

Cabinetmaker/Writer

An early pioneer still going strong

by John Kelsey



Andy Marlow chuckles and says a lot of people think that's him standing there grinning on the cover of his book *Good Furniture You Can Make Yourself*. The large man on the cover is wearing a neat, pin-striped apron and would have you think he has just made a Colonial-style rocking chair with a plane and a box of screws.

Marlow is a short, wiry man of 72 who wears old clothes and a peaked cap when he works in his shop out behind the house, and dons a necktie when he quits for dinner. Not only is the cover guy not Marlow, the chair isn't in the book. It looks as if it came from an unpainted furniture warehouse. The chairs that are in the book are much finer.

Although the work was all done by Marlow, the book has gone through so many changes that he stops just short of disowning it. For one thing, he never met his co-author, F. E. Hoard. For another, it was a nicer book when it was first published in 1952 (in hardcover) under the title *The Cabinetmaker's Treasury*. For a third, the co-author and the later resale for its current paperback reincarnation have chipped the royalties away.

That's what can happen when a fine cabinetmaker, desiring only to pass along a little of what he has so painstakingly learned, turns his hand to writing. Another sort of man would have given up on books and stayed with what he knew, but that man wouldn't have been able to master the difficult and exacting art of cabinetry, either. Marlow says he was so dissatisfied that he promptly started on his second book, *Fine Furniture for the Amateur Cabinetmaker*, a tour-de-force on the art of carving in furniture. Published in 1955, it remains the only step-by-step treatment available on how to carve piecrust tables, ball-and-claw feet and

the like. Marlow wrote it all himself, took all the pictures, and made all the drawings, besides making all the furniture in the first place. He followed with *The Early American Furniture-maker's Manual* in 1973 and finished with a book on inlaying, to be published next year. Marlow has great talent; his wife calls it "a God-given art."

Recall also that 25 years ago, when Marlow started writing about how to make fine furniture, there were no other books on the subject. There was little in print but *Popular Mechanics*, *Home Craftsman* magazine and treasures (like Wallace Nutting's) on antique furniture for the collector.

It began with a checkerboard

Marlow got his start during the depression in York, Pa., where he has lived ever since. One day when he didn't have a job, but had picked up a couple of pieces of walnut, he decided he'd like to make a little checkerboard table to pass the time.

"I went to this old fellow who had a shop, an old man I'd known all my life. He had a small shop like I have now and he made pedestal lamps with wooden posts that were all the rage then, and every once in a while he'd do a piece of furniture.

"I asked him, 'Sam, could I make this checkerboard table in your shop?' and he said, 'Sure, you can't use the machines, but you can do anything else you like.' I made the table and he offered me a job.

"I wasn't there long," Marlow recalls, "before I realized what he was doing: Somebody would give him a picture of a piece of furniture they wanted, and he couldn't get to first base. He had no design ability at all, he could only copy from an existing piece. So I wasn't there long before he came

over to me with some pictures in his hand and a sheepish look on his face and asked me if I could make this. And I did.

"And about a year later I opened my own shop. Sam was a good carver and he taught me that, but I was on my own afterward. As I tell everybody, it's a natural ability to understand design and proportion."

His first shop was in the garage of his brother-in-law, rent-free. Those first jobs, well, "when you start you'll take anything." Later on, when his reputation had spread a bit and people knew Marlow could and would make what he promised, it got a little easier. "But it was tough and competitive right up until it was time to think about semi-retirement," he says. "You always have to convince the customer you can make a nice piece he'll like, sight unseen. That means a reputation and that takes a long time, years of work. . . and you have to be a good salesman; you're selling yourself as well as your work."

Today, Marlow lives on a busy thoroughfare on the west side of York, in Pennsylvania Dutch country. His showroom is the enclosed sunporch of his house and his living room. All of the furniture in the house was made by Marlow, and much of it, although in daily use, has a little tag with its price. If you want it, he'll move his stuff out of the drawers, polish it up and it's yours.

Even after all these years, most of Marlow's customers don't come from York itself, but from Philadelphia, Washington and New England.

"When prospective customers want to know right away how much a chest will cost, that's when I turn them off. They're bargain shoppers," Marlow says. "I don't take a deposit and I never build anything I don't like myself and

couldn't live with, but it never has happened that a person didn't pick up furniture he had ordered."

Marlow's shop is small; about as wide and a little longer than the garage with which it shares a wall. He doesn't have elaborate machinery: a large band saw, a table saw with small jointer, a lathe, a shaper, a jig saw and a variety of sanders including a panel sander with wooden drive wheels that he cobbled together himself. He buys his wood thickness-planed and proceeds from there. The day I visited, he was fitting narrow drawers in a medium-sized chest being made for a collector for storing his treasures. Marlow said he would spend about a week on it, the dovetails taking the longest. He shoots the drawer sides before fitting the bottoms.

Most of Marlow's work is reproduction of period pieces or work in a classic style. But he understands design so well that a photograph in a book is all he needs. "You soon get so you can take a good photo and reproduce a piece without ever seeing it," he says. This is not to be confused with following mechanical drawings. To make an antique reproduction from only a photograph and an idea of overall size, the maker has to understand the design thoroughly. He must redesign those elements that are hidden, which he may never have seen, and every proportion must work as well as the original piece worked.

For example, Marlow has an enormous highboy, a replica of one made in 1760 that now sits in the John Brown House in Newport, R. I. It has the same proportions and the same difficult carving as the original—but it's a foot shorter. The original stood almost nine feet high, and wouldn't fit in a modern house.

Says Marlow, "Chairs are the hardest, no doubt about that. If you can make a good chair, you can make anything. But if one of the elements in a carved chair back, a Hepplewhite or a Sheraton, is just an eighth of an inch off, it's a dud."

In such work the ball-and-claw foot is the signature of the carver. "Every man makes them his own way, and the cuts I make are just the natural way for me to do it. It's so hard to make cuts that aren't natural for you. . . . I can try some other way, but I will succeed only more or less."