relative any such piece of furniture without first recording on paper everything that you know about the furniture or its maker or owners. Write everything down including dates and locations and attach the paper to the back of the furniture. Do not buy or inherit any such furniture without inquiring about its history and recording it in the same way. This procedure should be followed whether you sell privately or to a dealer or buy privately or from a dealer. If there are old folks in your family who own old furniture, ask them now, and write down the history. They will be glad to tell you, and you (and I) will be richer for knowing.

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