

Willett Furniture

Once a regional favorite, its popularity is spreading

By Natasha Thomsen • For *Antique Review Midwest*

About nine years ago, college professor David Debertin moved to Lexington, Ky., from North Dakota, and discovered the work of Consider H. Willett, a Louisville furniture company defunct since 1962.

"I kept coming across their beautiful and well-priced furniture," said Debertin. The manufactured furniture used quality hard woods and sported a wax-based finish that was nearly impossible to duplicate.

Debertin has researched the output of Willett, and began sharing his passion for Willett in 2002 by creating one of the few Web sites devoted to collecting the high-end traditional furniture.

Consider H. Willett and his brother, W.R. Willett, were in the lumber business before Consider founded the Willett Furniture Co. in 1934. At one time, they were reportedly the largest maker of cherry and maple furniture in the United States, with a 1946 profit equivalent in today's value of \$2.6 million dollars. The bedroom and dining room sets are the most sought after by collectors, along with china cabinets, sideboards, secretaries, bookcases and corner cabinets. Willett also made upholstered furniture.

Willett exhibited its wares at the Chicago Furniture Show in the late 1930s and 1940s, and by the 1950s, achieved national status advertising in *Better Homes and Garden*, and selling to markets in Illinois, Wisconsin and Michigan. In 1956 and 1957, it advertised in states as far away as California and Oregon.

The furniture peaked in popularity after World War II, between 1946 and 1952. Louisville architect Fred H. Elswick, who designed the Kentucky Fair and Exposition Center, added to its luster by designing collections in 1950 and 1951.

"At its height, people had to wait a year to receive their furniture," said Barry Goodall, dealer from



A Willett dining room table with rose-back chairs. B. Goodall photo

to the value of the furniture.

"A finish will have depth to it," Goodall agreed. "Each piece was sanded at least seven times along with five layers of hand-rubbed finish," he said.

The variations in stain color and furniture lines defined

wood or metal tags inside the drawers or underneath the tables. Chairs are more challenging, with the tags often removed or covered with new upholstery.

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Hard times set in as competing manufacturers began making quality furniture for less. By 1962, the Willett Co. was bankrupt.

Of the several hundred people who worked at the factory, the few alive today are a precious source of information.

Most collectors prefer the furniture with a spiral carved trim, referred to as "rope motif" by Debertin, in cherry wood that comes from Kentucky and North Carolina. "They made a lot of maple in the 1950s — about half of their production — but it doesn't move too quickly now other than in secretaries and bookcases," said Goodall. "In my shop, I have 60 pieces of Willett: one secretary and wall shelf are in maple and the rest is in cherry."

"A certain amount was produced in maple, but that hasn't caught on with collectors," said Debertin. An even tinier percentage is a highly prized black walnut that was used in country designs.

"Lots of people ask questions about refinishing Willett," said Debertin, "and I'm always in the mode of strongly discouraging them." The proper finish is key



A Willett dining room table with rose-back chairs B. Goodall photo

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The variations in stain color and furniture lines defined several different collections that were sold over the years. Several of the original collections have remained popular among collectors, especially ones using the rope motif in the cherry "Wildwood" line. Other cherry collections are Elswick, Marblehead, Transitional, Trans-East and Countryside.

"Some people prefer plainer lines with the Transitional. The Trans-East collection is a more Chinese influence," explained Goodall.

In maple, collections were advertised as the Golden Beryl, Brownleigh, and the Lancaster County Collection. "From 1946 to 1962, they made a traditional line of furniture every year, with differences in stain, and they would change the label from year to year," said Goodall. "I try to determine the age of pieces from these little differences."

Prices for Willett are usually higher in Kentucky, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, West Virginia, Georgia, North Carolina and Tennessee. With the Internet, Willett's reputation is spreading up the East Coast to Pennsylvania and even New Hampshire.

Willett pieces are easily identified with stamped

wood or metal tags inside the drawers or underneath the tables. Chairs are more challenging, with the tags often removed or covered with new upholstery.

A piece's finish and condition determine the price. A dining table can be as little as \$500 or as high as \$3,000, depending on the number of leaves, condition of the original finish, and thickness of the wood. "Refinishing drastically reduces the value," cautioned Debertin.

A well-maintained dining room table in its original finish can bring \$1,500 and six chairs, \$1,800. Tables and chairs are often sold separately.

A chest of drawers with rope twist can range between \$800 and \$1,400. Canopy beds with 72-inch posts and cannon balls with rope twist range from \$700 to \$1,800.

Auctioneer Danny E. Ratchiff in Athens, Tenn., has seen Willett's value go "through the roof" in recent years. Ratchiff owns a solid cherry bedroom suite valued at \$2,300. The same suite was worth \$300 to \$500 10 years ago.

Many Willett pieces remain within families.

"They wanted something that was quality, but very functional and something that would last where they could hand it down to the next generation," said Goodall, who believes owners of Willett furniture from the Louisville area are becoming wise and realizing they have something of value.

"My house is full of Willett. I keep the rarer pieces at

home," said Goodall.

His best customers are young professionals who are starting families, just like the baby boomers in the 1940s. "They do their homework. They like its increase in value and appreciate its use," Goodall said.

What's It Worth?

Prices are based on David Debertin's price guide and more recent market equivalents, with ranges representing refinish/repair needed and showroom quality, unless indicated.

1. Wildwood dropleaf dining room table, w/15-inch leaf, rope legs, original finish \$1,100 (minor scratches)\$1,400 (showroom quality)
2. Trans-East dining room table with six chairs\$250 to \$650
3. Transitional dining table, dropleaf, plain turned leg \$230 to \$700
4. Six rose-back dining room chairs\$600 to \$1,800
5. Corner cabinet, in cherry, with rope leaf motif \$690 to \$1,700
6. Bed, full, canopy, Rope Motif ... \$370 to \$1,500
7. Large horizontal dresser, rope motif\$370 to \$1,500
8. Vanity with oval mirror\$900
minor scratches\$1,100
9. Night stand \$450 to \$650
10. Tall chest of drawers \$350 to \$1,100

For More Information

- To contact David Debertin, visit members.aol.com/_NL_a/DLDebertin/willett.htm. This collector's Web site has information about how to collect and maintain Willett furniture as well as historical background with vintage advertising. Debertin's detailed guide (in Microsoft Excel) provides a price scale according to finish, condition by type of furniture.

- Barry Goodall's Pearcy House Antiques, 11611 Main St., Middletown, KY 40243, (502) 244-4409, e-mail: b.goodall@insightbb.com
- Louisville Antique Mall. Web site is: www.tias.com/malls/lam/. Search by key word on the s



Top, this four-poster bed in cherry with rope motif is part of a circa 1950s bedroom suite in cherry belonging to auctioneer Danny Ratcliff in Athens, Tenn. *N. Thomsen photo*

Bottom left, including this vanity with minor scratches, the suite was valued at \$2,200. *N. Thomsen photo*

Left, this chest of drawers is also part of the suite. *N. Thomsen photo*



An example of a Willett's label in metal ...



... and branded in the wood. *N. Thomsen photo*



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- Louisville Antique Mall. Web site is www.fias.com/maills/lam/. Search by key word on this Web site to locate merchants who sell Willett pieces at the mall.
- Thompson & Riley Auction House in Lexington, Ky. Web site is www.thompsonarifey.com. This auction house frequently brings Willett to the block.
- Cairns Antiques & Interiors, Harrisonburg, Ky. Web site is www.cairnsantiques.com.



A two-drawer night stand with four rope-twist legs and a gallery on the back. B. Goodall photo



Willett's label in metal ...



... and branded in the wood. N. Thompson photos



From left to right: Cherry corner cabinet. B. Goodall photo



A blind door cherry bookcase secretary. B. Goodall photo



Above, a very rare glass top Goodall has seen in cherry; otherwise they typically use blind doors, which can list for over \$3,500. B. Goodall photo