

Peter Kramer

Date: May 25, 1995
Introducers: Lenoir (Applegate) Stewart and Phyllis Boeddinghaus
Transcribers: Janena Benjamin, 2004 and Laura Cabbage-Draper, October 2019
Editor: Jennifer Warren, January 2020

Abstract: Harry Edward Kramer (1938-), commonly referred to as “Peter” or “Pete,” is the son of Mary Bender (Mayo) Kramer and Harry Kramer, the former postmaster of Metuchen. One of three children, Mr. Kramer was born and raised in Metuchen at 47 Carlton Road and he graduated from Metuchen High School in 1956. Mr. Kramer showed an interest in woodworking from an early age and was largely self-taught with support from his family and friends. Following high school, Mr. Kramer served in the United States Army and graduated from Rutgers University in 1971. He worked several jobs during this time period including at Johnson & Johnson and at Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. He acquired The Hitching Post at 414 Main Street from Ruth Eigenbauer in 1963 and owned the business for approximately five years. In the 1970s, Mr. Kramer moved to Washington, Virginia where he currently resides and owns his own furniture making business.

The following transcription is from a presentation by Mr. Kramer at the Borough Improvement League (BIL) building in Metuchen. Mr. Kramer is introduced by Lenoir (Applegate) Stewart and he spends the time discussing his upbringing in Metuchen and its influence on his famous furniture making. At the end of the presentation, Mr. Kramer shows his handmade furniture pieces and donates a cherry table to the Borough Improvement League.

Interview note: Excerpts from BIL letters are indented in the transcription.

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P. Boeddinghaus: This cassette tape contains the speech of Peter Kramer donating a brand-new table to the BIL [Borough Improvement League] building on Thursday, May 25, 1995. This tape is done under the auspices of the Metuchen-Edison Historical Society by Phyllis Boeddinghaus. [recording paused]

This takes place at the BIL building at 491 Middlesex Avenue in Metuchen, New Jersey. [recording paused]

L. A. Stewart: [audience laughter] I have a poem here that was written by one of our [BIL] members on the table that we had here previously. It had gotten to the point where every time we put something on it, we thought, *Oh, let's hope it holds up*. The legs were a little bit—well anyway, kind of like ours get after a certain age. [audience laughter]

This is to the officers and dear friends of the BIL:

Sorry to leave you after all these years. I've lived in your building a long time. Now old age has brought me physical problems. I have joint pains and have trouble holding up my arms. I know I don't look so good. Also, as I have a lot of skin blotches, I could be cut up and turned into sawdust. A nice antique man came by the other day and told Florence [Augustine] that I still had nice lungs, a good shape, and elegant legs. So he adopted me. He made out a check to the BIL for \$300. [whistling and audience laughter] He is going to arrange for my rehabilitation at a restoration center. I'll get replacement parts, veneer grafts, and a facelift. I'll then get a new home in some elegant place. There's still hope for an old girl for a glamorous future.

P.S. [postscript] I've heard many stories around the table top. I promise to keep them confidential. Please keep my facelift a secret.

This was written by our member, Florence Augustine. [audience applause] Now she has written another one. This is about the table as it is leaving the building. It's called "More Table Top." Can everybody hear me? [murmurs of agreement] Table top, okay.

Dear BIL members and friends,

Did I tell you about my last day at your cozy historic schoolhouse? Florence took some farewell pictures, then measured me, but she didn't weigh me. A tall man named Bob came to examine me in preparation for my departure for restoration. He gently flipped me on my side and slid me off the ledge to rest on a floor back stretcher. Bob's sister Eleanor is the keeper of the key. Then Florence got her steel tape so she and Bob could measure door exit spaces. The latched side door was best. It gave us three quarters of an inch clearance for my shapely legs to pass through. While waiting to four-thirty, Florence, my genealogist, found an old yellow sticker under my top that says "Oak." That got her excited. Bob gently slid my creaking body across your floor as I rested on the rug stretcher. Later, a handsome young member of the Metuchen Police Department helped Bob to protectively carry me across the grass to possible paved enemy territory [audience laughter] where my new benefactor had parked my trailer ambulance. It was a clean getaway. No scratches on the floor, no chips on the doorjambs, and no complaints from the neighbors about my ambulance in their driveway. Since I'm getting a new facelift and a restored body, I'm changing my name to Lady Jacobean Oak Refractory Table. Please express my greetings and best wishes to my young replacement at your charming building. Please keep her healthy and she'll serve you as many years as I did.

Your faithful friend,
Jackie Long Table

This was also from Florence Augustine. [audience applause] Aren't they wonderful? Isn't it wonderful to have such wonderful members?

Peter Kramer was born and raised in Metuchen. Even as a child, he loved to work with wood. At thirteen, he made shoe shine boxes and went from door to door taking orders. He graduated from Metuchen High School in 1956, went into the [United States] Army for six months and then in the [Army] Reserve for four years. He

graduated from Rutgers [University] in 1971. From 1954 to [19]63, he worked for JNJ [Johnson & Johnson]. Peter owned The Hitching Post store [at 414 Main Street] in Metuchen from 1963 to 1968. He then worked for Radio Free Europe [Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty] from [19]65 to [19]70. He has been in his own furniture business for twenty-five years. His shop and home are in “Little Washington,” Virginia. It was not until Peter was over thirty [audience laughter] that he became a full-time cabinetmaker and creating furniture as he imagined it could have been made during the 1700s. This furniture is the finest made today with pieces featured at museums across the country, and he was recently invited to Japan to demonstrate his craft. At present, he is also manager for Habitat for Humanity Project. This is something many of the Presbyterians know is a very, very important project for us as we have many, many young people go to West Virginia every year. Did you know it?

P. Kramer: **Yeah.**

L. A. Stewart: Okay, fine.

P. Kramer: **You could send some down to us. [audience laughter] We could use the help.**

L. A. Stewart: Well, we’ll keep it in mind. I remember The Hitching Post very well and I’m sure that many of you people that are here do. I have many pieces in my house that came from The Hitching Post. In fact, the light in my kitchen over my table is still from The Hitching Post. I’m here to introduce Peter Kramer and give him a big welcome we do [unclear] so much. [audience applause]

P. Kramer: **Well, I am overwhelmed at how many people are here. Can everybody hear me? Is that loud enough? Okay, I am overwhelmed by the numbers. I thought it was going to be a little group of ten people or something like that, so I’m impressed. [audience laughter] Thank you, Lenoir [(Applegate) Stewart], for whatever you did to turn out the crowd.**

I just had a few things that I wanted to say about Metuchen. I’ve been away from here for about twenty-five years, twenty-six years. And as part of I guess getting older, one looks back about where your talents and skills and things developed, and I realized that Metuchen was a very significant factor getting me into the world of furniture and art. And I wanted to express that because it took me a long time to look at it, and it occurred to me that maybe there are others that haven’t looked at it this way because the tiniest little things can impact upon an individual and change a course of their life. So I want to go back to the very beginning and talk about that.

Actually when I was nine, a friend of mine, Hugh D’Andrade, who is announced “Done-dra-dee” is how he says his last name, but anyway. [audience laughter] Hugh D’Andrade and I were nine years old and a fellow who lived on Bounty Street—his name was Pat Skow [Patrick Skow]—was in our class. And the three of us decided that we were going to make footstools and sell them. And so the town was small enough to allow us the freedom to do that. And what we did was to go out and collect bottles from the neighborhood and take them to the corner store—the Corner Confectionary [at 275 Amboy Avenue]—and turn them in. We got fifty-two cents. We walked down to what was Royal Lumber Company [Royal Millwork & Building Supply Company at 253 Lake Avenue], and at nine years

old, to have a town in which you could do that was very significant. And we purchased two board feet of pine, took that home to my mother's [Mary Bender (Mayo) Kramer] basement, and began to cut that thing up and made a footstool out of it. We then started to go door to door to sell it. And we had our first sale when we got to Pat Skow's house, his mother bought one. [audience laughter] We had our second sale when we got to Hugh's house and his mother bought one. [audience laughter] And we had our third and final sale when we got to my house and my mother bought one! [audience laughter]

I started working with tools much younger than that. It was during the Second World War, I was probably about five years old and my job was to straighten nails because you couldn't buy nails during the war. So my dad gave me a hammer and I would sit down on the basement floor with a board and I would straighten out the nails that he had pulled out of something—out of crates or something—and sit there for what seemed like an eternity because he would be doing something and he'd need nails, and he'd say, "Straighten that one over there" and I would straighten that nail out. And by doing that—I mean it was just a tiny little thing—but it got me using a tool and I liked it; it was a good feeling and I felt good having done that, and I got praise for doing it. And it reinforced—and it gave me confidence.

The atmosphere in Metuchen at the time that I was growing up was—there was a lot of *laissez-faire* on the part of the government. There weren't things like Little League and those kinds of organized sports. Now, as kids, we felt like we were cheated because we knew that there were other communities that had these things and we were always lobbying the respective council member that we knew or somebody that couldn't they please get a Little League? But now as an adult, looking back on that time, I realize that without it, we were really better off. And I'm not knocking the Little League, but we had to produce the whole thing. We even had to go and burn the field off in the spring, and make the bases and line it, and we had to go to Iselin and find another group of guys that would get on a bus and come play baseball here, or we would have to take the bus down there and play baseball. And we became this kind of—total production-oriented. It wasn't just showing up with a glove and playing baseball. We had to make sure the bats were there, that we had at least one ball and that maybe hopefully with a real skin on it instead of a bunch of tape. It was just a start to finish thing that required lots of different events to happen. And it was wonderful training and at the time I didn't get it, but I get it now. And I wonder if we haven't over-orchestrated some of the things for kids today, because I don't think they understand what it takes to bring something about, to create something from start to finish. They can get into it and they play very good baseball, but I'm not sure that they understand all of the events that happened for that.

When I was in school, I wanted to take shop in high school. I was going to go to college. So at that time, they had three programs and I think I was in an academic program, and as such they would not let me take woodworking shop. And even though I had tremendous interest in this from very early on, they would not permit me to do that. And I didn't like that very much at the time, and I was actually pretty vocal about it. But it didn't do me any good. And now when I look at it, I realize that it probably was, in a funny kind of way, a benefit because I learned basically by doing on my own and that created a style that was

uniquely mine. And had I been able to take shop with some kind of concentrated coursework and so forth, I think I probably would have ended up not being quite as individualistic as I am. So I see it as a benefit. But the most important thing I think was just the size of this place [Metuchen]. It was just the perfect place. The right-size community and it was a safe community. I don't know what it's like anymore, I've been away too long. I don't know whether a nine-year-old can walk six blocks. I don't think he'd go to the lumberyard. I don't think there's a lumberyard left in town. [audience laughter] So I don't know where he's going—I guess he'd need somebody to drive him to the nearest Home Depot [home improvement store].

The people who influenced me, I would like to mention. First, there was my father [Harry Kramer] and my mother. There was support there and there were compliments about anything that I achieved. I want to particularly single out my sister [Ruth (Kramer) Hume] and her husband, Don Hume [Donald Hume], for their mentorship, their guidance, use of their basement shop [audience laughter] and all the mess that was created there over the years, and their just general support and pushing and shoving and their can-do attitude that they instilled in me. It was really important and it had a major effect on my life. I don't know whether I ever said that, but thank you. [audience laughter] I appreciate it.

I want to mention a Sunday school teacher that I had, and I think his name was Ed Hawkins [Albert W. Hawkins]. His name was Hawkins and he lived on [56] Home Street and I'm not sure whether it was Ed, but I think it was. And he had a little shop, he taught me in third grade, which was kind of the year before that I really started to get to doing things. But in the evenings, every once in a while, I would go over there and he would be working and I would sit and watch him. And just being around the sawdust and being around somebody doing it really was helpful in being an inspiration that I might want to accomplish something in that direction myself.

Bill Yultz [phonetic] was a Sunday school teacher in my next year, and I don't know whether they had connected with something between them, but he brought in a lot—each Sunday, you got a little sample of wood. If you didn't show up for Sunday school, you didn't get that week's sample. And so, I had probably perfect attendance because I wanted to get all the samples of wood. [laughter] It was a little thing, but it was an important thing.

Let me see, my sister Mary Lou [(Kramer) Bandfass], who's not here, gave me two books when I was probably twelve or thirteen years old that were written by a guy named Peter Hunt [folk artist] from Massachusetts. One was on furniture refinishing and one was on furniture decoration. And I read those like they were the Bible and learned a great deal. Subsequently some years later, [I] went up there and rented space and it turned out to be the space that he had had his place in, and I didn't realize it at the time. It was just kind of a coincidence that we stumbled into it.

I want to thank Tish Ruegger [phonetic] and Klaus Risten [phonetic] because when I was starting in business, they were supportive of me; they ordered some things, they had me do work. It wasn't a lot, but it was enough to say, "You can do it and we'd like to have you do something for us." Ruth Eigenbauer, who

owned The Hitching Post, encouraged me by buying some small products that I made, some planters. If I saw them [the planters] today, I would probably be very embarrassed. [audience laughter] But I did make them and she bought them, and I thought that was wonderful. Jodi Marks [phonetic], who lived here for a short time, had a profound effect on me in terms of wanting to do beautiful things, of directing me to creating something other than ordinary. And she introduced me to a gal named Betty Behr [phonetic], who was an interior designer, and Betty used me to make a number of pieces of furniture. Betty taught me a lot about quality. Everybody knows that the top of the table ought to look good, but Betty taught me that the bottom of the table ought to look good too. And so we finished inside out, back, bottoms, everything. You touch the bottom of the table and it feels as good as the top that you can turn it over and use it. It was a lesson that was taught here in this small town. I want to thank Mary [T.] Bohner, who is married to Hugh D'Andrade now, because they have been really good friends and good patrons and have a lot of my furniture, and they have been a great source of encouragement.

Why the BIL? What's its connection? Well, when I was in the fifth grade, a fellow named Bob Jochen [Robert F. Jochen] and I—I don't know why, but my best recollection is that we came on a book that was called *Boyhood Days in Old Metuchen*. It was written by a fellow named [David Trumbull] Marshall. And in that he talks about this [BIL] building. He talks about a lot of historic sites and a lot of historic events in and around the town. And we got turned on to the historic things around town, one of which was this building. And we came down here and we photographed it from just about every angle that you can photograph it, and we wrote a little report about it. We were up in the Old Colonial Cemetery and we tried to find where the old meeting house was up there—he talks about what size that was—and we spent time and we put this whole report together. But it was this building that really focused me on history and preserving it. That this building was 150 years old and looked as good as it did and was as interesting as it is on the inside and on the outside, was an important thing as a young child and it tweaked my interest in old.

So then I started to make furniture and for years I've made furniture that I guess could best be described as the kind of furniture that I would have made had I lived 200 years ago. They are not really reproductions. And in recent years, the last couple of years, I have probably have flown way off into other, other directions. And I have a lot of whimsical pieces and I have what would probably be called contemporary pieces, but we still do this basic kind of thing.

And I thought that you might be interested in seeing some of the legs that are original designs of mine that I have done over the years. And that's what these things are [showing furniture pieces to the audience]. They are upside down—this being a table top. And this is something called the stepped staggered leg. And I'll just leave these here and afterwards you can come up and take a look at them.

This is a proud Queen Anne. Queen Anne—of course, the cabriole leg is a very common leg, but this has a proud strike that comes down.

This is very contemporary-like; we call this a wishbone leg. It can be very light and it's very strong—certainly not a historic leg, but interesting.

This may be my best contribution to the leg world. This is called a hatchet leg and it's made from the same piece of wood, but it was taken apart in order to create it and then put back together again.

This is another version of the stepped staggered leg. This is a core-filled, inside-out turning. If you look, the turning is on the inside of this leg. It gives you a square format with this interesting shape.

This is what we call a gusset leg. It's kind of like a quote? What do you call those things on a skirt? A half note? Dark? Yeah, pleat. We call it a gusset leg. This is an inside-out turning again, but it doesn't have the core filling.

This is a caged knee. And this is what we call a shadow leg. To give you an idea of how simple this leg is to create, but how hard it is to come up with the idea, all that's done here is we take a saw and cut this piece out and glue it back in. And it just creates that extra detail, which looks like a million dollars.

This piece is a two-bottom bench; we make it in three-bottom bench also. [audience laughter] Actually, the person. Now these two pieces represent a new—I have a friend who is a sculptor. His name is Lee Robertson [copper artist]; he lives in Missouri.

This is a lily pond table, and this is a grapevine chair that we've done. I invite you to sit in it. If you come up and want to try it out, please do. These are relatively new pieces.

Now to this table. This table has a leg that I call the "BIL leg." [audience murmurs] It's kind of a triplet-set back leg and the apron, edged detail on the top picks up what's happening in the legs. And I give it to you with lots of thanks for fond memories from a childhood that was a very happy childhood here, and a very educational one. Thank you. [audience applause]

If anybody has any questions, I'll be glad to answer. I'm an expert on Ruth; I can answer any questions you have about her. [audience laughter]

[audience member asks what kind of wood is used] This is cherry. As a matter of fact, all of these—well, not all the legs—but all of these main pieces are cherry. This is cut—actually the people who are in Washington, DC [District of Columbia] call the town that I live in "Little Washington." We're actually Washington, Virginia, which was the first town called Washington in the United States. So if you come there, if you're ever passing by when you're there, don't say, "Is this Little Washington?" because the people who were born there don't like "Little Washington." [audience laughter] I think it's great, but the people who were born there don't like it very much. [audience laughter and talking] This was cut—this was a tree that we took down in the county and sawed. One of the fellows who works for me has a kiln, and so we cut, take trees and dry them, and saw them, and make furniture out of them. So this came out of Washington, Virginia. I had at one point actually thought about trying to find something here in town to make it out of, but the logistics of that seemed pretty difficult, so you'll have to settle for Virginia cherry.

L. A. Stewart: We don't mind. [audience laughter] What else can I say? This is so beautiful. There are so many—Ruth gave me a lot of articles and magazines about Peter and some of the things that he has done. There is no way I can convey them, but it was fascinating to me to read. I understand that after the lumber is cut, that he uses hand tools. Am I right?

P. Kramer: Yeah, basically.

L. A. Stewart: I don't want to do this wrong.

P. Kramer: No, you're doing great.

L. A. Stewart: And there are no nails. They are all square wooden pegs as the olden furniture was done, so there is no metal in the table at all. I'm sure I could sit on it—not the vine chair [audience laughter]—and I don't think it will break!

P. Kramer: You should be able to sit on the table.

L. A. Stewart: That's all it needs is for me on it! [audience laughter]

P. Kramer: I don't know if I have enough because I created a bunch. There's a little colored catalog here and some other information, and I'll pass them out and hopefully you can get them around. I don't know.

L. A. Stewart: There are also some articles on the piano in the back showing different types of furniture that Peter makes. You are most welcome to look at them. Now if you will give us just a few minutes, we are going to prepare our new table so that we may serve tea from it. Thank you very much and we welcome the— [audience applause]

We have the Golden Years Club with us here today through Phyllis Harmon and her mother. And it's wonderful that you can be here. You've swelled our body considerably, which we very much needed. Thank you so much. Just give us a few minutes. [audience applause] [recording paused]

P. Boeddinghaus: As a postscript to this cassette tape, I would like to mention that Peter Kramer was introduced by Lenoir (Applegate) Stewart. The poetry was written by Florence Augustine. The table donated to our group is absolutely gorgeous. It is made of cherry and it has an original design on the legs, and Peter called them the "BIL legs." And we very much appreciate this wonderful gift and beautifully-crafted table, which we can use for all of our meetings and special occasions. Thank you, Peter. [recording paused]

As a second thought, his name is not Peter Kramer. It is Pete Harry Kramer¹. He has a nickname of Pete and I have misnamed him, so please correct that in your memory.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

¹ Mr. Kramer's legal name is Harry Edward Kramer, but he has always been referred to by his family and friends as Peter Kramer or Pete Kramer.