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ACROSS THE ISLAND

Data Being Sought On Island Furniture

By NEIL A. MATHESON

I'M WRITING this column on old Island furniture, something I know virtually nothing about. However there's a good reason. Three Charlottetown ladies last week told me they are researching items of old Island furniture and asked me if I could write something that might help them carry their research a bit further.

Mrs. George Rogers, Mrs. Charles MacKenzie and Mrs. Alfred Hennessey have done a great deal of work already on Island-made furniture in the days that are gone. They have uncovered considerable information, have some attractive pictures, and are asking through me for information from anyone across the province who can send them information about old Island furniture they have not seen as yet.

These three ladies are doing their research with the ultimate aim of publishing the interesting talk George Leard of Souris gave to the Prince Edward Island Historical Society here back in June of 1965.

I regarded Mr. Leard as one of our best historians and his interests were varied. His death was a real loss to the province.

Settle-Beds Recalled

MR LEARD "guessed" that settle-beds were widely used in the period 1720-28. They were used long after that, as Mr. Leard knew. As he described them "they opened out to make a snug bed for two and closed up to hide the chaff, or straw-filled tick". They were used for 100 years, he said, after the French lost control of the Island.

The settle-beds I knew were made of plain boards, but Mr. Leard had seen them "in plain pine" and also "more ornately carved ones".

"The first Grandfather clock came here 204 years ago . . . it was a beautiful piece of furniture."

Looking back to the days of William Townshend, one of the first customs officers, Mr. Leard had a list of furniture that included two mahogany bedsteads, four black birch bedsteads and five black birch chairs. Much of that furniture was of beautiful mahogany.

I was interested in the Leard reference to "two beer horses for the cellar, valued at 17 shillings" so I called my friend Joe Curran who must know more about such things than any other Islander.

Joe believes they were concrete, concave blocks to set beer casks on so they wouldn't roll across a cellar floor. He's not sure of that, but I did find that he has two old beer pumps, and the picture will be found elsewhere in this paper

They were used to draw the beer from the casks as the foamy stuff was dispensed in glasses, or steins.

No Room For Furniture

“GOOD FURNITURE was the exception”, Mr. Leard noted, in his early history of the Island. “The crowded little ships that brought the settlers had no great room for furniture.” He notes “in my brother’s home at Souris” – this would be Mayor or Ray Leard, I presume – “the hood seems much better than the lower case, which is explained by the fact they only had room to bring the essential working parts.”

But interesting as these references to imported furniture are, it’s Island-made furniture that we’re interested in today.

Mr. Leard noted in his talk to the Historical Society, good furniture was the exception.

Some of his references were really good. I liked one in particular. After noting that country people often made their own furniture, he said:

“In a Fraser log cabin in North Lake they thought carpenters a luxury so they left the stumps in the clay floor as supports for the benches, the table and beds.” How’s that for being practical about furniture?

Mr. Leard spoke of Benjamin Chappell making a cradle for his son, and that makes me wonder when people stopped using the old-fashioned wooden cradle. Once there was one in mostly every kitchen. As I recall them all of them were home-made. Chappell also made a high chair for his son when he became big enough to use one. Chappell is more widely known as Charlottetown’s first Postmaster. The Leard lecture suggested he was also a founding father of Trinity United Church. I have no information on that one.

William The Loyalist

FIRST SCHURMAN on the Island came in 1784 and “William the Loyalist” was a jack of all trades. In 1786 he sold sets of six chairs in his store for \$4.00 – Mr. Leard must have transposed the English currency in use then to dollars.

Charlottetown newspapers of 1812 spoke of “The Charlottetown Chair Manufactory” which was two doors down from the Wesleyan Chapel.

And here’s an interesting paragraph from the Leard talk:

“Recently I learned from Dr. A.A. MacDonald, Souris . . . that he had heard that James Mills (1800-1889) Fortune had made the chairs for the Colonial Building in 1847” – the reference here must be to what we knew later as Province House, or the Provincial Building.

Here are the names of some of the Island furniture makers that were given me by the trio of ladies who are researching such things.

Butcher, Newson, Wright, Hobbs – first names are not available. There were such other names as Bill Jury, Robert Pike, Charles Dogherty, George L. Dogherty, Alexander Stewart, Georgetown; Thomas Green, Charles Drew, a Kirkland man in Western P.E.I.

There was a William Moor, a Samuel Westacott, York Road – only one of two addresses were given to me. Other names included E.D. Stairs, George Doull, George Douglass, Harry Cutcliffe, and Thomas Abbott.

The ladies tell me they have contacted many people in their search for Island-made furniture, but feel they may have missed some good items.

They would like to hear from people who know of other furniture makers of other years. They suggest information may be available on old bill heads, day books, newspapers, letters or even in diaries.

Any information available may be sent to me at The Guardian and I'll pass it on to the ladies who are interested.

In Lighter Vein

FOR THOSE who are not interested in old Island furniture, here's something on the lighter side.

Reg. MacDonald, Souris told me a story about Jim Condon, a Souris man who was one of a group in a Souris restaurant once when the talk got around to people getting water in their cellars.

Mr. Condon told of a man on the Southeast coast of the Island whose cellar used to fill with water.

A neighbor suggested he should run a pipe from the house to the shore which was close by. Next morning the man looked in to see if there was any water in the cellar. The water had gone but the cellar was half filled with eels.

I can't vouch for the truth of the story but at least it's different.

To Mr. MacDonald, I was unable to find the column to which you referred. That is why you have not heard from me.