

CITIZEN CANE —

Clarence Berger (right) learned how to cane furniture more than 25 years ago. Below: Golf tees help hold the caning in place.



The furniture caners

At the Family Cane Shop in Beaverton, Clarence and Verna Berger rely on a rare art to restore antique furniture

By JEANNE LEESON
For the Times

BEAVERTON — A modest sign reading "Family Cane Shop" for 25 years has stood on Scholls Ferry Road just a few blocks north of Hall Boulevard. Inside one finds antique furniture beautifully restored with what many consider a lost art: caning.

The story of the shop's beginning is how some things were done "in the old days." Clarence Berger, with a full-time job at Parr Lumber Co., repaired antique furniture for extra income. Friends brought him an antique child's rocker that needed a cane seat. Berger took the rocker to Dan Nauman a 92-year-old craftsman who did perfect caning, but at a price Berger's friends could not afford.

Nauman suggested that for \$15 he would teach Berger how to cane the chair seat, and perhaps his friends would pay for the class. They did.

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Clarence Berger

After three lessons, Berger was on his own and so enthusiastic he taught his wife, Verna, the skill. Today she does the standard six-step caning and such fancy patterns as the

Star of David, spider web, sunburst and lace patterns.

At the time, Berger was working at Parr Lumber, and Verna was busy rearing their children and grandchildren and for both, repairing and caning were part-time work. Since 1977, Berger has taught a caning class at Portland Community College.

Berger's garage became a workshop; he built a storage building. He converted three second-hand dentist's chairs into

work tables that move up and down with a touch of the foot pedal. Caning and repair work are time-consuming, hard on the hands and back.

Then came a time when Berger's second job was so busy, he retired from Parr Lumber and worked full-time on repairing and caning furniture, using reed, rush, rawhide, wicker and rattan.

Verna tells of caning two Louis the XVI chairs on which she caned around a medallion in the center and spaces below the arms. She spent six months on that assignment.

A woman in the Sylvan area brought her a commode, a fascinating antique. With the caned seat down, it was a delightful chair; with the caned seat lifted up, it became a commode, used in many homes before modern plumbing was in place.

With both the furniture repair and the caning, the Bergers are thoughtful about advising owners.

"If the basic construction is good, the piece is worthy of repair. If it is not, I try to let a customer know," said Berger.

Professional caners, and there are very few, charge \$1.40 a hole for the standard six-hole pattern. That's why, when teaching a class, Berger suggests students do one chair in class and go home and do another one.

"People want to pass on their heirlooms so they are sturdy and useful. I delight in making this possible," Berger said.



RESTORATION — Verna Berger (left) learned the art of caning from her husband. Above: A chair in need of repair will receive the Bergers' special touch when it gets repaired.

Photos by Jaime Valdez of the Times

That's what the Bergers did in "the old days." Today they spend five to six hours doing just what they always have done: repairing and caning antiques, but with children and grandchildren moved away, they have time for new interests.

A fuchsia club has met for many years in east Portland, and as members of the Oregon Fuchsia Club the Bergers attended, but they believed many disliked traveling there at night. So in February 2001 the Bergers invited four people to meet in their home to start a west-side fuchsia club.

Today 35 members meet at the Edgewood Downs Retirement Inn. They bring in speakers, maintain a booth at the Home and Garden Show at the Expo Center and each September have a display at the Oregon Gardens near Salem. Berger is president; Verna is secretary. Each month the fuchsia club members fill a food basket for the Oregon Food Bank.

"Fuchsias are easy to grow, beautiful to have around and our club helps to regain

an appreciation of one of God's creations," said Verna.

Clarence swims an hour every morning. For 15 years he has given a demonstration in caning for youngsters at the Oregon Episcopal School. He also works on his collection of 3,000 Happy Meal toys from McDonald's.

"On my computer I know where and when I bought each one and how much it cost," he said.

Verna is busily collecting information about her grandfather, who immigrated to America, established a travel agency in Vancouver, B.C., and helped immigrants solve travel problems.

They also get to visit their son Steven, who is director of community corrections for Klamath and Lake counties, and their daughter, who lives in San Antonio, where her husband has a fellowship in cardiology. When he completes his studies and their three children are older, she plans to attend law school.