

Jimmy Carter, Woodworker

A visit with the former president, and drawings of his porch swing

by Jim Cummins

Jimmy Carter grew up in rural Georgia, joined the Navy and served in nuclear submarines, became governor of Georgia, then was elected 39th President of the United States. On the private side, Carter has been quietly making furniture for more than thirty-five years. He has turned himself into a creditable cabinetmaker who sits on his own chairs, eats at his own table, and sleeps in his own bed. When the talk turns to woodworking, he relaxes, laughs a lot, and could swap sawdust stories with anybody.

Carter says he never got much time in the shop while he was president. "The White House has a fully equipped woodworking shop," he told me, "but I never found time to use it." About all he was able to do was to search out the carpenters' shed at Camp David and steal some time to work there on weekends. Whenever he travels to a foreign country, he goes out of his way to visit local woodworkers. He treasures some woodworkerly souvenirs: a primitive African lathe, like the one shown in *FWW* #21; a carvers' hatchet from Togo; a set of Chinese gouges; some lathe tools made from files. A missionary once gave him a box of agricultural tools, among which were a primitive plow, a hand-wrought hooked knife for cutting sugar cane, and an adze. Carter showed me the plowshare and reflected that when he was a child in Plains, "People right down the road were working with the same basic design." In those pre-electric days, woodworking was one of the chores everybody took for granted—Carter can't even recall when he first began to use hand tools.

As a teenager, he joined the Future Farmers of America. Like the 4-H Clubs, the FFA gives instruction in the skills a farmer needs. One way of finding out whether the lessons have stuck is to stage contests. In Carter's day, one competition required each teenager to determine from plans the length, pitch and valley angle of a rafter, then with hand tools to cut it to fit. Carter says he



Carter, a woodworker for more than 35 years, gave away much of his early work. He turned pro with these chairs, which brought \$41,000 at a benefit auction last October.

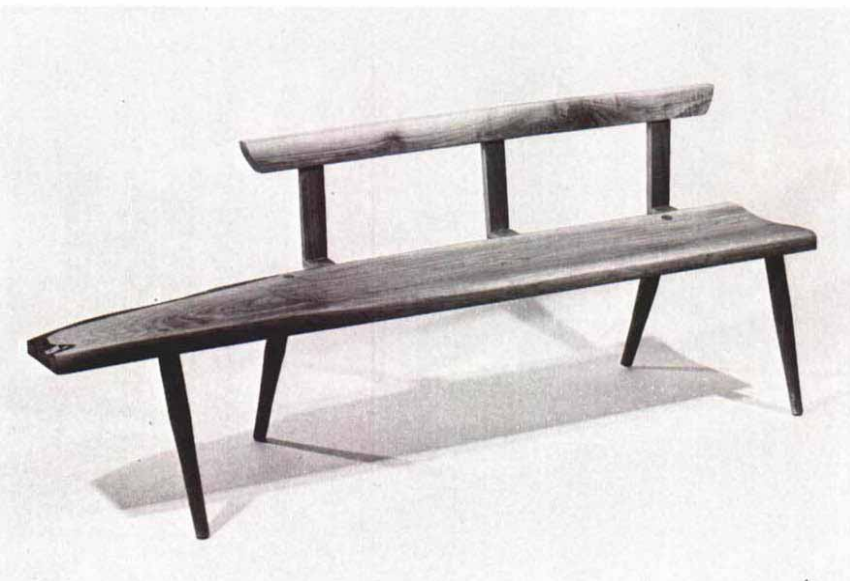
Jimmy Carter



Jimmy Carter



Courtesy of the Atlanta Historical Society



Carter's output has included quick, sturdy pieces such as this chaise (top) and couch (center), built many years ago to meet his growing family's needs. The more recent slab bench (bottom) was photographed while on loan to the Atlanta Historical Society. The pieces reflect Carter's changing perceptions of what furniture should be.

remembers that particular contest out of dozens of others because one year he was able to win it.

In 1948, when the Navy sent him and his young wife, Rosalynn, to Hawaii, they rented an unfurnished apartment and Carter began making furniture out of necessity. The Navy maintained a shop for the servicemen to use, with a resident cabinetmaker to oversee the work and to help out. Carter learned mortise-and-tenon joinery and was encouraged to work with hardwoods. He remembers that one of his first pieces was an oak dining table. Most of this early furniture was left behind when the family moved back to the United States in 1950. With a raise in salary, they could now afford to buy factory furniture from Sears. But Carter soon discovered the Navy shop on his new base and resumed woodworking—this time more for relaxation than from necessity. He built other pieces, including a white-oak hi-fi cabinet which he and his family have enjoyed for more than thirty years.

After the Navy, when the family moved back to Plains, Carter had no real shop of his own, just the sort of tools that everybody picks up along the way: a circular saw, an electric drill, random hand tools. But there was a carpenter's shed down at the family peanut warehouse, and Carter worked there in his spare time, as well as whenever necessary to keep the business running. Elevators would break down, the roof would leak, a floor would need patching. Carter did the engineering designs, and, often as not, swung his hammer with the rest of the crew.

Like many young fathers, when the kids needed desks, cabinets and bunk beds, Carter made them. When the family moved or the kids left home, the Carters "loaned" the furniture to friends. After passing from hand to hand a few times, the pieces sort of faded away, as old furniture does. Somebody recently told Carter that some of the beds had finally been donated to the local nursing home, but he hasn't had a chance to run over and see for himself. When I asked if he would even recognize those beds after all these years, he replied, "Of course."

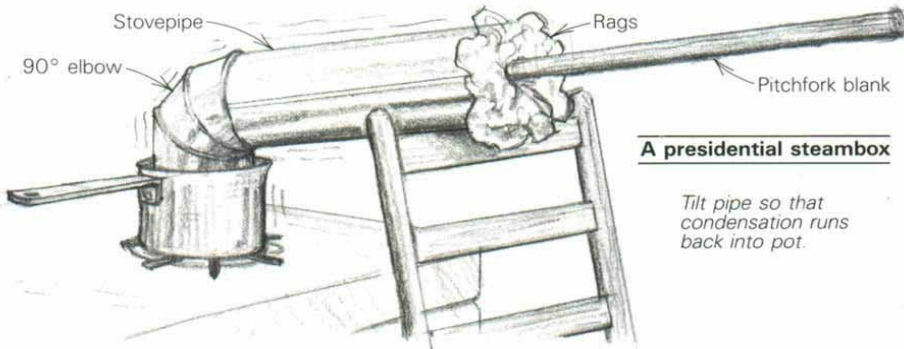
He took me through his house, and if I'd been forced to guess which pieces were his own work, I would have missed more than a few. Over the years, Carter has made about fifty pieces of



Jimmy Carter



After years of working in borrowed quarters and carpenters' sheds, Carter finally got a fully-equipped shop of his own, a gift from his staff when he left the White House. Much of his recent work, such as this armoire in 19th-century Southern style, was made to fill his vacation cabin near the Tennessee border.



furniture in many styles, and has given away about half of them. One of his earliest, a chaise longue that sits in the sunporch, is vastly overbuilt of southern yellow pine, most likely out of the common beginners' fear that homemade furniture will mysteriously fall apart someday. The chaise (shown on the facing page) works, though. It may look clunky, but its wooden wheels won't wear out, or sink into the lawn. Its garden-gate-style leg rest and backrest will adjust to fit a weary body, and—unlike some modern aluminum lawn furniture—won't collapse and throw you out of the chair. To the old chaise, comfort is everything and visual harmony is irrelevant.

In contrast, the recent piece beside it on the porch is a walnut-slab bench, cantilevered out at one end, with a stylish offset backrest (bottom photo, facing page). It could be an engineer's example of the minimal use of structural wood,

and a designer's example of the maximum use of pure tree. Carter looks at it critically, and says he wishes he'd made the legs at more of an angle, that from the front they're too straight. These days, he doesn't have to give a thought to what is actually a complicated technical feat—setting a shouldered, angled leg through a mortise at any orientation he likes.

When Carter left the White House, his staff pooled money for a going-away present. Nobody was allowed to contribute more than \$100, but the total added up to about \$8,000 worth of tools and machines from Sears. It was the first real shop he had ever had, and he set it up in his garage: the Carters don't own an automobile because they ride in Secret Service vehicles. Back in private life, Carter began writing his memoirs, and during the 18 months this took, he offset his time at the word processor by working several hours in the

shop every day. The work was both therapeutic and practical. He needed furniture again, this time to fill a vacation cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains, up near the Tennessee border.

Rosalynn determined what they needed, then gave her husband a list: a lazy-susan table, a deacon's bench, two armoires (one of which is shown at left), chairs, some stools, stands and beds. Carter took to the list with great pleasure, and designed the pieces after traditional Southern furniture he'd seen and liked. Much of the wood was recycled yellow-pine boards, salvaged from the old house where Rosalynn was born. Carter counted the annual rings in the lumber and figured that the trees had been growing 350 years ago.

Carter doesn't usually bother with detailed plans. If he sees something, he can build it. He borrows designs that take his fancy, and he's tried out a lot of tricks from the masters: a slab table in his den owes a lot to George Nakashima, his bed's headboard is a variation of Art Heinkel's in *Fine Woodworking Design Book Two*, his living room coffee table is pure Tage Frid. He says he'd "like to hear Krenov explain just how he makes one of those cabinets."

One wall of Carter's shop is stacked with pine, poplar, ash, maple and walnut boards, with a few exotic turning blocks tucked away. Hand tools hang on the walls. His workbench and shaving horse are both near the center. His planer is set up so that he can run long pieces out through the garage door. The most complicated piece of equipment is a Zinken combination machine—a tablesaw, jointer, planer, mortiser and shaper—that was given to him at a recent trade show in Atlanta. His Sears tablesaw is still in service, but he keeps it fitted with a dado blade. Except for the Zinken, Carter's shop looks like a Sears centerfold—jointer, lathe, planer, bandsaw, just about everything. These machines have been his mainstay, and any complaints are on the order of: "I wish the bandsaw could take a stiffer blade for resawing." Like any other woodworker, when the job demands it he hankers for industrial-grade equipment.

Yet Carter unhesitatingly says his favorite tools are a drawknife and spokeshaves. I suspect that he enjoys green woodworking so much because it's the most personal involvement with wood itself. He starts with the tree, choosing one from the woodlot bordering his

Building a porch swing

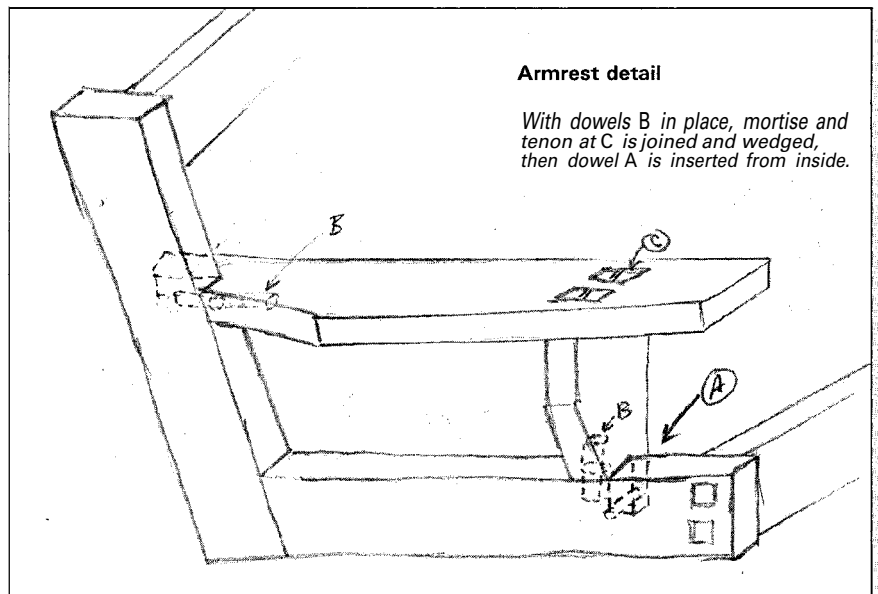
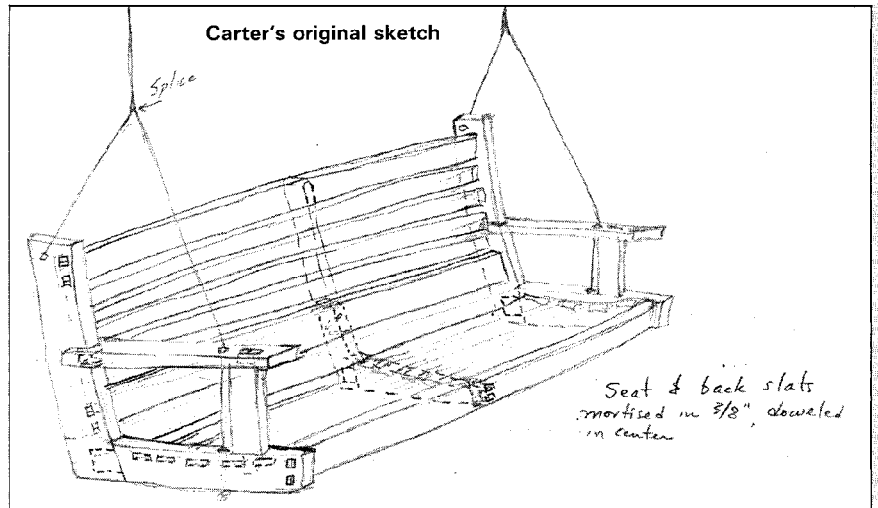
by Jimmy Carter

We wanted a swing for the front porch of our mountain cabin, so on one of my business trips I sketched the design on an old file folder. As my drawing shows, I wanted the swing to have no metal fasteners, be suspended by grass rope, and be strong enough for heavy use but light enough to be taken down easily and moved inside when we weren't there. Later I made a few changes in the arms and arm supports to improve stability and strength, as seen in the second sketch. The photos on these two pages show a couple of other changes that evolved during construction: In the center frame member, I cut a notch for the lowest back rail, for more rigidity. And, in several places, I decided that single tenons would be more than strong enough.

The wood is ash. The back and seat slats are 60 in. long. Some are 3 in. wide and some are 2 in., but all are $\frac{5}{8}$ in. thick. I adjusted the spacing of the slats so that the armrests could pass between them where they're doweled into the frame. The front rail is $\frac{3}{4}$ in. thick, as are the other main frame parts. The whole seat is 18 in. deep and 17 in. high, and the armrest supports are 6 in. long, shoulder to shoulder.

I derived the configuration of seat and back from our most comfortable chair. Although the back slopes only 5° from vertical in relation to the seat, the entire swing is also tilted back on its support ropes, which I adjusted to the best angle before permanently knotting the ends.

The whole frame is locked together by mortise-and-tenon joints, wedged when appropriate, and the centers of the slats are doweled to prevent shifting or warping. I routed the blind mortises for the seat and back slats, and glued all the joints. The most difficult task was putting the whole thing together—it's somewhat like a complicated jigsaw puzzle. Two coats of polyurethane varnish protect the ash boards from the moisture of a roaring mountain stream twenty feet from the porch. A soft pillow, the swing's movement and the water's music make sleeping easy. □

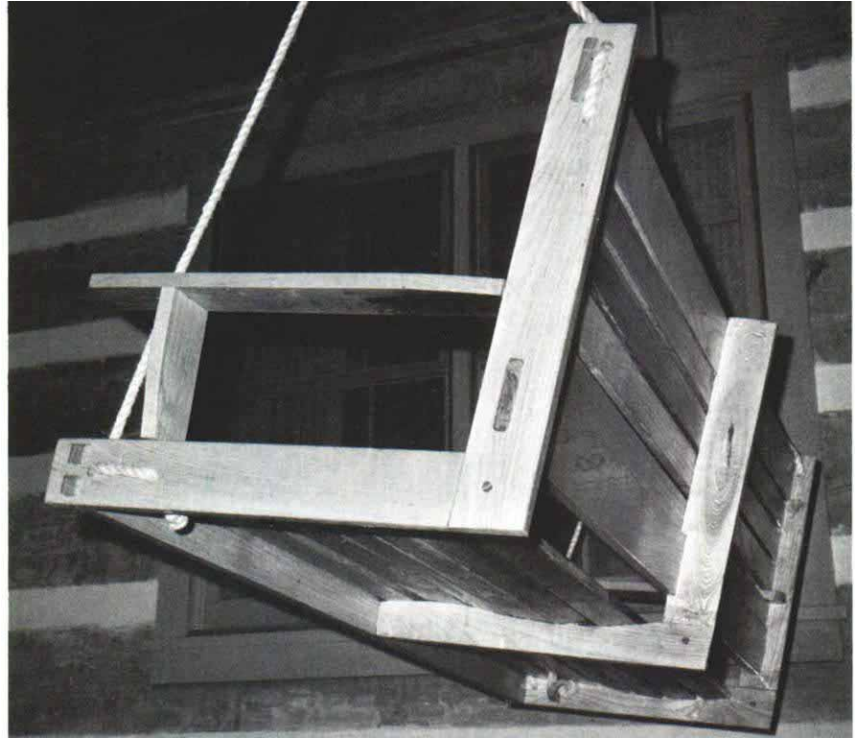


The finished swing at Carter's cabin in northern Georgia.

160-acre backyard, most of which is farm (the house sits at the front corner). In addition to southern pines and the pecans that are such an important cash crop in central Georgia, Carter's backyard boasts several kinds of oak, a few black cherry trees, some poplar and lots of prime hickory. Carter had just finished a yard rake and a couple of pitchforks, so I asked him what sort of steambox he'd used to bend the tines. He pulled out a length of stovepipe with a 90° elbow on the end (drawing, p. 67). "You just put the elbow in a pot on the stove and prop up the end of the pipe so that the condensed steam runs back into the pot. Then you plug the other end with rags," Carter said. "For longer work, just add another length of pipe." I told Carter that it was as ingenious a method as any I'd seen, and asked if he'd invented it. He shook his head. "I don't really know. I probably read about it someplace."

It's Carter's nature to keep busy and to keep trying new things. When an old chair in the living room lost its woven-cane seat, he bought an instruction book and some cane and reweave it himself. He'd take the chair along when he visited his mother, who was in the hospital, and they'd watch ball games together while he wove. I asked him how long it took to do the job. "Two ball games," he said. I asked him if he ever wanted to cane another. He laughed. "One was enough."

Carter says that when he's woodworking, everything else goes out of his mind. His other hobbies affect him the same way. Formerly oil painting and golf and now fly fishing top the list. "Fly fishing is my passion," he says. He ties his own flies, and has an old roll-top desk in his den overflowing with fur and feathers. As we talked fishing, there wasn't a favorite Catskill stream of mine which he wasn't familiar with, even to knowing the average size of the trout, and whether things were getting better or worse. His woodworking lore is similarly encyclopedic, which is one of the reasons he's so unassuming about his own skills—he thoroughly knows the work of the masters, and gets a kick out of emulating them, but he knows he's no Nakashima. Carter also keeps a sense of humor about his work. Hanging on his shop wall, for instance, is the first dovetail joint he ever cut. "I followed the steps in Tage Frid's book, and the joint fit together so well," he grins, "I framed it."



On the facing page, Carter explains how he made this porch swing. This end view shows joinery details, how he curved the seat, and the positions of the rope holes.

Personal appearances, travel, and political business had been cutting into his planned woodworking time, Carter told me when I visited him late last September. His shop was covered with a thin layer of sawdust, and under that was a thin layer of rust. The set of Chinese scoop gouges he showed me had ragged edges, the marks of a woodworker pressed for time—if a tool dulls, it's all too tempting to pick up the next one in the set and use that for a while. Yet he'd managed to finish an ash swing for the porch of the cabin (which he tells about building on the facing page). Typically, he drew up some sketchy plans while waiting for an airplane, then stole enough time to do the job.

Since my visit, he's started another book, and things are getting back to normal. He tells me that his chisels and other cutting tools are back in condition, and that he's been finishing up a maple rocking cradle with woven cane sides for his forthcoming fourth grandchild.

Carter has never tried to make political hay from his woodworking hobby, but recent publicity has let people know about it. Now whenever he travels, somebody is likely to come up to him and say, "I'm a woodworker, too." He has never sold his work, with the exception of four green-wood chairs auctioned to benefit the Carter Presidential Center at Emory University in Atlanta (photo, p. 65). Carter felled the trees and peeled the bark, then split, steamed and bent the wood. He cut and pinned the joints,

then wove the seats. The chairs match a set of six that he made for the cabin, and Carter ran out of hickory bark for the last two chairs. Chairmakers prepare their bark in the spring and early summer—when the sap is up and the bark slides off easily—and any full-time chairmaker puts enough in reserve to last the year. Carter could have gotten surplus bark from other chairmakers by making a phone call, but instead he felled an autumn-dry tree and prepared another batch of his own—a painstaking, difficult job at that time of year. The two pairs of chairs netted more than \$40,000. Having made ten, he has no present urge to make more.

Carter knows that his furniture will be valuable, so these days he signs his pieces as he makes them. He signs little else. Rosalynn is forced to sign the family's checks, for instance, because the ex-president's signature is worth too much money on the collectors' market. If Carter signed the checks, people wouldn't cash the smaller ones, and the bankbook would never balance. Recently, an old family friend did the Carters a small favor, and Carter asked if there was anything he could do in return. "Well," said the friend, "I've got this old table and two benches you gave me years ago. You could come on over and sign them." Carter laughed, went on over, and did. □

Jim Cummins is associate editor at Fine Woodworking.