



Chester
Carnett

beyond the narrow sky

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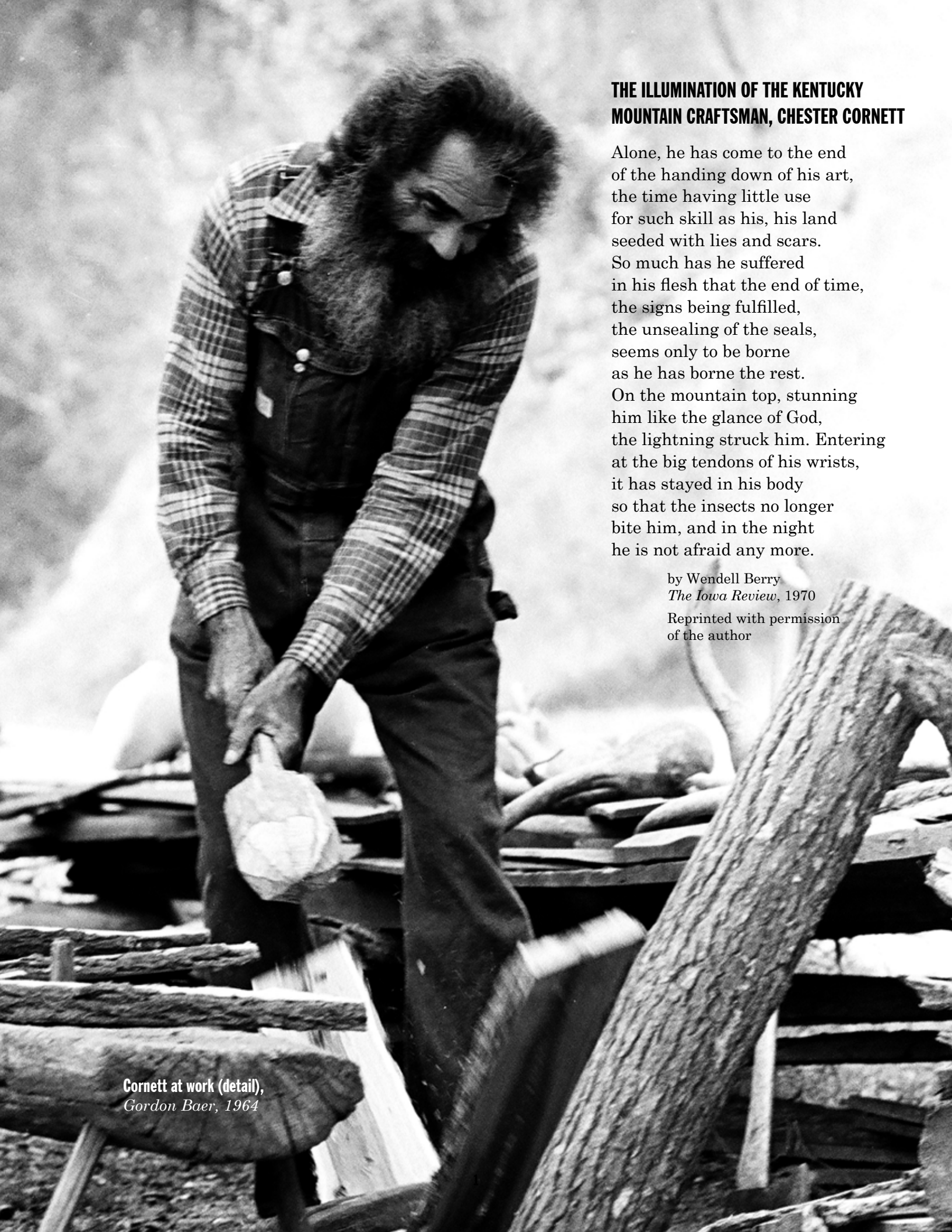


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Sharon Butcher
Back Cover Art: *Cornett Bending Back Slats*, Gordon Baer, 1964



THE ILLUMINATION OF THE KENTUCKY MOUNTAIN CRAFTSMAN, CHESTER CORNETT

Alone, he has come to the end
of the handing down of his art,
the time having little use
for such skill as his, his land
seeded with lies and scars.
So much has he suffered
in his flesh that the end of time,
the signs being fulfilled,
the unsealing of the seals,
seems only to be borne
as he has borne the rest.
On the mountain top, stunning
him like the glance of God,
the lightning struck him. Entering
at the big tendons of his wrists,
it has stayed in his body
so that the insects no longer
bite him, and in the night
he is not afraid any more.

by Wendell Berry
The Iowa Review, 1970

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Cornett at work (detail),
Gordon Baer, 1964



Sitting Chair, 1948, White Oak,
KFAC Permanent Collection

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In the summer of 2010, KFAC received an e-mail from Debbie Tuggle Pendley, which began, “I live at Dwarf, Kentucky and heard that you might be looking for a Chester Cornett chair.” It got our attention. As it turned out, Debbie was writing on behalf of her friend, Shirley Williams, who was in possession of a Cornett sitting chair that her father had purchased from the artist in 1948. We headed south and met with Shirley and Debbie. Shirley had known Chester growing up, and she had written one of the first articles about him while working for *The Courier-Journal* newspaper in Louisville. We came back from Dwarf with a chair and with stories.

Soon after, we got to wondering whatever became of the “Nixon Chair,” a dramatic sassafras rocker that Cornett had presented to the President on a trip to the White House. We were thrilled to find that the Nixon Presidential Library and Museum in Yorba Linda, California still held it in their collection. That led us to call Michael Owen Jones, the folklorist who penned the classic book about Chester Cornett. Over the speaker phone, Dr. Jones asked us what we planned to do, and we weren’t quite ready to answer that question.

This set us on a three-year long course of research and travel. We made calls, chased down rumors, and made numerous trips to southeast Kentucky and Cincinnati, digging in junk stores and talking to people who had known Cornett. Through those who knew and supported him during the 1960s and 1970s, a picture of the artist began to emerge. And, along the way, we found chairs, wonderful chairs. While Chester Cornett made hundreds of chairs during his lifetime, we have been able to track down and identify only about three dozen. Thankfully, a small number of museums and private individuals had recognized Cornett’s mastery as a craftsman and his unique artistic vision and had held on to some of the finest examples of his work. Through them this exhibition was made real.

The lenders for this exhibition are Appalshop, Gordon Baer and Shirley VanAbbema, Jim and Pam Benedict, Wendell Berry, Joe and Doc Boggs, Dwight and Sharon Butcher, Bill and Josephine Richardson, Gordon and Kathy Salchow, Peter Seidel, Diane Greer Smart, the Art Museum at the University of Kentucky, the Kentucky Museum at Western Kentucky University, and the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum. We also thank Shirley Williams and Marc Bibee for allowing us to acquire chairs from each of them.

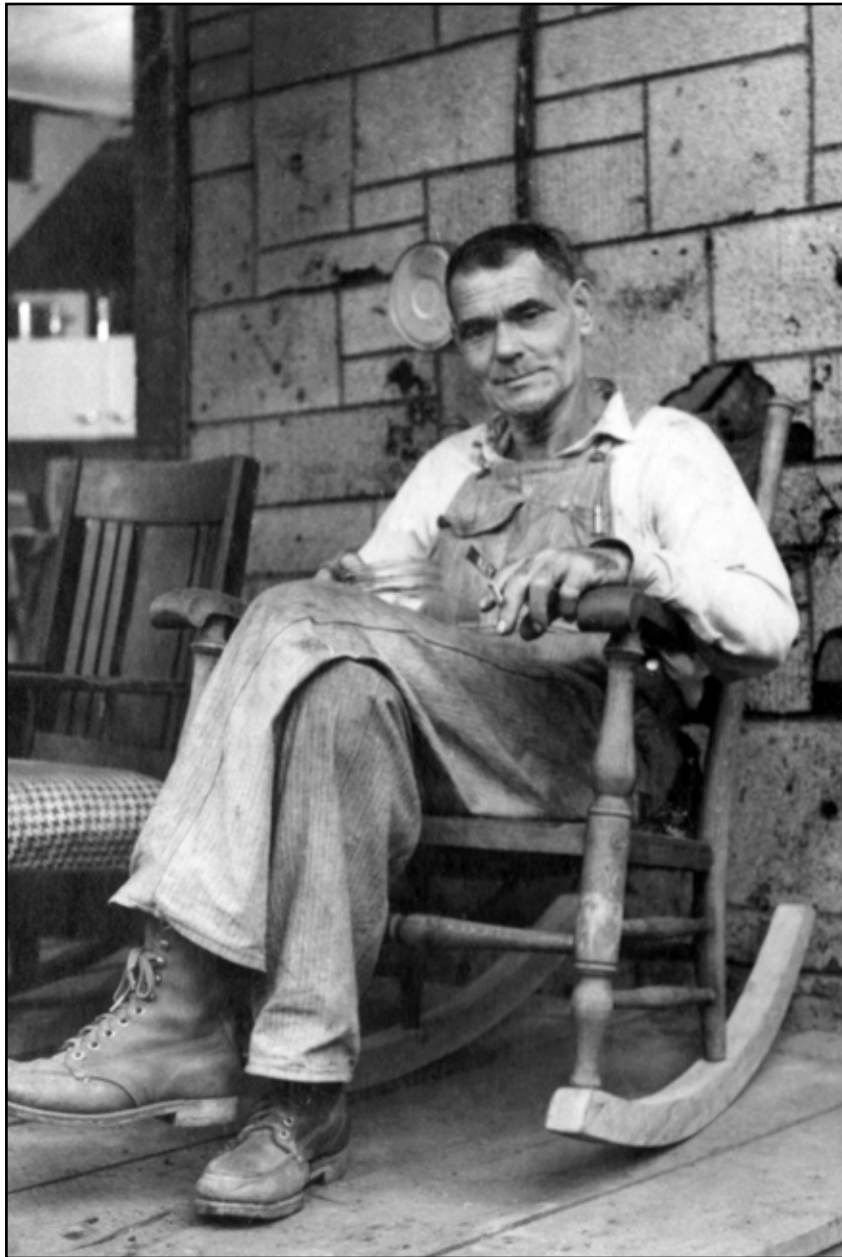
Media provided by Appalshop, Gordon Baer, Jim and Pam Benedict, Joe Boggs and the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum provide valuable context for this exhibition and the accompanying catalog.

In addition, this project would not have been possible without a significant grant from the National Endowment for the Arts or without the support and trust of our parent institution, Morehead State University.

Finally, we would like to thank Herb E. Smith, Elizabeth Barrett, Richard Bellando, Steve Graves, Michael Owen Jones, Gurney Norman, and Joe and Diane Bottoni, who all generously contributed their time to the research for this exhibition.

INTRODUCTION

Chester Cornett lived from 1913 to 1981 and spent his adult life making chairs. He was, as Michael Owen Jones wrote, “King of the chairmakers,”¹ but trying to reconstruct his life, to understand the course it took three decades after his death, requires imagination and much supposition. Cornett was a complex man, a conflicted human being, whose life revolved around a craft that had been in existence for centuries, meeting a basic human need. We can only imagine the world he was born into or what that world looked like seen through his eyes.



Cornett on Porch, *Gordon Baer, 1960s, Courtesy of Joe Boggs*

After World War II, America entered a period of unprecedented economic growth. In one of history's cruel ironies, the blossoming of America's heartland industrial machine undermined the basic relevance of traditional hand craft. Cornett lived through this upheaval to see his traditional market dwindle and his once-valued craft reduced to an anachronism. And yet, he continued to make chairs. This was the challenge faced by the practitioners of most traditional crafts. To survive they had to adapt and in doing so found themselves making things for a very different, discretionary market that regarded their products in a fundamentally different way.

Cornett received a flurry of attention from the press in 1965. In the spring, the *Hazard Herald* published an article by Gurney Norman, "Rare Hand-Made Furniture Produced By Bearded Chairmaker." Then, in June, an article appeared in Louisville's *Courier-Journal* written by Shirley Williams, formerly a native of Dwarf where Cornett lived for a period while she was growing up. Cornett was the inspiration for an essay by Wendell Berry, "The Tyranny of Charity," which appeared in *The Nation*.² The *National Observer* published an article by Dave Hacker with photographs by Gordon Baer,³ who had chanced upon Cornett around 1963 while on press assignment in the mountains. Baer took insightful photographs of the chair maker and would remain in contact up until Cornett's death.⁴

Also in 1965, a doctoral student in folklore at Indiana University, Michael Owen Jones,⁵ embarked on a comprehensive study of chair making in southeast Kentucky. Cornett became the central focus of his dissertation. The dissertation became a book, *The Hand Made Object and its Maker*,⁶ later expanded and published as *Craftsman of the Cumberlands*. Dr. Jones's research was an important resource for this project.

However, Cornett was alive and making chairs north of the Ohio River for ten years after Jones concluded his study in the late 1960s. Therefore, we talked to people who knew him during that time, watched a brief 8mm home movie of Cornett,⁷ and studied *Hand Carved*, a documentary film made with Cornett's cooperation by Herb E. Smith and Elizabeth Barrett of Appalshop during 1977 and 1978.⁸

People have vivid memories of Chester Cornett. Most who knew him consider his chairs "works of art." But, despite periodic scholarly attention granted his work, Cornett has, for the most part, remained an obscure, if respected, footnote in the history of American craft. The goals of this exhibition are to update what is already known about Cornett, to present his accomplishments to new generations, and to explain how he came to be the "King of the chair makers."

~ Adrian Swain, March, 2014



Sitting Chair, 1970s, Sassafras,
Collection of Jim & Pam Benedict



Sitting Chair, 1970s, Walnut,
Collection of Wendell Berry



Sitting Chairs, 1970s, Sassafras,
Collection of Bill & Josephine Richardson

BEYOND THE NARROW SKY

Chester Cornett made chairs. “But are they ‘just chairs,’” asked Gurney Norman, “pieces of anonymous furniture to sit on and otherwise ignore? Most of the few people who buy original Cornett chairs think not.”⁹

The third of four children, he was born on September the 4, 1913 on Kings Creek in Letcher County, Kentucky. With their parents separated, he and his brother, Kenton, were raised by their mother and her family in a secluded homestead on the side of Pine Mountain in Harlan County. His grandfather and his uncle, Linden, were chair makers.

Watching and listening, he learned about chairs and different types of wood, how to select a tree and sample the wood before he cut it down.¹⁰ He learned about tools, and how to weave strips of hickory bark to make a sturdy seat. He learned how to shape and bend the different component parts and the best timing for joining them into a finished chair. By the time he was grown, he was making chairs of his own.

When war broke out in the Pacific, Cornett was drafted into the army, “plucked from the protective mountain hollow where he was born and reared, and dropped onto one of the fog-shrouded islands in the Aleutian chain for ‘two years, seven months, and twenty eight days’.”¹¹ After the war, he returned to making chairs in eastern Kentucky.

In May, 1970, Cornett moved into a vacant, run-down house near Elizabethtown, Ohio just west of Cincinnati.¹² Earlier in the day his nephews, Duane and Doc Boggs, had loaded his tools, his shaving horse, and other worldly belongings into the bed of their pickup truck and moved him off Troublesome Creek. He was almost 57 years of age. Transplanted into unfamiliar surroundings and facing an uncertain future, Cornett’s move had less to do with new horizons than with what he hoped to leave behind.



Planes Flying Over Alaskan Military Base (detail),
Chester Cornett, early 1940s, Courtesy of Joe Boggs



Cornett Talking with Visitors, Gordon Baer, 1960s. Courtesy of Joe Boggs

...Chester was the 'King of the chairmakers' and Chester knew it. He had believed it for years, and he said as much in the chairs that he built, but few would listen to his message.¹³

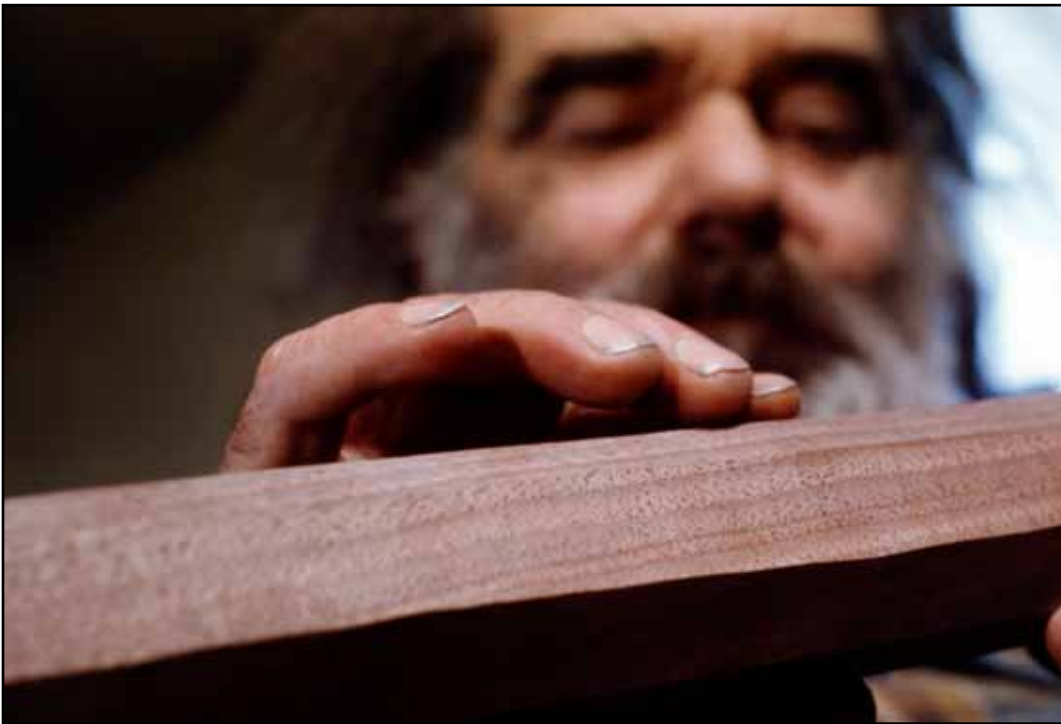
—Michael Owen Jones

Cornett began his adult life well-versed in the traditional craft of chair making. When he was growing up, a chair maker was well regarded for his work, but that was about to change. Why did Cornett cling to a craft that was fading in importance within his community? What forces were at work that led him to continue making chairs and to make them unlike any seen before? For answers we must look to historical trends that were underway and to Cornett's unique personality.

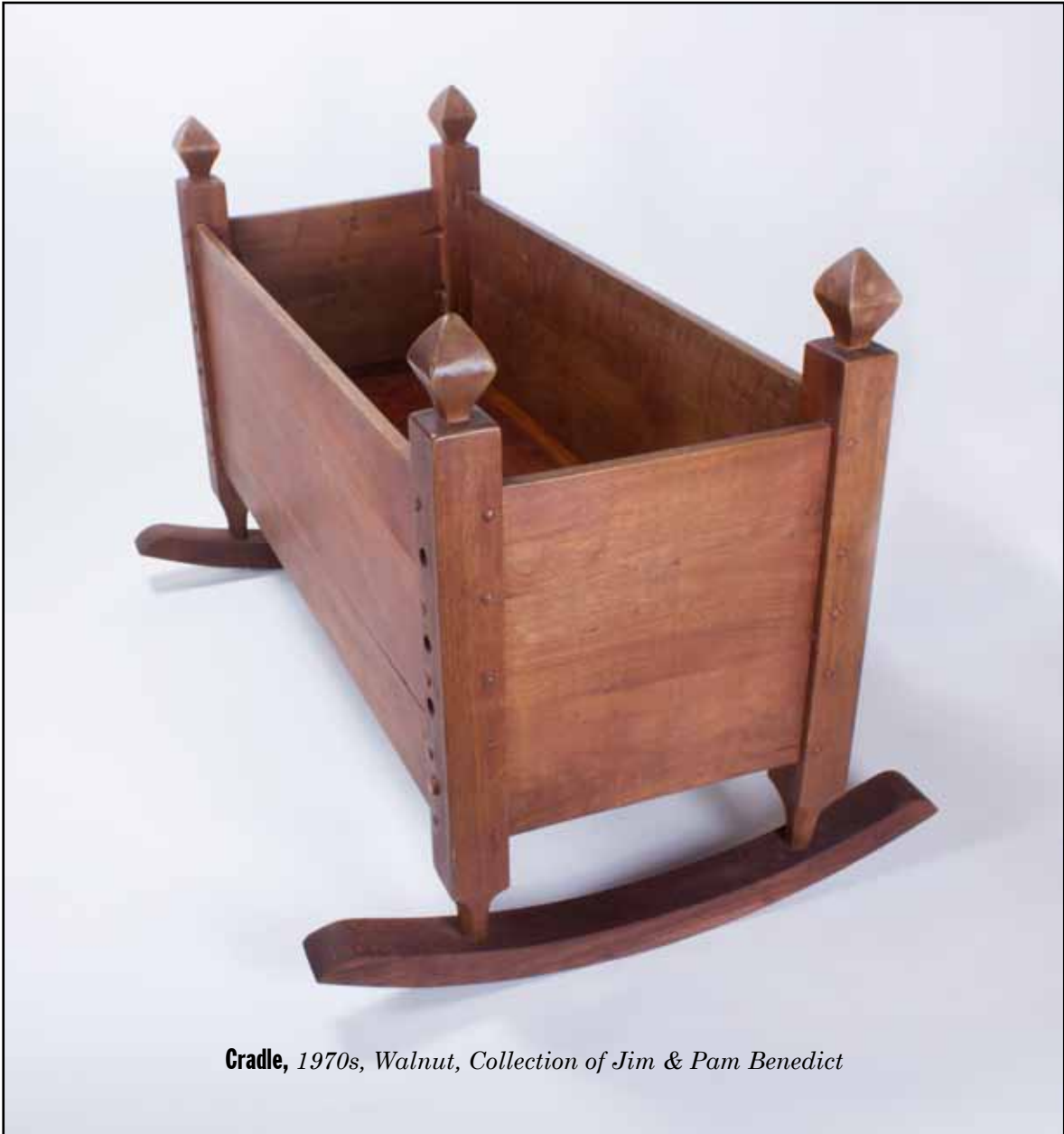
Cornett was always different. "...Chester's problems really began when he was a child. He was a loner who kept to himself and spent most of his time making things, partly because other people would have little to do with him."¹⁴ Michael Owen Jones devoted an entire chapter, "Man Of Constant Sorrow," to Cornett's personality, his difficulties fitting in, dealing with marriage and parenthood, and the ongoing struggle to make ends meet.¹⁵



Cornett Playing Handmade Guitar, 1970s, Courtesy of Jim & Pam Benedict



Cornett Examining Chair Post, 1970s, Courtesy of Jim & Pam Benedict



Cradle, 1970s, Walnut, Collection of Jim & Pam Benedict

While on leave prior to shipping out for Alaska, Cornett married a girl named Sarah. Whether or not he suffered from a nervous condition prior to World War II, he was clearly traumatized when he was discharged and returned home, on a thirty percent psychiatric disability, to find that Sarah no longer wanted anything to do with him. So, he went to stay with his mother. But his grip on reality was tenuous. He was fearful of other people and hid out by himself most of the time in a barn.¹⁶

In the fall of 1945 he met Ruth, abandoned mother of an infant child, and soon they were living together as husband and wife. Perhaps rejection was what threw them together, because time would show that they shared little else in common. In most respects Ruth and Chester were polar opposites. Their life together was fraught with conflict, and she left him on several occasions. Ruth was gregarious and longed for company; Chester craved solitude and was happiest when working alone. She hoped for a few material niceties, while he seemed content to settle for the spare existence in which he had been raised.

Ruth and Chester rented an apartment in Hazard, where he briefly held a succession of jobs. He was a coal miner for about a week, a janitor for four or five months, and for a short spell worked setting utility poles for the power company. Whether out of stubbornness, nerves, or an innate inability to conform, Cornett seemed unwilling to punch a time clock or work to a schedule set by someone else. Soon they moved to the country in Knott County, and he began again to make chairs. They were together for over twenty years. Ruth gave birth to several more children, many of whom developed severe disabilities as they entered adolescence. Chester would later deny that he was actually the father of any of them.¹⁷



Cornett at Home in Elizabethtown, OH
Gordon Salchow, 1970s



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Certain events in Chester's life are the stuff of legend, and accounts sometimes vary depending upon the version given later to different people. While the actual sequence is unclear, three things occurred in the late 1960s that finally tipped the balance in his life: 1) His workshop was destroyed by a tornado, or high winds—Chester was convinced someone had bombed it; 2) The “ark,” a flat bottomed boat that he had built and moored nearby on the Kentucky River, was washed away in a flood;¹⁸ and 3) Ruth left him for the final time in February, 1969, taking the children with her. With the foundations of his personal and professional life finally eroded, he descended into a state of depression, lying in bed and eating rarely for months on end. This was the situation in 1970 when he moved to Elizabethtown, Ohio.

In the mid-1970s he moved into Cincinnati and was still living there when Elizabeth Barrett and Herb E. Smith filmed him in 1978 for Appalshop's classic documentary *Hand Carved*. But his health was declining, and he eventually moved across the Indiana state line, close again to the Boggs family. When his health deteriorated further, he was hospitalized. He died in 1981.

Given his background, it was natural for Cornett to be making chairs. But in many respects, he could not have gone into it as a source of income at a worse point in time. Industrial expansion following World War II had enticed many people to leave eastern Kentucky for factory jobs in Ohio, Michigan and Indiana. When he had started out, a good handmade chair was valued in the community, but after the war, factory-made furniture was more widely available. And, it was *modern*, which, in the minds of many people, meant that it was intrinsically better. Factory production and the shrinking population hastened a demographic shift in the region away from hand-made wares towards the kind of goods people were now consuming elsewhere in the country (Why would you want that old stuff, when you could have something nice?).



Two-in-One Rocker, 1978, *Sweet Gum*, Collection of Appalshop

In eastern Kentucky, Chester had struggled as a chair maker, like a drowning man clinging to a largely obsolete craft against the tides of progress and modernization. By the mid-1960s, up to half his orders were from people living out-of-state, boosted perhaps by publicity in the *National Observer*.¹⁹ Cornett kept a ledger to record financial transactions and income and expenditures on everything from rocking chairs to tons of coal. Entries in 1955 show regular (“reglar”) rockers priced from \$70 to \$90. But, it could easily be a buyer’s market when the artist was short of money. Earlier that year he priced a similar rocking chair at \$25 and sold it half-price for \$12.50. Adjusted for inflation, even the \$90 received for that one rocker would price out now at under \$800,²⁰ pauper’s wages in 2014 for work that took four to six weeks to complete.

Cornett’s chairs appealed most strongly to educated, artistically-inclined people, who viewed them as art—finely-designed, expertly-crafted objects of beauty that were earthy, rugged and authentic. There were a lot more of those people in the greater Cincinnati area, enough to keep him working until 1978. Relocating to that area, with its open landscape and unfamiliar culture, created physical distance from experiences that had burdened him so heavily in the past. Although he spoke wistfully of the Kentucky mountains over the following years and was taken back there on occasion, it was Cincinnati that enabled him to shed some portion of his burden and be more widely recognized for his work.



Saddle Seat Rocker, 1971, Red Oak,
Collection of Peter Seidel



Rocker, 1960s, Cherry,
Collection of Wendell Berry



Rocker, 1971, *Maple*, Collection of Diane Greer Smart

Gordon Baer, who had photographed Cornett extensively on Troublesome Creek, reconnected with him in Elizabethtown and sometimes took friends to meet him. A young architect friend, Peter Seidel, met him this way in 1971 and Cornett made him a chair. "...[T]he house was very dilapidated. When it rained it leaked," Seidel recalls.²¹ Another of Baer's friends was Diane Greer Smart, who was thoroughly impressed by Cornett and his artistry, and began regular visits on her own. Smart, organizing Cincinnati's first Appalachian Festival, recognized that Chester would be a valuable attraction and talked him into participating in 1971. Introverted by nature, Cornett had already demonstrated in public at the 'Berea Fair' in 1967 and 1968.²²

He agreed to participate providing Williams drove him in each morning from Elizabethtown and returned him home at night.²³ He was paid for his time; in 1973 he received \$66 for 33 hours.²⁴ In a sectioned off area at the festival, he set up his shaving horse and his tools and went to work, mostly in silence.

Cornett became the star of the show because he was viewed as an authentic mountain craftsman. He also came across as authentic because of the physical image he presented, which was not an image at all, just who he was. He was a somewhat unusual sight in Cincinnati with his bushy hair, a long beard, and rugged working hands. Smart said, "They were huge, tight...big fingers...you could just tell that they worked strong every day."²⁵ Physically he was identified as a mountain man, the real thing, and his work confirmed that identity.

Many of those who came to know him were invigorated by their association with Cornett and spread the word to acquaintances and friends. Jim and Pam Benedict first met Cornett in 1971 when they were in town looking for a place to live because Jim was about to start work at Proctor and Gamble. The Appalachian Festival was underway downtown, and they went to check it out. Chester was a revelation, and they were entranced. Once settled, they sought out Chester and ordered their first chair.²⁶

The Benedicts visited Cornett many times and eagerly rounded up new customers. Notations such as “Like Jim Benedict’s” or “Like Pam Benedict’s” appear alongside at least fourteen orders marked in Cornett’s ledger between 1973 and ’78. The Benedicts enjoyed promoting Chester’s chairs to their friends because “you knew you were trying to get somebody to buy something that you’d never have to apologize for...something special, made by somebody special.”²⁷ Eventually they would own several sitting chairs and rockers, along with a cradle, a high chair, a small table, and other items.

Back in Kentucky several people recalled seeing him set up on the sidewalk with chairs for sale, but once he relocated, he rarely had chairs on hand because his time was taken up filling orders. Most commissions were for rocking chairs to be made in accordance with the customer’s particular needs. Even though his income never rose much above subsistence level, Cornett no longer lacked for customers.

Saddle Seat Rocker, 1972, Cherry,
Collection of Jim & Pam Benedict





Large Rocker, 1970s, Honduran Mahogany,
Collection of Gordon & Kathy Salchow

If you wanted a Cornett, chair he would have to make it for you, which might take up to six weeks, when your turn arrived. Experience had conditioned him to be wary of customers, so you first had to gain his trust. Many people retain distinct memories of their first encounter, getting to know the chair maker and the courtship they underwent before he agreed to make their chair.

Some were most struck by what they saw as his impoverished living situation, others by how they had to visit repeatedly before he agreed to make their chairs. Some spoke of Cornett's wariness, others of his gentle, other-worldly nature. Several remembered his warmth and kindness towards their children. "You know he talked to him like he was a grown person even though he was only about four," recalled Diane Greer Smart.²⁸ Reticent in a crowd, Cornett could be warm and generous one-on-one.

Gordon and Kathy Salchow saw two Cornett chairs in an exhibit at the University of Cincinnati. They went to visit him and he agreed to make them a chair. They took him to a specialty lumber yard where he picked out a large slab of mahogany. Although unfamiliar with mahogany, they recall that he loved that piece of wood. Six weeks and several visits later, they picked up their chair, a majestic, throne-like rocker. Cornett also insisted they take home what was left of the mahogany. Several years later they took the wood back and he made them a slightly smaller version of the original chair and turned what remained into a child-size rocker that he presented as a gift to their daughter.

The Salchows' collection grew over the years to include many chairs designed by 20th century modernists.²⁹ In among these classic pieces, sits the large Cornett rocker. When people come to visit, says Gordon, "They walk right by those designer chairs and immediately question us about Chester's chair." And, while several of the designer chairs show signs of wear, neither of their Cornett chairs "are in any way physically different, structurally different from what they were to begin with."³⁰

There was something very special, almost magical, about ordering a chair from Cornett. Starting with a basic agreement on the form and size and the type of woods to be used, executing the concept gave Cornett room for creative interpretation. This may explain why many customers in the 1970s made periodic visits, so they could see what was actually emerging while their chair was under construction. This gave Cornett the opportunity to be creative, to experiment with new approaches to old problems. It sanctioned innovation and enabled him to continue expanding his knowledge and his understanding of what form a chair might take. Cornett's time in Cincinnati offered more opportunities to explore new ideas, because most of his customers understood and anticipated that their chair might well feature some new element of design. But, Cornett had been experimenting as long as he had been making chairs.

In 1961 he made the first "two-in-one" rocking chair. The chair has an octagonal seat, which required eight legs for support, one at each angle of the octagon, and four rockers instead of the normal two. Burt Bibee noticed this big, unusual rocker among other chairs Chester had on a sidewalk in Hazard. He had priced the chair at \$65. It had a very wide seat and Bibee was a big man, so he haggled with Cornett and bought it for \$50 in cash, with the balance traded in office supplies from Bibee's store. Burt's brother wanted one just like it, so Chester returned and sized up Burt's chair without a ruler, using his hands—noting the length of a leg as so many widths of his hand, the distance between back-slats in widths of his thumb, etc.—and later produced an almost identical chair.³¹



Original Two-in-One Rocker, *early 1960s, Walnut & Ash, KFAC Permanent Collection*
Gift/purchase from Marc Bibee and Bibee Family



Rocker, 1976, Walnut, Collection of Jim and Pam Benedict

Simply put, Cornett's mind was consumed with chairs. Michael Owen Jones wrote of Cornett, in 1967:

[T]he germ of an idea sprang up in his mind and, in a sudden flash of inspiration, he knew that he could make yet another kind of chair. A more complete image of this new design came to him that night as he lay in bed in a semiconscious state. He was unable to sleep all that night, he said, for this design was the first major new one he had thought of in two years...³²

“Of all classes of furniture, the chair presents the greatest structural challenges, and this fact has led to a variety of types attempting to meet these challenges in different ways.”³³ Artist and skilled woodworker, Steve Graves, maintains that the stress—pounds of pressure per square inch—borne by a chair exceeds that required of the average house. Imagine the downward pressure exerted when a 200 pound man tilts a chair backwards on the tips of the two back legs. Form must follow function, so design innovation must always be subordinate to structural integrity, if a chair is to remain intact over extended use. The chair maker has to work to avoid weakening the structure of a chair.

Designed in consultation, a Cornett seat might be deep or shallow, narrow or wide, high or low. The back rest could curve ever so slightly or be rounded and quite deep. Arm rests were also shaped and positioned to best fit the customer's particular needs. Cornett was consumed by his work, always in search of new solutions to age-old problems of form and function.

He grew up making chairs from green, unseasoned wood, which will shrink and contract in width as it dries out. If you drill a rung hole in a green chair leg, the hole will shrink as the leg dries, tightening up around the rung. The same principle applies with the back slats of a chair. But, after he arrived in Cincinnati, green wood was not readily available. Without the benefits of shrinkage, he had to improvise to best secure the joints in chairs that were made from seasoned wood. And so, he was constantly experimenting with different types of wood and the color variations they might offer in a chair. The chairs featured in this exhibition illustrate many of his innovations.

Cornett made extensive use of pegs, which help secure the joints in a chair, locking the joined parts in place for added stability. As the years went by, he utilized pegs more and more. The *Sitting Chair* made in 1948 (pg. 2) has one peg inserted in either end of each back slat for a total of six pegs. Sitting chairs from the 1970s have as many as thirty pegs in them. The *Original Two-in-One Rocker*, made in the early 1960s, includes thirty-two pegs. The rocking chair documented in the Appalshop film in 1978 features no less than ninety-eight! In his later chairs Cornett generally used two pegs to secure each end of a back-slat. Where a single peg, used earlier, ran through the middle of a slat, later peg holes were drilled so that they bored out a half-moon shaped notch on the upper and lower edges, reducing the chances of splitting the slat and enabling him to use two pegs.

Pegs became a conscious part of Cornett's visual vocabulary. They could be narrow and inconspicuous or wide and prominent. Some were cut flush with the surface, while others stood out with a bold, rounded head. Pegs were often made out of a different woods punctuating a chair with dots of contrasting color.



Cornett made all sorts of different chairs over the years along with other related furniture: sitting chairs, rockers, small tables, sewing rockers, cradles and stools. At times, in Kentucky, he wove oak splint baskets and made gourd dippers. He also constructed several gourd musical instruments. But, of all the chairs he made, with all the variations he incorporated into them, a few stand out as distinct and clearly different.

In 1962 or 1963, he made the *Mayor's Chair*, originally referred to as the "President's Chair."³⁴ Cornett made it for presentation to President Kennedy, but JFK was assassinated before it could be delivered. The *Mayor's Chair* was unlike any he had made before. It has four rockers, and in place of arm rests, Cornett constructed enclosed, rectangular, lidded compartments. At the front of the seat is a pull-out foot rest. The entire body of the chair—the seat, back panels, lidded compartments, foot rest and the empty space between the seat and the rockers—are all sheathed, basket like, in panels of woven hickory bark. The rectangular, lidded compartments appear almost like-wings, extending outwards on either side of the chair.





Mayor's Chair, 1963, Walnut & Maple with Hickory Splinting
Collection of The Art Museum at the University of Kentucky;
gift of Willie Dawahare, A.F. Dawahare, Dee Dawahare, Frank Dawahare, Hoover
Dawahare, Martin Dawahare, Woodrow Dawahare, Mrs. Nellie Kawaja, Mrs. Mary
Dawahare, and Mrs. Sybil Ajalat 1980.18

Cornett's interest in making a chair for a president of the United States came to fruition in the early 1970s when he made a rocking chair for President Nixon. With the help of Cincinnati Congressman Walter E. Powell, Cornett presented an extravagant sassafras rocker to Nixon during a private audience in the Oval Office in the spring of 1973. It is safe to assume that Richard Nixon had never met anyone like Chester Cornett, or vice versa. The Nixon Rocker has a permanent home at the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum in Yorba Linda, California.



Cornett Meets the President, 1973,
Courtesy of the Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum



Presidential Rocker, 1973, Sassafras,
Collection of the Richard Nixon Presidential Library & Museum

Making the *Braced Rocker*, he experimented with additional structural support, adding two slender struts that run between the back of the rockers up towards the top the back legs. Rather than being imbedded, the rungs and back slats, run all the way through, visible on the outer sides. Perhaps the braces were added to enable him to make a lighter chair because all of the individual chair parts are relatively thin. As a result, the chair is full of light, airy and elegant in appearance. The *Braced Rocker* includes fifty-eight pegs.

The *Bookcase Rocker* (below), begun in 1965 and completed in 1966, was made entirely of milled lumber. Letters written to Michael Owen Jones, while the chair was being made, reveal Cornett uncomfortably adrift in his creative process. He did not know what the chair would turn out to be. He was making it, but the chair seemed to be leading the way.³⁵ And, the chair is quite strange. It has a high back, wooden seat, and four rockers. Three vertical back panels rise above the seat. Extension panels on either side each support three shelves. The entire chair is boxed-in with flat boards. Clearly, books would fall out if the rocking chair was used as suggested, but the wing-like side panels, eight posts with pointed finials, and the additional, spike-like decoration on top between the finials, make it an extraordinary, almost disquieting object to look at.³⁶ It is quite clear that Cornett had ceased to be a strictly traditional chair maker at least a decade before he left eastern Kentucky.



Cornett with Banjos and Bookcase Rocker,
1960s. Gordon Baer.
Courtesy of Jim & Pam Benedict



**Braced Rocker, 1964, Maple & White Oak, Collection of The Kentucky Museum
at Western Kentucky University**

Snake Rocker, 1970s, Honduran Mahogany,
Collection of Dwight & Sharon Butcher



From the early 1960s onwards, many of his chairs illustrate conceptual leaps in design. Cornett was consumed with chairs, but chairs were also his livelihood. It is very likely, therefore, that some sense of customer expectations continued to play a significant role in determining what he would make. As a result, much of his innovation was subtle, but the chairs described above illustrate that he was capable of surrendering to the creative process, taking innovation to extreme.

In the early 1970s, not long after he relocated, he made the *Snake Chair* or *Dream Rocker*. Among all of Cornett's chairs, the *Snake Chair* stands separate for two reasons. First of all, every visible wooden part of the chair curves back and forth, made to resemble a slithering snake. In addition, they are incised with a carved, diamond pattern, against which the pegs, each carved with a diamond shaped head, are virtually invisible. The "snakes" are thick which makes the chair appear quite massive. Two different colors of inset wood were used to create the pupil and iris of eyes. The *Snake Chair* is spectacular and dramatic, Cornett's masterpiece.³⁷



Cincinnati provided a safe haven for the troubled chair maker, away from events that had set him spiritually and emotionally adrift. When he moved into Camp Washington, a poor, blue collar neighborhood down near the Ohio River just west of downtown, he was accepted as part of the community. It is likely that many residents of Camp Washington had roots in Appalachia.³⁸ Here he made time for the children in the neighborhood who were curious about what he did. He befriended them; sometimes he let them try their hand. He made gifts for them at Christmas. In return, they decorated his tree, and he treated them with kindness and respect.³⁹ He was admired for his work by educated customers, but he was evidently trusted and respected in the neighborhood by people who, perhaps, were culturally not so different from himself. And, it is possible that his interaction with the neighborhood children helped soothe some of the pain he still harbored from his desertion by Ruth. His time in Camp Washington may well have been the happiest period of his life since early childhood.



Child's Two-in-One Rocker, 1974, Walnut, Collection of Jim & Pam Benedict



Child's Two-in-One Rocker, 1970s, White Oak, Collection of Gordon Baer



Child's Saddle Seat Rocker, 1972, Cherry, Collection of Jim & Pam Benedict



Cornett with Neighborhood Children, Camp Washington, 1970s, Courtesy of Jim & Pam Benedict



Small Table, 1970s, Walnut,
Collection of Jim & Pam Benedict



Stool, 1970s, Oak & Ash,
Collection of Wendell Berry



Stool, 1971, Poplar,
Collection of Diane Greer Smart

When Cornett took sick in the late 1970s, the Boggs family found him a home close to them, near Greendale, Indiana. Illness stripped him of the one thing that had real meaning in his life. Unable to make chairs, his frustration would sometimes boil over in bouts of strange or unpredictable behavior. Chester was aging and getting sicker all the time. His great nephew, Joe, just a teenager at the time, was the family member to whom Chester could best relate. It was Joe to whom he gave his shaving horse and his draw knife, and Joe became guardian of Cornett's photo albums and ledger. Joe had the temperament. He now makes finely crafted chairs of his own. When his health deteriorated, Cornett was hospitalized, and he died in 1981 at a Veterans Administration hospice across the river in Fort Thomas, Kentucky.

It is impossible to know what kind of chair maker Chester Cornett might have been had his life been different. But, from what we can interpret from the detailed accounts given by Michael Owen Jones, and those who came to know him during the last ten years of his life, chair making would appear to have made his life tolerable, providing one area over which he could really exercise control. He was clearly consumed by the practical challenges of making chairs, almost to the point of obsession, even though that destined him to live on the edge of poverty.

Chester Cornett was king of the chair makers. Through chairs he was able to reconfigure the world, in an abstract sense. This enabled him to survive beyond the isolation of childhood, past the hard knocks of war, and to navigate through the psychological trials and emotional disappointments that characterized his life as an adult. Chester Cornett took refuge in chairs and that provided meaning in his life. All of that is history. What remains is a trail of truly remarkable chairs.

~ Adrian Swain, March, 2014



Sawed-Off Rocker, 1960s-1980, Red Oak, Collection of Joe Boggs

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Jones, Michael Owen, PhD, *Craftsman of the Cumberlands*, p. 110, (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky) 1989.
- ² Berry, Wendell, *The Tyranny of Charity*, *The Nation*, September 27, 1965, pp. 161-163.
- ³ Hacker, Dave, photographs by Gordon Baer, *Artisan in Wood: Mr. Cornett, The Chair Man*, *The National Observer*, December 6, 1965, p. 16
- ⁴ Baer, Gordon, conversation with Matt Collinsworth and Adrian Swain, September 13, 2013. KFAC Archives
- ⁵ Michael Owen Jones, Professor Emeritus at the University of California Los Angeles.
- ⁶ Jones, Michael Owen, *The Hand Made object and its Maker*, (Los Angeles: University of California Press) 1975
- ⁷ KFAC Archives, Courtesy of Gurney Norman and Appalshop. Shot circa 1968, the film shows Cornett aboard the ark he built, moored then on the Kentucky River. The film clarified one particular point of note: the boat's carved Christ Crucified figurehead, is an earlier, different version of the same subject now in the collection of the American Folk Art Museum which was displayed outside Cornett's home in Elizabethtown, Ohio.
- ⁸ Smith, Herb E., and Barrett, Elizabeth, *Hand Carved*, movie, (Whitesburg, Kentucky: Appalshop) 1981.
- ⁹ Norman, Gurney, *Rare Hand-Made Furniture Produced By Bearded Chairmaker*, (Hazard, Kentucky: Hazard Herald) May, 1965
- ¹⁰ Ibid, Smith, Herb E./Barrett, Elizabeth
- ¹¹ Ibid, Jones, Michael Owen, *Craftsman of the Cumberlands*, p. 80
- ¹² Ibid, Smith, Herb E./Barrett, Elizabeth
- ¹³ Ibid, Jones, Michael Owen, p. 110
- ¹⁴ Ibid, Jones, Michael Owen, p. 80
- ¹⁵ Ibid, Jones, Michael Owen, pp. 80-112
- ¹⁶ Boggs, Doc, conversation with Joe Boggs, Matt Collinsworth and Adrian Swain, Greendale Indiana, September 16, 2013. KFAC Archives
- ¹⁷ Boggs, Doc, Ibid
- ¹⁸ Smith, Herb E., conversation with Elizabeth Barrett, Matt Collinsworth and Adrian Swain, Whitesburg, Kentucky, February 16, 2011. KFAC Archives. Smith recalls another account in which the boat was to be used to ferry a local man up and down the river as a platform from which he would preach. The collaboration fell apart and Cornett salvaged the wood for other uses. Another version had Cornett planning a trip down the Kentucky, Ohio and Mississippi Rivers to the Gulf of Mexico.
- ¹⁹ Wendell Berry, phone conversation with Matt Collinsworth, February 5, 2014.
- ²⁰ Source: CPI Inflation Calculator, Bureau of Labor Statistics, US Department of Labor, http://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm
- ²¹ Seidel, Peter, conversation with Adrian Swain, Cincinnati, August 21, 2013. KFAC archives.
- ²² Bellando, Richard, phone conversation with Adrian Swain, February 14, 2013. The Kentucky Guild of Artists and Craftsmen has staged fairs at Indian Fort Theater outside the town of Berea since 1967. Bellando was Director of KGAC at the time.
- ²³ Smart, Diane Greer, conversation with Adrian Swain, August 15, 2013. KFAC Archives
- ²⁴ Cornett Ledger, p. 43. KFAC archives.
- ²⁵ Graves, Steven Rogers, conversation with Adrian Swain, July 29, 2013. KFAC Archives.
- ²⁶ Ibid, Cornett Ledger, p. 39.
- ²⁷ Benedict, Jim, conversation with Matt Collinsworth, Arvada, Colorado, November, 2013. KFAC Archives.
- ²⁸ Ibid, Smart, Diane Greer
- ²⁹ Salchow, Gordon, phone conversation with Adrian Swain, January 28, 2014.
- ³⁰ Salchow, Gordon and Kathy, conversation with Adrian Swain, August 21, 2013. KFAC Archives.
- ³¹ Bibee, Beverly, telephone conversation with Adrian Swain, February 17, 2011
- ³² Ibid, Jones, Michael Owen, pp. 66-67
- ³³ Blackburn, Graham, *A Short History Of Chairs*, *Fine Wood Working Magazine* online, (Newtown, CT: Taunton Press) Sept 12, 2005, <http://www.finewoodworking.com/woodworking-plans/article/a-short-history-of-chairs.aspx>
- ³⁴ To relieve back pain, John F. Kennedy used a type of rocking chair known as the "Carolina Rocker," manufactured by the P & P Chair Company of Troutman, North Carolina since the late 1920s, on the recommendation of Dr. Janet Travell. JFK was so widely publicized sitting in the chair that it came to be known as the "Kennedy Rocker." <http://www.thekennedyrocker.com/history.html>
- ³⁵ Ibid, Jones, Michael Owen, p. 51
- ³⁶ The Bookcase Rocker is in the permanent collection at the Mathers Museum of World Cultures at Indiana University, a gift to the museum from Michael Owen Jones. Chairs from the collection at the Mathers Museum were not made available for this exhibition.
- ³⁷ Ibid, Bellando, Richard. Bellando recalls seeing Cornett at work on the Snake Chair in Cincinnati at the Appalachian Festival in 1973.
- ³⁸ Cincinnati has a significant population with origins in Appalachia. "Appalachian" is among several demographic identities given special consideration by the Ohio Arts Council when reviewing grant applications.
- ³⁹ Ibid, Smith, Herb E. and Barrett, Elizabeth, *Hand Carved*

CHECKLIST

1. Two-In-One Rocker, 1978, Sweet Gum, Collection of Appalshop
2. Mayor's Chair, 1963, Walnut and Maple with Hickory Splinting, Collection of The Art Museum at the University of Kentucky; gift of Willie Dawahare, A.F. Dawahare, Dee Dawahare, Frank Dawahare, Hoover Dawahare, Martin Dawahare, Woodrow Dawahare, Mrs. Nellie Kawaja, Mrs. Mary Dawahare, and Mrs. Sybil Ajalat 1980.18
3. Child's Two-In-One Rocker, 1970s, White Oak, Collection of Gordon Baer
4. Cherry Saddle Seat Rocker, 1972, Collection of Jim and Pam Benedict
5. Child's Saddle Seat Rocker, 1972, Cherry, Collection of Jim and Pam Benedict
6. Child's Two-In-One Rocker, 1974, Walnut, Collection of Jim and Pam Benedict
7. Cradle, 1972, Walnut, Collection of Jim and Pam Benedict
8. Rocker, 1976, Walnut, Collection of Jim and Pam Benedict
9. Small Table, Mid-1970s, Walnut, Collection of Jim and Pam Benedict
10. Sitting Chair, Mid-1970s, Sassafras, Collection of Jim and Pam Benedict
11. Rocker, 1960s, Cherry, Collection of Wendell Berry
12. Sitting Chair, 1964, Walnut, Wendell Berry
13. Stool, 1960s, Oak & Ash, Collection of Wendell Berry
14. Banjo, 1970s, Gourd and Mixed Woods, Collection of Joe Boggs
15. Sawed-Off Rocker, 1960s, Red Oak, Collection of Joe Boggs
16. Snake Rocker, 1970s, Honduran Mahogany, Collection of Dwight and Sharon Butcher
17. Original Two-In-One Rocker, Early 1960s, Walnut and Ash, Kentucky Folk Art Center Permanent Collection. Gift/purchase from Marc Bibee and Bibee Family
18. Sitting Chair, 1948, White Oak, Kentucky Folk Art Center Permanent Collection
19. Braced Rocker, 1964, Maple & White Oak, Collection of Kentucky Museum at Western Kentucky University
20. Presidential Rocker, 1973, Sassafras, Collection of Richard Nixon Presidential Library and Museum
21. Sitting Chair, 1970s, Sassafras, Collection of Bill and Josephine Richardson
22. Sitting Chair, 1970s, Sassafras, Collection of Bill and Josephine Richardson
23. Large Mahogany Rocker, 1973, Collection of Gordon & Kathy Salchow (on display at KFAC only)
24. Mahogany Rocker, 1976, Collection of Gordon & Kathy Salchow (only on display at touring venues)
25. Saddle Seat Rocker, 1971, Red Oak, Collection of Peter Seidel
26. Maple Rocker, 1972, Collection of Diane Greer Smart
27. Stool, 1971, Poplar, Collection of Diane Greer Smart

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