

William Yeager, (ed.), The Cabinetmakers of Norfolk County, Norfolk Historical Society, Simcoe, Ontario, 1975. 154 pp. illus. \$9.75

Although a number of books on Ontario furniture have been published during the past few years, the study of individual cabinetmakers is still in the beginning stages. The Cabinetmakers of Norfolk County, edited by William Yeager, is a forerunner in this field. It provides a very competent listing of furniture makers working in various communities in Norfolk County between 1800 and the early twentieth century, and includes excellent appendices reproducing information gleaned from directories and censuses.

The Cabinetmakers of Norfolk County is divided into sections according to township, with the various chapters written by different authors. In the introduction the problems of research are pointed out -- the scarcity of sources, problems relating to the attribution of cabinetware and, in particular, the rarity of signed examples. The authors correctly note that a name scratched on a piece of furniture is as likely to be that of a former owner or of the store that sold it as of the maker. Within these limitations, the research is generally excellent. For example, a number of photographs of cabinetmakers' shops were uncovered, including one very rare interior view of a late nineteenth century shop. Descendents of several cabinetmakers were tracked down, some of whom now live as far away as California. The recollections and clippings they were able to provide add interest and a more intimate perspective to these cabinetmakers' lives. The photographs and drawings that illustrate the text are also of a good quality, with some excellent detail shots.

However, The Cabinetmakers of Norfolk County is disappointing in a number of areas. While the authors admit in the introduction that all attributions carry an element of speculation, in many instances they have provided no basis for an attribution. As well, William Z. Nixon's 1958 paper entitled "Furniture and Cabinetmakers in Early Norfolk" is cited as the source of a number of attributions to particular cabinetmakers, but few of these items are pictured or their present location mentioned.

Moreover, the information concerning individual cabinetmakers is arranged in a disorganized manner. For example, the section concerning John L. Barber, a cabinetmaker in Waterford, begins with his obituary,

then outlines other aspects of his life and career that are provided in directories and advertisements, and ends with details, including his birthdate, which were found on his tombstone. While the author's professed task of recording "the exact wording of the original scattered sources" is admirable, a chronological arrangement of information relating to each cabinetmaker could have been carried out within these limitations and would have rendered the material more coherent and readable.

The Cabinetmakers of Norfolk County is also disappointing in its discussion of furniture styles. Although the book encompasses the entire nineteenth century up to the beginning of the twentieth, the brief section concerning style touches only on a few early types of furniture. The major style changes that occurred in the latter half of the century, including the introduction of new forms of furniture, the importance of changes in technology, or the preferences for different woods at certain periods are not mentioned. One suspects that the authors were unclear in this area for few of the items illustrated are given even approximate dates.

Despite its flaws, The Cabinetmakers of Norfolk County is an important addition to the field of material history. It provides an example of the type of solid research required before an accurate, broadly based picture of cabinetmaking in Ontario can be presented. It is to be hoped that this book will provide the inspiration for other local historical societies to become involved in this field.

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