

## Avocational Furniture Making in the Mid-Twentieth Century

### Catherine Carman

*Catherine Carman is a member of the 2007-08 Historical Administration class. She graduated from the University of Michigan with a BA Ed. in 2005 and taught high school for two years before coming to Eastern Illinois University. She has been named 2008 Distinguished Graduate Student for the Historical Administration program. This paper was written for Dr. Debra Reid's course, HIS 5330: Material Life in America-1600-Present, for fall 2007.*

### Introduction

The mid-twentieth century was a period in which Americans looked forward, adopting new technology, vocations, and lifestyles. Much of the material culture of the period matches this affinity for the latest innovations, including the modern, factory-produced furniture dominating homes in the post-war period. Yet, some craftsmen continued the tradition of making furniture in the home workshop. Was this trend the product of a need to express oneself, to reconnect with the material world through this traditional hand-made form of expression? Was it nostalgia for farm life in an era of suburbanization? Did men make furniture to reclaim their masculinity, which had been challenged as women took their places on the home front during World War II? Were some so frustrated with low-quality, factory made furniture that they preferred to make their own? Did the increased availability of plan books, power tools, wood and other materials finally fulfill a need that had existed all along? Perhaps it was simply a way to fill time in the evenings. Or, was producing their own furniture a necessity for families who did not share in the post-war prosperity? This paper will investigate the pastime of furniture making in the 1950s, and the reasons hobbyists undertook this endeavor. It will argue that both societal and personal factors contributed to individuals taking up furniture-making. Mid-twentieth century American society's influences on the reasons individuals adopted this hobby will be examined through social history, the comments of plan book authors, and a case study of woodworking hobbyist Ervin Dihlmann, great-grandfather of the author. His social beliefs, socioeconomic realities, and personality make Dihlmann quite representative of individuals involved in the amateur furniture-making movement. The furniture he produced, sources he used, and family oral histories regarding his personality, life experiences, and avocation will be used to investigate Dihlmann's hobby. Lastly, the paper will examine the legacy of amateur-made furniture through the example of Dihlmann's family.

### Conscious Factors

As the American consumer culture developed during the mid-twentieth century, it was easier than ever to satisfy one's desires for furniture quickly, easily, and relatively inexpensively. Yet, purchasing

mass-produced furniture from a catalog or department store left an unsatisfied desire: the urge to create. The introductions to instructional furniture plan books reveal that the satisfaction of making something with one's own hands was the most often cited reason for choosing this particular hobby. Their glowing language exposes the intensity of the authors' convictions about furniture making. Author Emmanuele Stieri described the feeling of constructing his own things from wood as "a real thrill of accomplishment" and declared the hum of a circular saw or joiner to be "real music to the handy man or boy."<sup>1</sup> He also related that the craftsman "is achieving something really worthwhile."<sup>2</sup> Why did this particular accomplishment, making one's own wood furniture, seem "really worthwhile"?

The nature of the other accomplishments a man at this time might achieve, especially those at his regular job, the activity in which he spent the majority of his time, was that of a group effort, not solitary. Production jobs had become specialized. Each person contributed a small piece, determined by management, to the product. Thus, items were produced quickly and inexpensively. However, industrialization had negative effects. Particularly pertinent to this study are the lost opportunities for creativity and involvement in the entire production process. Author Rolf Shütze observed that while the economic necessity of the home workshop disappeared, "the joy of creation, which was the motive power of the workshop, remained. Unable to find expression in handiwork, the individual felt stifled."<sup>3</sup> Thankfully, there was a solution, as Whitney K. Towers noted in the introduction to his 1957 *Cabinetmaker's Manual for Amateurs and Professionals*: "... the great majority of production jobs has become so specialized as to be boring to a large proportion of the employees. Thousands of these men whose jobs make no provision for the creative urge with which most people are imbued have turned to woodworking as a hobby."<sup>4</sup> It wasn't only the men who worked in a factory, adding screws to the automobile body passing by the assembly line, who fulfilled their desire to create by making furniture. Author W. Clyde Lammey noted that "people in widely diversified professions find a common interest in their home workshops and share alike a desire to acquire manual skills they cannot find outlet for in their regular vocations."<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Stieri, Emmanuele, *Woodworking as a Hobby* (New York: Harper and Bros., Publishers, 1939), 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Shütze, Rolf. *Making Modern Furniture* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Corp., 1967), 8-9.

<sup>4</sup> Towers, Whitney K. *Cabinetmaker's Manual for Amateurs and Professionals*. (New York: Home Craftsman Publishing Corp., 1957), 5.

<sup>5</sup> Lammey, W. Clyde. *Power Tools and How to Use Them*. (Chicago: Popular Mechanics Press, 1950), 4.

In the post-war period, young people left family farms in droves. Their help was no longer necessary as rural electrification and the mechanization of farming and farm homes spread. One thing, however, had not changed: the proliferation of the home workshop, now “popping up again in every suburb” after it “lost its importance in running the farm.”<sup>6</sup> Woodworker and author Rolf Shütze hinted at the nostalgia he felt for that time one hundred years ago: “Here large numbers of people, as their forefathers did, have arranged a place in their own homes where they can satisfy the desire to fashion something both useful and decorative with their own hands.”<sup>7</sup> The Arts and Crafts movement in the (late nineteenth and?)early twentieth century first produced handmade furniture as a reaction against industrialization. By the mid-twentieth century, this philosophy seems to have trickled down to the general public, at least if one can speculate that home craftsmen shared the views expressed by furniture plan book authors. The desire to express creativity with manual skills was one (of many) factors in taking up this hobby.

Ervin Dihlmann was just such a man, who found creative outlet in making his own furniture. During the 1940s through mid-1960s, he worked in the Mason City, Iowa post office, and sometimes also worked a second job at an area sugar beet processing plant.<sup>8</sup> While he liked his work at the post office and found it as fulfilling as that type of job could be, it was not an outlet for creativity.<sup>9</sup> Dihlmann expressed his artistry by making furniture, which was then used by his family. Furniture plan books seem to have provided a basis for his work, but he personalized it and made it his own. For example, the largest piece Dihlmann produced is a sectional, wood-framed sofa (fig.1 and 2). A plan for this piece is given in B. W. Pelton’s *Furniture Making and Cabinet Work: A Handbook* (fig.3 and 4). The dimensions of Dihlmann’s piece are slightly different than Pelton’s plan.<sup>10</sup> This may have been to best use the space in his living room, or it might have been planned to better fit the grain of the beautiful bird’s eye maple wood of the piece. This flexibility demonstrates Dihlmann’s skill and creativity. Dihlmann added his own flair to the sofa by shaping the skirt to reach lower to the floor, with his own graceful curve. He also altered the arm supports, substituting a flat piece with a turned support (fig. 5). Dihlmann’s only power tool was a lathe, and much of the furniture he made featured some turned pieces.<sup>11</sup> Dihlmann took great pride in the furniture he created. His daughter Kathy remarked, “He would probably roll over in

<sup>6</sup>Rolf Shütze. *Making Modern Furniture*. 8-9.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Myers and Wild, interview.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Pelton, B. W. *Furniture Making and Cabinet Work: A Handbook*. (New York: D. Van Nostrand Co., Inc., 1949), 110-114.

<sup>11</sup> Myers and Wild, interview.

his grave if those pieces left the family.”<sup>12</sup> This attitude illustrates that, like the plan book authors, Dihlmann placed great value on his creations.

Dihlmann would not have been familiar with the farm workshops of his forefathers that Shütze had emphasized. Dihlmann, the son of a meat processing plant worker, grew up in a small city, with parents who had emigrated from Germany before he was born. Dihlmann and many other woodworkers who did not personally experience the farm workshop were instead fostered in their youth by the educational approach of handwork. Handwork was considered an important part of one’s education, likely due to the influence of the flourishing Arts and Crafts movement. Dihlmann, born in 1912, graduated from high school in 1929, and like many other men of his era, took “shop” class in school. Here, he built his first piece of furniture, a plant stand (fig. 6). Education in creating “plain, square, Mission type furniture” such as this plant stand ingrained in students both the skills necessary to make furniture and the “aesthetic dictum” that form should follow function.<sup>13</sup> As adults, many of these men, including Dihlmann, created furniture in the modern style, likely because they learned as children that the intended use of an object should determine its shape. In the first decade of the twentieth century, a contemporary source noted that “some form of handwork is to be found nearly everywhere, even in small towns and little country schools.”<sup>14</sup> Is it any wonder that as these boys came of age, furniture-making became a popular hobby? As these boys grew into men making their own furniture during the mid-twentieth century, they generally created furniture in two different styles. The Colonial Revival style continued to be popular. Making one’s own furniture was particularly appropriate to this style, which exemplified the nostalgia Americans felt for a “simpler, slower” time. Like many of his era, Dihlmann harbored some nostalgia for the past, as demonstrated by his creation of two Colonial Revival pieces, a tea cart (fig. 7) and a cobbler’s bench (fig. 8). A popular project during the mid-twentieth century, the cobbler’s bench was used as a coffee table and conversation piece. B. W. Pelton included a plan for a cobbler’s bench in *Furniture Making and Cabinet Work: A Handbook*. In his description of the piece, he noted a recent “vogue for artisans’ workbenches” including milk benches used as bars and sideboards, blacksmiths’ tool boxes “dramatized” into magazine racks, and the “eye-arresting,” “lowly” cobbler’s bench, which became a coffee table.<sup>15</sup> Pelton encouraged the modern craftsman to choose maple, as the cobbler or village carpenter would have used for its availability and hardness.<sup>16</sup> Dihlmann did choose this recommended wood when he crafted his own cobbler’s bench.

<sup>12</sup> Myers and Wild, interview.

<sup>13</sup> Gelber, Steven M. *Hobbies* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 202.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> B. W. Pelton. *Furniture Making and Cabinet Work: A Handbook*, 83.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

The bench was used as a coffee table in the family's living room, as part of the same furniture set as the sectional sofa. The old-fashioned cobbler's bench demonstrates that Dihlmann harbored some nostalgia and interest in woodworkers of the past. However, the majority of the pieces he created were of the modern style, which was the other popular style among woodworkers of the time.

Contemporary design in the mid-twentieth century, was focused on the new, the modern. In his plan book *Contemporary Furniture*, A. F. Bick described this style as "spontaneous, clean, and new, and giv(ing) the impression of honesty and sincerity."<sup>17</sup> The reason for this style was the nature of the society itself: "The era for which it is a symbol is great in its own right as an age of strength, self-confidence, inventive ability, and engineering skill."<sup>18</sup> Wood, a favored material of the modern style, had the ideal qualities for furniture symbolizing this era: "In wood, these qualities appear in the form of fitness of the material, lightness of structure and tone, simplicity of surface, excellence of line and proportion, and faultlessness of finish."<sup>19</sup> These simple design tastes and needs of the mid-twentieth century spurred handy people to think they could create furniture that met these requirements. Rolf Shütze noted this phenomenon, and the small disasters that could result, saying, "One of the reasons for this development must surely be our present-day desire for simple lines and simplified construction, and this tempts even the amateur to feel he can take on such projects. The beginner, however, who attempts to make useful furniture will often run into unforeseen problems."<sup>20</sup> The author does not go on to enumerate these unforeseen problems, but one can imagine they might include frustration, wasted money, injuries, and perhaps even marital discord. Jerry Lammers, who has been an active woodworker since the 1940s, noted that members of the St. Louis Woodworkers Guild often arrive at meeting with injuries, and that he himself had an accident which resulted in an unplanned shortening of one of his fingers.<sup>21</sup>

In his work, Ervin Dihlmann also tended toward simple lines, simplified construction, and undecorated surfaces, allowing for appreciation of the beauty of the wood. His sectional sofa is a perfect example of this. He uses a concave curve in the skirt of the chair to contrast with the straight lines of the stiles and stretches (see fig. 1). Following the design plan, the arm of the chair appears to be a straight, plain line when viewed horizontally, but when viewed from above, the arm gracefully curves outward beyond the piece of furniture (fig. 9). The skirt and arms are made of beautiful bird's eye maple (see fig. 9). Dihlmann's daughters remembered

<sup>17</sup> Bick, A.F. *Contemporary Furniture*. (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1954), iii.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> A.F. Bick. *Contemporary Furniture*, iii.

<sup>20</sup> Rolf Shütze. *Making Modern Furniture*, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Lammers, interview.

that he loved bird's eye maple.<sup>22</sup> Little additional decoration was needed on the sofa because of the carefully chosen lines and wood. Dihlmann did choose to use the turned arm support, not typical of modern furniture design (fig. 5). However, perhaps because of the simplicity of the piece's construction, he had the option of making his own changes. Thus the modern designs and tastes not only encouraged the craftsman to make his own furniture, they also allowed him more space for creativity.

While school boys were learning the old traditions of producing quality furniture with their own two hands, the new "science" of Taylorism was sweeping American industry; this often resulted in lower quality products. The materials used contributed to this development. For example, rather than wood, or plywood, wooden furniture was often made of engineered wood products made of wood fibers, held together with adhesive. The method of production could also impact the products' quality. The assembly line process decreased the personal pride the workers took in their products, as the product resulting from the contributions of so many did not seem like one's own accomplishment anymore. With less personal investment in the piece, and with the additional challenge of sped-up work, workers did not produce the high quality furniture they might have in a small cabinet shop. Some consumers were pleased to have this inexpensive option for furnishing their homes, regardless of the quality of the product. Ella Moody, in analyzing modern furniture in her book of the same title, explained that "no longer is furniture simple to recognise as good – or bad. Expendable, laminated fibreboard which is gay today and something else tomorrow, can be just as good in its own way as teak or rosewood cabinet-made in a small workshop or under an architect's eye in a factory."<sup>23</sup>

Dihlmann, and others, did not agree. They found that making their own assured them of having quality furniture. And Dihlmann's furniture was high-quality; it has been used heavily for twenty-five (non-consecutive) years by his, his daughter's, and his grandson's families. Of the living room set, which included the sectional sofa, cobbler's bench, book-shelf end table (fig. 10), "butler's chest" possibly used as a TV stand (fig. 11), end table, and coat rack (fig. 12), only the sofa's legs have needed repair, which "took a beating" according to Dihlmann's grandson, Randy Carman.<sup>24</sup> Carman noted that his grandfather would not own anything junky, that it should be good and of lasting quality. Items of inferior quality weren't acceptable. If he couldn't afford to buy a piece of quality furniture, he made it.<sup>25</sup> His daughters also noted that Dihlmann felt quality was very important and

<sup>22</sup> Myers and Wild, interview.

<sup>23</sup> Moody, Ella. *Modern Furniture*. (London: Studio Vista Ltd., 1966), 6.

<sup>24</sup> Carman, interview.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

that his work had to be perfect.<sup>26</sup> Dihlmann's pursuit of perfection brought him to spend many evenings and weekends sequestered in his basement workshop. For Dihlmann, and perhaps for other craftsmen as well, it was not only a matter of having quality furniture that would last for generations. For him, it was as if the quality of the furniture he owned, especially that which he himself made, reflected his personal worth. Excellence in one's personal and material achievements became an imperative in the family, one which sometimes generated feelings of inadequacy in Dihlmann's descendents.

In addition to his needs for creativity and a reminder of the past, making furniture fulfilled social needs, both to socialize and to be alone. Rolf Shütze noted that "the local lumberyard has become a popular community meeting place as well as a new industry catering to the hobbyist."<sup>27</sup> The home workshop could also serve as a location for men to bond over their shared interest. Steven M. Gelber examined media representations of the home workshop in the 1950s, including a 1954 advertisement for Corby's whiskey featuring five men who seem to have just stepped away from a social gathering into the host's garage workshop, probably leaving their wives in the house. They smoke pipes and drink whiskey, served from a home-made cart, and admire the host's Windsor rocking chair project. Gelber also located a feature on the "Do-It-Yourself Man" in a 1954 issue of *Look* magazine, which modeled appropriate "white-collar work clothes" styles for the new "unhired man" to wear "when he stops to boast with neighbors at cocktail time."<sup>28</sup> These documents suggest that proving one's manliness through his woodworking was an important component of the social encounter. Some craftsmen, including Dihlmann, took classes in the evenings, which provided them the opportunity to socialize, learn about new projects, and perfect their craft. Overall, though, Dihlmann was a man who kept to himself. He enjoyed the peace, quiet, and privacy of his basement workshop. Because this hobby accommodated sociable and loner personalities, many craftsmen were able to in part fill their social needs through making furniture.

In addition to providing an opportunity for socializing and learning, evening classes also allowed craftsmen to share tools. One might expect that mid-twentieth hobbyists spent large sums of money on outfitting their workshops with power tools, as many woodworkers in the twenty-first century do. No doubt, some did purchase many tools for their hobby; Emmanuele Stieri noted that "The development of fine hand and power tools has contributed in no small measure to the present-day popularity of

<sup>26</sup> Myers and Wild, interview.

<sup>27</sup> Rolf Shütze. *Making Modern Furniture*, 9.

<sup>28</sup> Steven M. Gelber. *Hobbies*, 288-289.

woodworking as a hobby and an art."<sup>29</sup> Magazine articles featured and were aimed at middle-class do-it-yourself types, but Gelber notes that subsequent studies showed that blue-collar men were just as likely to work around the house.<sup>30</sup> Many craftsmen were pursuing this hobby in part due to financial necessity, and were unable to purchase these tools, even though they had been developed and were available to homeowners through the Sears catalog.<sup>31</sup> Lacking these tools was not to be considered a problem, though. Michael Rothman encouraged these poorer craftsmen in this way: "Timid people will say that you must have lots of tools to produce many of the things that make your home a pleasant place to live. If this were true, a furniture factory full of such tools would prove insufficient if you refused to be patient and accurate. As a matter of fact, everything about you can be duplicated with the simplest of tools."<sup>32</sup> Even in a book titled *Getting Started with Power Tools*, readers were encouraged to "economize without sacrificing quality" by, for example, purchasing attachments for a circular saw which could perform the work of a jointer, sander, and shaper.<sup>33</sup>

For Dihlmann, economizing was a necessity, as the family struggled financially. Dihlmann and his wife, Katherine, had three daughters, all of whom came of age during the 1950s. He held down two jobs at times. The family saved money in many ways. Katherine canned vegetables from her garden. Dihlmann built a pit in the backyard, in which they buried carrots and apples to keep through the winter. They ate meat only about three times a week. Katherine made clothing and quilts for the family. For two years, the family went without a car because they did not buy things on credit. Dihlmann had the attitude that one did not buy new things unless it was really necessary. Things were fixed as often as possible, not thrown away.<sup>34</sup> This philosophy was probably greatly influenced by his parents, immigrants from Germany, who were much poorer than he. Making his own furniture was one way for Dihlmann to save money, so he adopted various strategies to decrease the cost of this hobby. Rather than purchasing his own power tools, Dihlmann took a night class held at a local junior high school, and had access to power tools through the class.<sup>35</sup> For at least one project, he obtained his wood for free. On the Greimann farm, which neighbored his wife's childhood home, a large walnut tree was cut down. Dihlmann made a hall tree for Mrs. Greimann with the wood, who

<sup>29</sup> Emmanuele Stieri. *Woodworking as a Hobby*. (New York: Harper and Bros., Publishers, 1939), 1.

<sup>30</sup> Steven M. Gelber. *Hobbies*, 275.

<sup>31</sup> Lammers, interview.

<sup>32</sup> Michael Rothman. *Build It Yourself: A Hundred Good Ideas for Making Your Home More Comfortable*. (New York: Greenburg, 1943), v.

<sup>33</sup> *Getting Started With Power Tools*. (Chicago: Popular Mechanics Press, 1956), 4.

<sup>34</sup> Myers and Wild, interview.

<sup>35</sup> Myers and Wild, interview.

liked it so much that the rest of the wood was given to Dihlmann. He made dining tables for each of his daughters with the wood.<sup>36</sup>

Dihlmann's furniture allowed him to pass on his values of thrift and care for one's belongings. As his daughter Avis's family moved into their first home of their own, Dihlmann gave them the living room furniture he had made. While it was not a fancy or expensive housewarming gift, undoubtedly Avis and her family were happy to receive this assistance. Avis later did the same for her children and grandchildren by passing down furniture and household goods she had accumulated over the years, including the living room set. That Dihlmann recognized value in material goods was evidenced by his careful care of his home and furnishings, and especially of the pieces he had made himself. This sometimes caused division in the family. The long-term resentment that followed a rambunctious cousin's climbing on and breaking a small table went down in Dihlmann family history. Those relatives were rarely invited over again.<sup>37</sup> However, for the Dihlmanns, recognizing value in material goods was not equivalent to being materialistic and coveting more and more possessions; rather it was about being a careful steward of what one had acquired. Dihlmann's "training" of his daughters to be stewards of their possessions, as well as his family's pride in Dihlmann's work, has now led his whole family to take special care of the pieces he created.

Furniture plan book authors focused on certain personality traits and values necessary for a successful craftsman, including not only thrift, but also carefulness. Michael Rothman impressed this on his readers, warning them that "Lumber, though fairly inexpensive, has financial value. Its waste through carelessness will prove destructive to your feeling of craftsmanship. Here and now, make a promise never to cut a piece of wood unless you're sure of your mark."<sup>38</sup> Producing an attractive piece of furniture required attention to detail, particularly with the modern designs that emphasized the natural wood and were devoid of decoration that could cover up mistakes. Thus, this hobby required a certain type of personality. Dihlmann's personality was well-suited for a home craftsman. As noted previously, thrift was of great importance to Dihlmann. He was a quiet and private individual, who enjoyed the peace and quiet of his basement workshop. Known as being a perfectionist, Dihlmann poured his energy into his work. He found his relaxation in being productive; most of his hobbies helped his family in some way, as Dihlmann also spent time fishing and later in his life, restoring antiques. This philosophy is precisely what George A. Raeth described in his introduction to *Modern Homecraft*: "All

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Michael Rothman. *Build It Yourself: A Hundred Good Ideas for Making Your Home More Comfortable*, vi.

mental and physical expressions and activities must be wisely directed for useful living. Profit, pleasure and relaxation are the benefits to be derived from a home workshop."<sup>39</sup>

For most home craftsmen, "profit" resulted from producing furniture for their family to use, not from a sale. Making furniture for use in one's own home contributed to the family's good. Dihlmann contributed to family's good by providing generations with furniture. For his own family, he produced an entire living room set. He also created pieces specifically for his daughters' young families to use, including the walnut dining room tables from the Greimanns' tree, and a rocking horse for his first grandson. When the living room pieces were no longer used in his own home, they were passed to his daughter Avis. Dihlmann's grandson, Randy Carman, recounted childhood memories of his dog hiding from him under the sectional sofa, removing the sofa cushions to set up a comfortable television-viewing station on the living room floor, and storing his crayons in the cobbler's bench coffee table.<sup>40</sup> During the 1980s, the living room pieces ended up in Avis's basement, and suffered humidity damage (visible in fig. 8 and 9). In the early twenty-first century, Avis gave the living room set to her son Randy. At first, the family had little appreciation for the pieces, as they were so strongly reminiscent of the 1950s, particularly in their orangey finish. They did not really fit in with the décor of the 2000s. However, sharing family stories regarding the furniture has engendered pride, and the pieces are slowly but carefully being lovingly restored by Randy.

Helping his family by making them furniture also provided an opportunity for Dihlmann to express his feelings for them. Although both he and his wife found it difficult to verbally express love, providing for their daughters served as evidence of their affection. Dihlmann actively showed his feelings by making furniture for his daughters, while his wife Katherine accomplished this through cooking. And so, he left a legacy of handmade, quality furniture to be passed down through generations of his descendants.

### Subconscious Factors

The reasons so far enumerated for making one's own furniture were voiced proudly by hobbyists and plan book writers in the 1940s-1960s. In addition to these, other reasons, more subconsciously ingrained by American popular culture, also exerted a pull on hobbyists toward furniture-making.

While plan books often cited the boredom in the workplace due to industrialization as motivation for furniture-making and hobbies in general, they ignored other influences of industrialization upon the development of

<sup>39</sup>George A. Raeth. *Modern Homecraft*. (Chicago: Frederick J. Drake & Co., 1941), 10.

<sup>40</sup> Carman, interview.

hobbies. Industrialization moved for-profit production from the home into the factory, as items could now be purchased for less than the price of making it oneself. This was sometimes the case with making furniture, although working-class craftsmen like Dihlmann found ways to make the hobby more economically sound. With the end of most at-home production, time at home was more often leisure time than it had been before industrialization. This was especially true for men, whose job had to be left at the factory. This increased leisure time allowed men the opportunity to develop hobbies. Many found that they missed the opportunity to construct items at home, and chose to take up a productive hobby, for example, furniture-making. This home production differed from pre-Industrial home production in that it was voluntary. Thus, industrialization was a multi-front force upon the hobby movement in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Industrialization also spurred the growth of consumer culture in the United States. Not only were the modern styles “tempting” handymen to make their own furniture, but the modern desire to have more fueled the attraction. In his introduction to *How to Make Tables Chairs and Desks*, Milton Gunermen focused particularly on the “need” for more tables in order to persuade his reader to attempt his table designs. He suggested the reader may need a new dining table, coffee table, end table, lamp table, and “occasional tables to enable each member of the family to keep his personal books, magazines, smoking accessories or sewing materials conveniently at hand.”<sup>41</sup> Making one’s own furniture allowed the family to keep up with the Joneses, and perhaps even outdo them, having accomplished the feat of directly supplying all the tables with the work of one’s own two hands.

Business realized that a profit was to be made from the newfound interest in hobbies, and commercial products aimed at hobbyists soon followed. Kit projects, most commonly models and handicrafts, were highly popular during the 1950s. Commercial influence on furniture-making was less strong, but existed nonetheless. To learn about making furniture, a hobbyist could purchase one of numerous plan books, or subscribe to *Popular Science* or *Workbench* magazine. Materials used in furniture making became more widely available. As more types of power tools were manufactured, more were purchased for home use. In 1952, there were about one hundred different types of power tools made for the home market. Ten years earlier there had been only twenty-five.<sup>42</sup> \$95 million was spent on portable power tools in 1953, up from \$6 million in 1946.<sup>43</sup> Publications and materials worked hand-in-hand. Newspapers and

magazines began to run do-it-yourself sections that featured projects and advertisements for products to use on the projects.<sup>44</sup>

This commercialization impacted economic classes differently. While the middle-class man may have spent great sums of money outfitting his workshop with power tools, or purchasing the best quality wood, or even the small sum of money to purchase a plan book or subscribe to a magazine, the working-class hobbyist did not enjoy this disposable income. The working-class man was more likely to engage in furniture-making in an effort to save money than the middle-class man. As “spending to save” was not part of these men’s economic strategies, working-class men invested in their hobbies differently. Dihlmann’s only power tool was a lathe. For at least one of his projects, wood was given in exchange for completion of a small project, rather than purchased. Dihlmann did not subscribe to magazines or purchase books in the 1950s; he likely had access to these materials through the public library. While working-class craftsmen like Dihlmann might have been influenced to pursue certain projects as a result of commercialized consumer culture, they necessarily spent little of their more meager incomes to feed the consumption machine.

Making one’s own furniture was also a reaction against consumer culture and industrialization. The independence one had demonstrated in the past by producing goods to meet his own needs was replaced by a growing dependence on others to make the goods he needed to survive. One was now at the mercy of the furniture manufacturers, who chose the designs and materials, and set the price of the dining room table the family had to have in order to eat a meal together. The craftsman of the 1950s demonstrated his independence by making his own table rather than depending on furniture manufacturers. Dihlmann’s self-reliance was exemplified in his ability to build his own furniture. The family’s self-reliance (likely due in part to financial realities, as well as philosophical beliefs) was also illustrated by the clothing his wife sewed for the family, the canned vegetables from her garden, and the family’s makeshift root cellar. Avocational furniture-making was both a product of industrialization, as leisure time and a cultural desire to consume developed, and a reaction against it, as people returned to start-to-finish home production through the hobby, demonstrating independence and perhaps even saving money in the process. Thus, industrialization was a multi-front, largely subconscious front upon furniture making in the mid-twentieth century.

Gender played a subconscious role in the hobby. Traditional gender roles had changed during World War II, with women working in factories while men were away fighting. While many women returned to working full time in the home when the men came back from the war, gender roles

---

<sup>41</sup>Milton Gunerman, ed., *How to Make Tables Chairs and Desks* (New York: Home Craftsman Publishing Corporation, 1954), 2.

<sup>42</sup>Steven M. Gelber. *Hobbies*, 279.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 278.

---

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 276.

continued to be challenged, as men were now expected to take more of an active role in the family life and home. Men also had to fulfill the post-war male role as a “handyman.” These expectations worked hand-in-hand to give men a separate sphere of domestic work, thus enabling them to be home with the family and yet preserve some masculine privilege. The masculine household duties commonly included car care, lawn care, barbecuing, supervising boys’ sports, taking out the trash, home maintenance, and do-it-yourself projects.<sup>45</sup> Dihlmann and his wife, Katherine, divided their work along traditional gender lines. His daughters remembered that each did his or her part.<sup>46</sup> Dihlmann’s masculine sphere included many of the accepted household duties, even performing perhaps the ultimate feat of domestic masculinity, building his own barbeque in the backyard he kept perfectly manicured. His basement workshop also provided a physical masculine sphere, a haven from a family of women. Some fathers spent quality time teaching their sons woodworking skills in the workshop, but probably due to his belief in traditional gender roles, Dihlmann’s daughters did little more than watch their father work. As Dihlmann and Katherine maintained traditional gender roles, his daughters took up the feminine productive hobbies of knitting and sewing. His grandson Randy took up the masculine hobby of home maintenance. Likely, Dihlmann’s handiness was in part a product of this midcentury need to assert one’s masculinity in the home rather than a continuation of gender traditions of an earlier era. He did not learn his skills from his father; Dihlmann’s daughters did not remember their grandfather as being handy at all.<sup>47</sup>

For some hobbyists, furniture-making was an opportunity for the male and female domestic spheres to meet. Some couples used furniture-making as a shared activity. Wives would suggest projects for their husbands; by one estimate, 80 percent of do-it-yourself patterns were purchased by wives for their husbands.<sup>48</sup> Plans for Dihlmann’s sectional sofa included instructions for making its cushions. It is possible that Katherine Dihlmann made the cushions, although her daughters believe they were more likely made by a local upholster.<sup>49</sup> The exact arrangement between Dihlmann and his wife Katherine in regards to choosing projects is unknown, but his daughters suggested that “he probably just asked for as little advice as he could get by on” as Katherine was one to make her opinion known, whether asked or not. Later, the couple did bond through a

<sup>45</sup> Steven M. Gelber. *Hobbies*, 268-269.

<sup>46</sup> Myers and Wild, interview.

<sup>47</sup> Myers and Wild, interview.

<sup>48</sup> Steven M. Gelber. *Hobbies*, 287.

<sup>49</sup> Myers and Wild, interview.

shared hobby of antique purchase and restoration, utilizing skills Dihlmann had developed by making furniture.<sup>50</sup>

Generally, though, the home workshop was a retreat. It provided sanctuary from the fear produced by nightly news of the Cold War, the changing social structure engendered by new gender roles and the Civil Rights movement, the loss of personal power at work, and the day-to-day difficulties of family life. Dihlmann took up his hobby during the height of the Cold War. Also at this time, the Dihlmann family was going through a period of changes. His daughters were teenagers, and he had the usual concerns a father has about his teenage daughters’ decisions and futures. His wife could be a rather dominating woman, and his workshop provided a bit of a break from her, as well. The set-up of Dihlmann’s workshop showed his desire to lead a structured life, one which was being threatened by the factors outlined above. The workshop was a highly organized room. His grandson Randy remembered visiting his grandfather and going down into the basement to see his grandfather’s workbench. Dihlmann’s tools were all hung on pegs in a particular order. He organized screws and nails into small jars, which each screwed into its own specific spot on the wall. As Randy’s father did not own many tools, this image persisted in Randy’s mind as the ideal workbench. His own work areas are, like his grandfather’s, quite orderly affairs.<sup>51</sup> Also like his grandfather, Randy prefers a structured, routine life, and is known to retreat to his garage or workshop when his house becomes boisterous and busy during his adult children’s visits.

Dihlmann expected his hobby to benefit to his family materially, and his work to be passed down through generations (see fig. 13). The passing down of his personality traits and values to his descendants was one unexpected benefit of furniture-making through these tangible remnants of his life and the family stories surrounding them.

## Conclusion

Amateur furniture makers proudly boasted about some of the personal and societal factors that led them to choose their hobby. But other factors, deeply imbedded in mid-twentieth century American culture and the personalities of the culture’s men, were also important in how they spent their free time. It is impossible to measure if the conscious or subconscious factors held more sway in some men’s decision to spend countless hours in their workshops, toiling over tables and chairs from the wood-cutting stage to the staining stage. Each craftsman certainly held different reasons to different degrees. Yet, all who finished a piece of furniture likely felt that “real thrill of accomplishment,” that “joy of

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> Carman, interview.

creation,” which encouraged a return to the workshop for more. The emotions experienced by the furniture-makers are also felt by those who admire and continue to use the products of these hobbyists’ evening-and-weekend sweat. As long as the reminders of mid-twentieth century avocational furniture-makers remain, through family histories and the physical remnants of plan books, magazines, tools, and the furniture itself, the pride of giving birth to a useful and hopefully beautiful piece after a long labor from the wood-cutting stage to the staining stage, will be remembered.

