



Verna and Clarence Berger have taken over the local caning trade in the past 10 years

staff photos by Jim Thompson

They give new life to old chairs

When Clarence Berger says he raises cane, he's not kidding.

Clarence and his wife Verna repair chairs, replacing the worn reed and cane seats on antiques, heirlooms and second-hand rockers. Hand caning — weaving palm strips onto wooden furniture — is a dying craft, one that the Bergers learned from an old Beaverton man named Dan Nauman. That was 10 years ago. Nauman is 102 now, and the Bergers have gradually taken over the local caning trade.

The couple works in a cluttered shop — once upon a time a garage — at their Beaverton home. Inside, there are chairs everywhere — in the rafters and in the corners, in piles and in pieces. There's an old doll buggy and an antique highchair, too.

Giant spools of fiber reed hang from the ceiling; six-foot cardboard tubes hang on one wall. Each tube has a label, like "superfine" or "common." Those labels are chair-repair jargon for varying widths of cane, which is made from a palm tree called rattan that is native to India, China and Ceylon. Inside the Bergers' cardboard tubes, the 12- to 20-foot strips of cane range from 1 3/4 millimeters (superfine) to 3 1/2 millimeters (common). Between 200 and 500 feet of cane goes into the average chair.

Clarence talks about the chair business while he works on the reed seat of an old straight-backed chair.

"I found out it wasn't as easy as it looked," he remembers of that day 10 years ago when he watched old Mr. Nauman at work.

Weaving those reeds or cane strips hour after hour makes his arms weary and his fingers sore. The tedium can be maddening. If he makes a mistake, or if a piece of cane breaks, he has to rip out hours of work and start again.

Since those early days, Clarence has learned the ins and outs of chairs, the fine points of a folk craft that has been pushed aside by machinery. Take reed seats, for instance.

"There's oval reed, flat reed, round reed," he says. "Then there's five different widths. It ranges from an eighth to a half an inch."

Originally, reed seats were woven from twisted strips of bullrush. But these days, most reed chairs are made from fiber reed, paper



Verna carefully re-weaves a wooden chair seat

strips that look like twisted grocery sacks.

Clarence and Verna have a photo album full of chairs they've restored in a variety of styles and patterns. The Bergers use four cane patterns: the spiderweb, the lace pattern, the standard six-step, and the Star of David, the most difficult — and expensive — of the four. To cane a rocker's seat and back in the Star of David pattern would take about 30 hours, Verna says.

For people with valuable antiques or sentimental heirlooms, hand caning is often worth the cost.

"A lot of the people who come in here have chairs with sentimental value," says Verna. "They'll bring it in and say, 'This was my grandmother's grandmother's.' They know it's not worth anything."

The Bergers themselves have a few of those sentimental chairs around their house. They've refurbished Verna's grandmother's oak rocker and Clarence's grandfather's oak rocker. Once, they bought a black lacquered rocker with a black-and-white checked cush-

ion in a second-hand store for \$12. Under the lacquer, they found a lovely solid-oak chair.

"Pretty soon, we'll be known as the house of rockers," notes Clarence, an old furniture buff who pokes around in antique and junk stores every chance he gets.

The Bergers do commercial work as well as residential. The Organ Grinder in Portland, Farrell's and the Park Restaurant at Washington Square are among their clients.

"You've been to Earthquake Ethel's? You've sat on our chairs," Clarence reports.

Chairs aren't the only furnishings the Bergers work on. Doll buggies and roll-top desks are among the projects they've tackled. Once, someone brought Clarence a roll-top desk in a cardboard box — in pieces. It took a month for him to put it back together again.

Clarence will teach a class on hand caning through Portland Community College this fall. The seven-week class begins on Monday, Sept. 26, 7 p.m., at Whitford Intermediate School. Tuition is \$21. Call PCC's Rock Creek campus, 645-4400, ext. 220, for registration information.