

Stanley A Briggs

Side 1:

He was born in the Asheville area in 1927 and grew up in his father's furniture work shop. He made handcrafted furniture from solid wood.

[15] In 1936 his father received a bonus as a veteran, built a shop next to his house and purchased tools and material. Stanley spent all of his free time helping. While his father stayed busy there was little money. [Eliada and Bertie Briggs]

[31] He did not have to serve in WWII and after college went to the Morgan Manufacturing Co. [Swannanoa, NC and Woodfin, NC] (see Morgan tape and photos) where he took over the business management and later the engineering and designing department. He worked there for 12 years (He shows me photo of Morgan, see my file.) [Robert K. Morgan]

[57] He worked 10-12 hours a day and was advised by his doctor to take time out. He was "man of the year." He took 6 weeks off, went to his father's shop.

[90] He had worked with Morgan in their Swannanoa and Woodfin plants. (Woodfin closed in 1949 after the peak of the demand passed). Morgan did some furniture assembly but mainly sold parts to other companies, i.e. Sears.

[118] When he was with his father he helped when needed but basically did his own work.

[127] He tells about a corner cupboard his father made out of solid wood, even the back panel. (He sold them for \$35 - about \$1.00 a day, which put food on the table for 4 children.) He saw one of these cupboards in an antique store for \$2,750. His father during the war had trouble getting lumber.

[180] In order to control the humidity he lights a fire in his stove (burns saw dust - heavenly smell) even in summer.

[194] When he set up business for himself in 1958 he could buy all the walnut lumber he wanted for about 30 cents a foot. Today it would cost \$4-\$5 a foot.

[202] Select hardwood is used for furniture making. Mahogany, which comes from the rainforests of South America, is becoming scarce as 12,500 square miles of forest is being destroyed every year and this has been going on for 10 years. There is no system of reserve control. A world-wide warming trend has been noted.

[222] The U.S. Forest Service sees to it that we have more timber standing than is being used. This, along with inflation, has caused price increase in lumber. Lumbermen can clear cut private property but, on government land, only mature trees are released for harvesting. Damaged small trees have to be paid for.

[257] Not much lumber for furniture comes from south of South Carolina. Hand made solid furniture sold for less than the same amount of lumber today, because of the rise in prices.

[292] After WWII the German forests were depleted and a process of gluing sawdust and chips together, using heat and pressure, created particle board. The Morgans built the 3rd plant in the world in Black Mountain in the '50s - this was later sold to American Glue Co. and then moved out of the area. Today most furniture made uses particle board for its core. Unless a special glue is used, the particle board can swell if it becomes damp, thus destroying the piece. Formaldehyde is used in the process of manufacturing and can have physical effects if furniture is confined in an unventilated space.

[371] High Point, NC, the furniture capital of the country, has two shows a year. A group of environmentalists boycotted the show one year because some solid furniture was shown - not using particle board and saving lumber.

[412] Particle board is so well camouflaged under a premium veneer and molding that often the sales person can't tell whether or not a piece of furniture is solid.

[492] If he produced more saw dust in his operation - a trailer load a month rather than a trailer load a year - he would sell it to particle board producers. The saw dust and chips were simply burned as late as 1958. This, plus the burning of coal, is no longer permitted by the E.P.A. (Environmental Protection Agency) while there is no restriction on wood stoves, most have catalytic converters. This method re-burns material at high heat. He said "the E.P.A. is doing a swell job of protecting our environment to make sure that our soil is kept clean, that our ground water is kept clean and our air is kept clean. I know it's become a political football, but they are doing a tremendous job."

Side 2:

Automobiles are required to have catalytic converters reaching 1200 degrees. They now are available for wood burning stoves.

[2/38] People who are building furniture at home often call him for advice. This, while it brings no money, creates good will and he does work from all over the U.S.

[2/44] A lady from Foxcroft, Maine, who knew of his work from a previous visit to this area, phoned him when she had a house fire which damaged her antiques. She and her husband trucked over 100 pieces to him for repair.

[2/154] He, and a man who has been with him for over 30 years, are able to restore antiques so that the repair cannot be detected. An original Duncan Phyfe chair, evaluated at \$17,000, would have been ready for the garbage man had he not been able to match the broken leg.

[2/231] Antiques should be cleaned up but dents and signs of wear should be kept.

[2/271] Over the years he has tried to train young people. The work is hard and dirty and he cannot compete with wages paid by industry - \$15 to \$20 an hour. His overhead has climbed and, the last time he had 10 men working for him, he was constantly filling forms and making reports. He enjoys his work and never wants to retire.

[2/422] He was asked by Graham to make pews for The Cove but suggested that a concern specializing in this would be better than all hand work. Graham and his wife sent Polaroid photos from England of two pulpits which would cost \$1,000. He advised them to buy at this price as the lumber to reproduce them would cost them more than that. They were 150 years old, he restored them and made 6 chairs to go with them. He made one chair as a sample and asked Mrs. Graham, her daughter and Miller, director of the Cove, to approve it before making more. Mrs. Graham sat in the chair and said : "Mr. Briggs, this is perfect." Graham was in Russia at the time. [Billy Graham, Ruth Graham, Jerry Miller]

[2/510] He specializes in anything you can't find someplace else and can compete in price with antique reproductions and solid wood furniture.

[2/530] Most furniture on the market is disposable.

[2/550] He is constructing an oriental four poster bed. The frame will be covered with fabric. He has his upholstery work farmed out to Mr. Gross as he found having this type of work done under his roof not successful. (see snap shot)

[2/603] While he has had no formal training in different designs, he is observant and has books on various styles used historically.

Tape II, Side 1:

Although he had no formal training in design, he worked for famous designers and was recommended to Frank Lloyd Wright by Drexel. He could hardly believe his ears when Wright phoned him from Tucson, Arizona asking him to make some dining room furniture for a home he was building in the shape of a ship in Tuxedo. Wright's associate came to the shop with drawings which appeared to be inspired by Oriental art, plain, simple and very different. He signed a pledge that he would never incorporate any of the ideas into anything he made. He wished he had made a copy of the check. [Frank Lloyd Wright, John Rattenbury]

[II/1/67] He made dozens of samples for a manufacturer who had studied in Europe. He would make one to seven of a kind which would go to a furniture show. If the models were popular they could be mass produced. [Zagarolli]

[II/1/96] Ethan Allen in Woodfin (see Morgan and Giezentanner tapes) often asked him to make samples. It was cheaper to hire him to make four bed posts at \$100 a piece than to use the machinery of the manufacturing plant, which was set up to turn out one post a minute for 24 hours a day, as retooling would cost about \$6,500, and the machine would be out of commission for other work during that time.

[II/1/143] During an election year the furniture industry goes into a slump. The public is reluctant to buy until politics are settled.

[II/1/177] Most furniture manufacturers are owned by conglomerates where, with their buying power, they can buy lumber by the carloads. Everything has gone big, big. It is ever increasingly hard for the small business.

[II/1/227] The State and Federal government require the same monthly and quarterly reports for the small companies as for the large ones.

[II/1/238] Twenty to thirty years ago it was common practice to throw waste material on the grounds. Now there are E.P.A (Environmental Protection Act) laws that restrict this.

[II/1/258] When Buncombe County started talking about hazardous waste (paint remover can be harmful) an officer was hired and he was asked to fill out forms. He also called the court house and said he washed furniture in the yard. He was told that this was ok. He later met with a hazardous waste expert to see if he was within the guidelines. He was told there was no problem and received a statement to that effect.

[II/1/320] Sometime later an inspector from the State came by. He showed her through and she was satisfied with what she saw until, on leaving, she saw a mess in the back yard - his helper had been removing paint from furniture. She said he couldn't do this and the earth would have to be taken up, cleaned and returned. He had 90 days to do this. A soil engineer out of Greenville, S.C. said the job would cost \$100,000. He was able to get a second opinion from a local contractor and settled with him for \$25,000. None of this could be deducted from taxes. It costs him up to \$300 to get rid of a drum of solvent now that it can't be dumped on the land.

Tape II, Side 2:

[II/2/20] Eighty percent of small business don't survive the first two years of business. A man wanted to buy his business and offered more than it was worth. He had a vague knowledge of how the business was run but had never built a piece of furniture, and could have duplicated the shop at less the price. He was told by a banker that he could borrow up to 90% of what the company grossed last year but not a dime to start a new business. Even though this would have been a good deal for Briggs, he would not sell, knowing the man would never make the plant make a profit [and, I suspect Briggs didn't want to retire]

[II/2/86] He never short changes on quality - even if, in error, he quotes a price too low. If you "short change in quality you put a knife to your throat" "a bad job never brought repeat business to anybody." "I've never seen a time when I didn't have something to do when I came in in the morning." He has been in business 38 years, come July.

[II/2/120] The log cabin out front was brought from a mountain on Sandy Mush. It was built by a Civil War veteran named "Woodie." Seven boys were raised in this windowless one-story house. The family slept in the loft. Solid chestnut logs were still firm when moved here in 1975.

The door was only 5' high, and a man, who studied Indian raids, said this might have been a means of discouraging intrusion.

[II/2/186] Until 1930 when a little worm got into the chestnuts and killed them, the hills were covered with them. In the valleys the nuts were so thick they could be shoveled up for hog food. The wood from these trees resembles oak and dead trees were used for the core in furniture making.

[II/2/242] Plywood sheets of oak, fir and birch can be bought locally - Westall is no longer in business. The company was bought by Johnson Chandley in Newbridge. Special orders must be placed for cherry and walnut. He makes most of his furniture from solid wood. Kitchen cabinets have solid fronts and particle board inside. [J. M. Westall]

[II/2/304] Furniture making came to a dead stand still during the war. Morgan made ammo boxes, life boats and truck bodies, but business boomed for 4 years when service men returned and started setting up homes. The "water fall" front had been a popular design during the 30's and 40's - the chest tops rolled over - hence the name. Patterns were stamped on much like decals. Grain patterns were stamped on paneling for homes and a sheet of vinyl was adhered, much like contact paper. The second sheet had the identical pattern. They were 100% washable.

[II/2/382] Parquet floors are making a big comeback today. Scrap pieces are glued in small squares making an interesting pattern.