

Lancaster Farming Antiques Center

Reproducing Originals Antique Furniture Serves As Template For New Pieces

MICHELLE KUNJAPPU
Lancaster Farming Staff

STRASBURG (Lancaster Co.)
You might say it was a dovetail fit.

From a beginning of experimenting at his father's workbench in the basement to a full-time cabinet maker today, woodworking has offered Stephen VanOrmer not only a favorite hobby but also a career.

Owner of a cabinet shop in Strasburg, VanOrmer creates reproductions of 17th and 18th century antique furniture. In addition he offers woodcarving and restoration services.

In 1976 VanOrmer began his own business in Strasburg, and has been busy ever since. Early jobs included making furniture reproductions for local establishments such as the Hans Herr

mental congress, which normally convened in Philadelphia — the acting capitol of the colonies at the time — moved to protect the government. For a short time the legislators met in Harrisburg, where the Rising Sun chair stayed.

"The speaker's chair was in Harrisburg for quite a while until they restored Independence Hall during the centennial celebration," said VanOrmer. The original chair went back to Philadelphia, and is now back in Independence Hall.

During the bicentennial celebration, when Harrisburg was completing its own restoration, authorities decided to commission a copy of the chair for Harrisburg. Consequently VanOrmer went to Philadelphia to make plans for duplicating the original chair. The chair, finished in 1968,



Steve is joined by his wife Darlene and daughter Laurie in the kitchen. He has made the furniture of the VanOrmer home.

the wear marks that might be realistic," to distress the furniture. "I distress it in ways they would have originally gotten beat up," he said.

Another aspect of the job that he enjoys is the investigation he can conduct in reproducing a piece. To make the Rising Sun chair, for instance, he traveled to Harrisburg to take pictures, measurements, tracings, and drawings to most accurately re-create the piece.

"If I have access to the antique I can take all the details," he said. However "the average customer doesn't have access" to the original, he said, so antique periodicals and books from VanOrmer's own library prove useful. In addition antique reference materials help VanOrmer establish proper measurements for the piece.

According to VanOrmer, "normal styles are typically standard heights," so he can make an educated guess when he designs a chair. Also local museums may serve as a reference source because they allow VanOrmer to take sketches and make mental notes.

"The best education is just being exposed to the originals," he said.

His first job included stripping and repairing original furniture.

"I was able to take a part a lot of original antiques and see them from the inside out.

"Even though that was the bottom rung of the ladder, it gave me the opportunity to handle the pieces and learn firsthand how they were put together," he said.

Designing A Good Fit

Building a piece of furniture that fits comfortably into a customer's home is not all shop work.

"A lot of times people

are not exactly sure what they want, so I sit down and help them design it and come up with something they like.

"If I know where it's going, I can more accurately come up with something that will fit in their house," VanOrmer said. He quizzes customers about their home and decorating motif to "get a feel for the place the piece is going into."

This consultation, combined with pictures and samples of his own work, helps customers create what they are looking for.

VanOrmer also suggests that customers research room settings in colonial museums to "see what furniture was used in certain settings."

He enjoys the entire process, from the initial consultation to the rough cut of the work to finishing touches of creating a piece.

Learning The Art

Watching his father work around the house and making his own creations from scrap wood from a local boat factory helped to mold his talent and put him on his woodworking career path.

In junior high, his first project consisted of making a lamp out of a log. Later, in high school, shop class quickly became a priority. "I ended up going to the shop for study halls and lunch period — I was there probably

four periods a day," he said.

In his senior year, the shop teacher allowed the students to pick their own projects. VanOrmer consulted with his mother, who had in her files plans for a grandfather clock.

His parents agreed to pay for the materials for the project, so he took on the challenge. "It took my whole senior year to do it," he said. The clock still stands in his parent's living room.

His talent and interests di-

(Turn to Page B30)



VanOrmer emphasizes a purist design that includes dove-tailing the drawers by hand and applying traditional shellac finishes.

House, Strasburg Heritage Society, and other museums. Since then he has also done an assortment of jobs for museums which include the Chester County Historical Society and the Strasburg Museum.

VanOrmer was also commissioned to copy the five-foot "Rising Sun" chair, for speaker of the house, that was displayed in Pennsylvania's capitol building.

During the civil war the conti-

is on permanent display in Harrisburg.

In addition he has created a piece for the Smithsonian. A miniature copy sits in his home.

Curators at the Smithsonian decided to create a hands-on room where visitors could handle and see different artifacts.

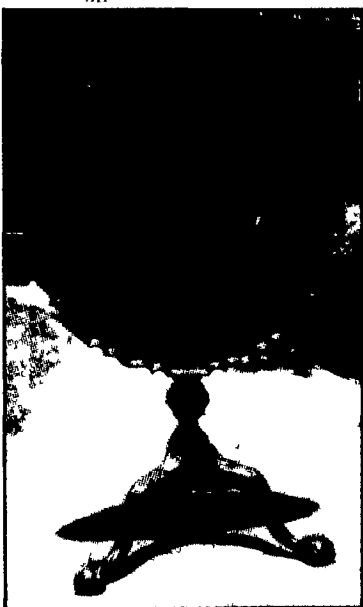
"They wanted me to create a chair that could be disassembled to show the integral parts of the chair," he said. "What I ended up doing was making a copy of a Philadelphia Chippendale chair." VanOrmer made a display piece, which sets beside the parts and pieces, which he also made, of the "hands-on" chair. On the wall are directions on how to put the chair together.

Variety Important

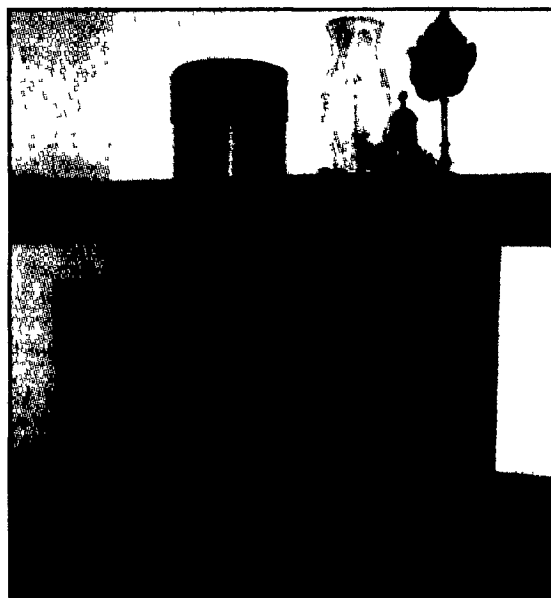
The job, according to VanOrmer, allows him flexibility and variety that keeps him enthusiastic about his work. Dutch cupboards, dining room tables and chairs, corner cupboards, tall case (grandfather) clocks, flip top tables, and even communion tables for churches are part of the variety of his work.

"What I like the most is the variety," he said. "I do everything from very formal Queen Ann or Chippendale furniture to country distressed furniture."

For distressed furniture, he uses silverware, tools, a rock, or "anything that might simulate



A tilt top table.



VanOrmer crafted, carved, and painted this chest. The piece decorates his home in Strasburg.



Grandfather clocks provide an opportunity to carve ornate designs.