

Shakers outsource chair making

For first time, they're licensing production to outsiders in a bid to keep the brand alive



PHOTOS BY FRED FIELD FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

By **Jim Baumer** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MARCH 31, 2015

NEW GLOUCESTER, Maine — In the pantheon of American decorative arts, Shaker furniture holds a high place, inspiring generations of designers and craftsmen hoping to replicate the clean lines, timeless quality, and exquisite simplicity.

Now, for the first time, the United Society of Shakers will license the manufacturing of its classic ladderback chairs and rockers to an outside party, not only to help support the Sabbathday Lake community of Shakers here, where the last three members of the

275-year-old Christian sect live, but also to continue the Shaker tradition of craftsmanship.

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The licensing deal comes from a partnership between the Shakers, the Maine retailer Chilton Furniture, and the New Hampshire furniture maker Tappan Chairs. Tappan will craft, by hand, the Alfred Side Chair and Alfred Rocker, named for the vanished Shaker community in Alfred, a Southern Maine town.

Adam Nudd-Homeyer, the owner of Tappan Chairs, has worked closely with the Shakers on the design and construction of the chairs, visiting Sabbathday Lake several times in recent months to get suggestions, advice, and approval from Brother Arnold Hadd, who, at 58, is the youngest Shaker. Nudd-Homeyer, who bought the company in 2013, said this may not be the first time that Tappan has collaborated with the Shakers.

Tappan, founded by Abraham Tappan in Sandwich, N.H., in 1819, designed a slatted ladderback chair in the early 19th century that was similar stylistically to the Shaker chairs made in Alfred. “It’s as if the Tappans had been in direct communication with the Shaker craftsmen in the 1830s,” Nudd-Homeyer said.

The Shakers, founded in England in the first half of the 18th century, settled in Colonial America and reached their peak in the mid-19th century, when they had established 23 communities with about 6,000 members. In addition to craftsmanship, the Shaker community became known for its simple, self-sufficient lifestyle as well as pacifism, equality between the sexes, and celibacy.

With conversions the only way to maintain its numbers, the sect dwindled over the decades. In addition to Hadd, the other members are Sister Frances Carr, 88, and Sister June Carpenter, 76.

The partnership between the two companies and the Shakers grew from Chilton’s long interest in 19th-century New England styles and working with regional furniture makers to reproduce them. Realizing many customers at Chilton stores in Freeport

and Scarborough might be unaware of the Shakers' history, Nate Gobeil, Chilton's general manager, visited Sabbathday Lake in 2011, looking to learn about the furniture making and other traditions to share with customers.

Other visits followed, and Chilton financed a short video about the Sabbathday Lake community, which the company shows at stores and on its website. This interest and respect for Shaker culture helped lay groundwork for a partnership.

“My own experience has been that most businesses that have come here in the past have tended, whether intentionally or not, to want to exploit the Shaker experience for their own benefit,” said Michael Graham, executive director of the United Society of Shakers. “I knew Chilton was different.”

Chilton was bought in September by Jennifer and Jared Levin of New York, who shared the enthusiasm for Shaker styles. They talked with Gobeil about creating new versions of historic Shaker designs, hoping the Shakers would partner with them in producing the Alfred chairs.

“We wanted to do something that would celebrate this unique community,” said Jennifer Levin. “We’ve been influenced by them and we thought it would be nice to find a way to bring attention to a small yet vibrant and active group.”

About the same time, Chilton had struck a deal with Nudd-Homeyer to become the exclusive distributor of Tappan chairs. Levin said she and Gobeil were so impressed with Nudd-Homeyer's craftsmanship that they invited him to become involved in the Shaker project

In November, Nudd-Homeyer visited Sabbathday Lake, meeting with Graham and Hadd. He brought along an 1850s Tappan chair . They discussed the Alfred chair, and Nudd-Homeyer took measurements, notes, and photos. Hadd also suggested he take a stab at the Alfred rocker.

During his most recent visit in early March, Nudd-Homeyer brought back his version of the two Alfred chairs. His side chair was a slightly tapered three-slat design. Hadd and Graham approved. Hadd offered a few Shaker suggestions on technique, including

spending 45 minutes on how to weave the cloth tape for the seat.

“It feels special to be part of this,” said Nudd-Homeyer. “The Alfred chair in many ways epitomizes Shaker design and I’m humbled to be chosen as craftsman.”

Nudd-Homeyer, who makes all his chairs by hand, said he expects to produce no more than about 250 Tappan and Shaker chairs a year. The Alfred chairs, which go on sale in April, will be branded on one leg with the Shaker tree of life. The side chair will retail for \$760, the rocker for \$960. They will be at Chilton and the Sabbathday Lake community.

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