

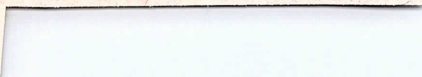


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New Life For Older Chairs

*Gilmanton Woman Restores
Seats to Useful Condition*

By JOHN COZENS
Staff Writer



When she began her caning business more than 12 years ago, Louise Sawyer of Gilman-ton hoped to make a few extra dollars on the side by fixing the seats on old chairs.

What she got was a lesson in the popularity of old chairs.

"A lot of people think that old chairs are better because they were built better to begin with," she said.

Sawyer said caning is a form of weaving in which reeds, clothe, wicker or rope are used to form the seat on a chair.

"There are all types of different patterns you can make out of them," she said. The work is intricate, but Sawyer said she can now finish a new seat in about two hours.

Fiber rush, a ropelike paper material, is perhaps the most difficult form of caning, she said.

"It's not particularly hard, but it's hard on your hands," she said. "When I get them out I have all I can do to bend my hands the next day."

Sawyer, who lives atop Fri-sky Hill, learned the craft from her husband, Mark, who had at one time been recreational director at New Hampshire Soldiers Home in Tilton.

The home sponsored a caning program, and "the old guys showed him how to do it," Sawyer said.

She was at the time staying at home taking care of their two daughters, and caning seemed a good occupation to do at home.

"It was a way of making money without working," she recalled. "So he showed me."

She was able to pick up the craft quickly, and starting the business was a simple process.

"I just hung a sign out and then we started going to crafts shows," she said.

It took some time before the business got off the ground.

"It was pretty slow at first until the word got around," she said. "A lot of the work comes from word of mouth."

Crafts fairs marked the turn-

ing point. Her first crafts show was at Belknap Mall about 10 years ago.

"When we went to crafts shows, that's when everything started. We started getting bombarded then," she said. "I was surprised. All of a sudden we were getting phone calls. People called and wanted us to look at their chairs."

She said customers usually bring in "an antique chair, or one they're particularly fond of, or one they find at a yardsale."

Before long, Sawyer's business began to overwhelm her. At one point, she had 45 to 50 chairs stacked up in her basement workshop, waiting to be have their seats replaced.

"I couldn't believe it," she said. "You had to dig your way to get to the next chair."

To cut down on her work, she became more selective in accepting jobs, and began referring restoration projects to other craftspeople.

And for a time, the Sawyers also stopped attending crafts fairs.

Sawyer had to begin turning away even more work after taking a job at Pittsfield High School seven years ago.

The lighter workload came as a relief, she said.

"It bothers your hands after a while," she said of the caning process. "I thought it was better not to do as much. It's just not worth it on the hands."

Sawyer worked five years as a fulltime substitute teacher in Pittsfield, and has been secretary to the assistant principal the past two years.

She said she now finishes only about three chairs a week, and looks at caning as a part-time craft, something to do when she has the time.

"I still enjoy doing it," she said. "It's still something I can do during the summer. That's when the business is best, with all the summer people up. If you don't feel like working, you take the day off and go to the beach."

However, because business has dropped off so much, Sawyer's husband has started

Chair Renewal

Louise Sawyer of Gilmanton weaves a new seat onto an old chair in the basement of her home on Frisky Hill. Although the process can be hard on the hands, Sawyer has been caning chairs for more than 10 years.

Off The Main Road

going to crafts shows again, she said.

Although she works during the weekday, Sawyer said her mother, Arlene Barnett, who lives with the family, helps keep the business going by answering the phone and doing small chores.

"A lot of times, she'll do my pick-ups and deliveries for me," she said. "She'll go and get supplies for me."

For the past eight years, Sawyer has taught a course in chair caning at New Hampshire Technical Institute in Concord, and also teaches caning classes at Laconia and Concord High Schools.

The Sawyers' two daughters, Robyn and Lynn, both attend Gilford Middle-High School.

