

BIL Members: Lenoir Applegate Stewart and Phyllis Boeddinghaus
Speaker: Pete Harry Kramer
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Place: BIL Building, Metuchen, New Jersey
Transcriber: Janena Benjamin

P. Boeddinghaus: This cassette tape contains the speech of Peter Kramer donating a brand new table to the BIL building on Thursday, May 25, 1995. This tape is done under the auspices of the Metuchen Edison Historical Society by Phyllis Boeddinghaus. This takes place at the BIL building at 491 Middlesex Avenue in Metuchen, New Jersey.

L. A. Stewart: I have a poem here that was written by one of our 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.

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 I 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 that I still had nice lungs, a good shape and elegant legs. So he adopted me, made out a check to the BIL for three hundred dollars. 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 is still hope for an old girl for a glamorous future.

p.s. 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. Now she has written another one. This is about the table as it is leaving the building. It's called *More Table Talk*.

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 4:30 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 where my new benefactor had parked my trailer ambulance. It was a clean getaway. No scratches on the floor, no chips on the doorjamb, 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. Aren't they wonderful? Isn't it wonderful to have such wonderful members?

(Applause)

Peter Kramer was born and raised in Metuchen. Even as a child he loved to work with wood. At thirteen he made shoeshine boxes and went from door to door taking orders. He graduated from Metuchen High School in 1956, went into the Army for six months and then in the Reserves for four years. He graduated from Rutgers in 1971. From 1954 to 1963 he worked for Johnson & Johnson. Peter owned the Hitching Post Store in Metuchen from 1963 to 1968. He then worked for Radio Free Europe from '65 to '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 30 that he became a full time cabinetmaker and creating furniture as he imagined it could have been made during the 1700's. 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 the Habitat for Humanity Project. This is something many of you Presbyterians know is a very, very important project for us as we have many young people go to West Virginia every year. Did you know about it?

P. Kramer:

Yes. You could send some down to us. 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.

(Applause)

P. Kramer:

I am overwhelmed at how many people are here. Can everybody hear me – is that loud enough? 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. Thank you Lenoir 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 25 years, 26 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 in getting me into the world of furniture and art. I wanted to express that because it took me a long time to look at and it occurred to me that maybe there are others that haven't looked at it this way. The tiniest little things can impact upon an individual and change the 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 DeAndrea and I were nine years old and a fellow who lived on Bounty Street, his name was Pat Skow was in our class. The three of us decided that we were going to make footstools and sell them. So the town was small enough to allow us the freedom to do that. What we did was to go out and collect bottles from the neighborhood and take them to the corner store, the Corner Confectionary, and turn them in. We got 52 cents, we walked down to what was Royal Lumber Company and at nine years old to have a town in which you could do that was very significant. We purchased two board feet of wood, took that home to my mother's 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. We had our second sale when we got to Hugh's house and his mother bought one. And we had our third and final sale when we got to my house and my mother bought one!

I started working with tools much younger than that. It was during the Second World War and I was probably about five years old. 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 - crates or something – and sit there for what seemed like an eternity because he would be doing something and he'd need nails. He'd say, "Straighten that one over there" and I would straighten that nail. By doing that – it was just a tiny little thing but it got me using the tool and I liked it, it was a good feeling and I felt good having done that and I got praise for doing it. It reinforced me and it gave me confidence with the tool.

The atmosphere in Metuchen at the time that I was growing up was –well, 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. 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. I mean we had to go and burn the field off in the spring and make the bases and lime 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 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 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 happen.

When I was in school I wanted to take shop in high school. I was going to go to college and at that time they had three programs and I think I was in the academic program and as such they would not let me take woodworking shop. 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, 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. So I don't know where he's going to go. I guess he'd need somebody to drive him to the nearest Home Depot.

The people who influenced me I would like to mention. First there was my father and my mother. There was support there and there were compliments about anything that I achieved. I want to particularly single out my sister and her husband, Hugh DeAndrea, for their mentorship, their guidance, use of their basement shop and all the mess that was created there over the years and just their 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 affect on my life. I don't know whether I ever said that but thank you. I appreciate it.

I want to mention a Sunday school teacher that I had and I think his name was Ed Hawkins. His name was Hawkins and he lived on Home Street and I'm not sure whether it was Ed but I think it was. He had a little shop and he taught me in third grade, which was kind of the year before I really started to get 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 Yeltz was a Sunday school teacher in my next year and I don't know whether they had connected with something between them but each Sunday you went 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. It was a little thing but it was an important thing.

My sister Mary Lou, who is not here, gave me two books, when I was probably 12 or 13 years old, which were written by a guy named Peter Hunt from Massachusetts. One was on furniture refinishing and one was on furniture decoration. I read those like they were the Bible and learned a great deal. And subsequently some years later went up there and rented space and it turned out to be the space that he had had his

place in. I didn't realize it at the time; it was just kind of a coincidence that we stumbled into.

I want to thank Tish Ruegger and Klaus Ridsen 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 today I would probably be very embarrassed but I did make them and she bought them and I thought that was wonderful.

Jody Marks who lived here for a short time had a profound affect on me in terms of wanting to do beautiful things and in directing me to creating something other than ordinary. And she introduced me to a gal named Betty Behr 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. In fact 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 Toner who is married to Hugh DeAndrea 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? When I was in the fifth grade a fellow named Bob Jochin 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* written by a fellow named Marshall. And in that he talks about this 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. 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. And we went up to the 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 I would have made had I lived two hundred years ago. They are not really reproductions. And in recent years, the last couple of years, I have probably flown way off into 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. They are upside down - this being the tabletop.

And this is something called the stepped staggered leg.

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 is a cabriole leg and is a very common leg but this has a proud strike that comes down.

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

And this might 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 is 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 is kind of like a pleat. We call it 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.

These two pieces represent a new friend who is a sculptor. His name is Lee Robertson; 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. It's kind of a triplet set back leg and the apron or 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.

(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 member asks what kind of wood is used.)

This is cherry. As a matter of fact all of these, not all the legs but all of these main pieces are cherry. This was cut in – actually the people who are in Washington DC 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 it very much. I think it's great but the people who were born there don't like it very much. So this was cut from a tree we took down in the county and sawed. One of the fellows who works for me has a kiln and so we 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 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. What else can I say...this is so beautiful. 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 then he uses hand tools, am I right?

P. Kramer: Yes, basically.

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

- P. Kramer:** **No, you're doing great.**
- L. A. Stewart: 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 - 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!
- P. Kramer:** **I don't know if I have enough but there is a little colored catalog here and some other information and I'll pass them out and hopefully you can get them around.**
- L. A. Stewart: There are also some articles on the piano in the back showing different kinds 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 we may serve tea on it. We have the Golden Years Club with us here today through Phyllis Harmon and her mother. 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.
- P. Boeddinghaus: As a postscript to this cassette tape, I would like to mention that Peter Kramer was introduced by Lenoir Applegate Stewart and 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. 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.
- P. Boeddinghaus: As a second thought, his name is not Peter Kramer; it is Pete Harry Kramer. He has a nickname of Pete and I have misnamed him, so please correct that in your memory.

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