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Old Adirondack: Living history behind the fabled Adirondack Chair

WILLSBORO – Have you ever sat in an Adirondack Chair? No matter where you are, when you know the history of the chair, scenes of mountain lakes and rolling lawns are conjured up in your mind.

History tells us that the original chair was invented by Thomas Lee in Westport, circa 1903. Lee, a genial host to his many summer guests at Stonysides, his summer home, was attempting to create a comfortable chair for them to sit in while enjoying a summer day. His prototype, one with a single pine plank with wide armrests, was the embryo of the Adirondack Chair as we know it. At this time the chair was known as the “Westport Plank Chair” or just the Westport Chair.

Lee, knowing his carpenter friend Harry Bunnell needed winter work, gave him the design, which Bunnell had patented unknown to Lee, or so the story goes. Bunnell manufactured the chairs for the next 20 years. All were made of hemlock, signed by him and were either green or a medium dark brown in color. It is known that there were two types of early chairs—one, the classic, had a straight back with narrow arms while the second, a variation, had a concave back and wide arms for comfort.

The name “Adirondack Chair” has been credited to be coined by tuberculosis patients who spent time sitting in the Chairs in the Adirondacks. In the early 80’s the chair was created at Flat Rock Camp on Lake Champlain by the caretaker, Jack Pedro, who adapted a rustic chair to make it more comfortable. Outgrowing the space there and taking the name Willsboro Wood Products, the firm then moved to the Grange Hall in Willsboro. The manufacturer of the chairs eventually moved the operation to Keeseville, but retained the Willsboro Wood Product name.

Willsboro Wood Products owner William Hickey patented a locking mechanism in 1987 which allowed the chair to fold. These chairs were made of maple used 2’ hardwood pegs instead of screws and were the first and only folding Adirondack chairs available.

Old Adirondack, as the company is now known, has preserved the sturdy comfort and rustic elegance of the “slat back” Adirondack chair, manufacturing them of natural cedar. The chair has the history to become an American icon; the style will continue to exist due to its simple beauty and amazing comfort.

On Aug. 21 Old Adirondack will be hosting a sale even with many chairs on display, including Adirondack Art Chairs personally owned by Kenda James, the plant manager. Also on display that day will be the evolution of the chair via photos and live displays. The sale will run from 10-4 with factory tours offered at 10:30, 12:30 and 2:30. If you want to take the tour, plan on approximately one hour.

While exotic woods are used in the production of the Chair in other plants, at Old Adirondack all chairs are manufactured using wood indigenous to the region. Old Adirondack was also the first to offer the curved back that identifies the chair.

As well as offering their products in their showroom, furniture is available through Plow and Hearth, Jackson & Perkins and on the Internet, through Overstock.com

