

BOOK REVIEWS

Texas Furniture, The Cabinetmakers and Their Work, 1840-1880. By Lonny Taylor and David B. Warren. Foreword by Ima Hogg.

Pp. xi + 387, maps, checklist, appendix, glossary, bibliography, index.
Austin: University of Texas Press, 1975. \$22.50 cloth.

Reviewed by Elizabeth Mosby Adler

All too frequently, picture books about furniture or other items of antique value are simply rehashes of old, previously published material. Not only does Texas Furniture rise above the standard picture book by introducing much previously unpublished, undocumented material, but it also presents the pieces in a scholarly, thorough manner. Originally conceived and supported by Ima Hogg, who spent many years tracing and documenting indigenous Texas furniture, the book combines the expertise of Lonny Taylor and David B. Warren. Taylor, formerly director of the Winedale Museum of the University of Texas at Austin and now working with the Dallas Historical Society, researched and wrote the book in addition to his role as editor-in-chief. Warren, associate director of the Houston Museum of Fine Arts and an authority on American furniture, was curator of the museum's Bayou Bend collection at the time, and both supervised the photography and documented and analyzed the furniture. This happy combination of talents produced a graphically excellent book (chosen for the 1976 AAUP Book Show), which is divided into a historical essay and a catalogue.

The authors maintain that there is an indigenous Texas furniture which reflects the social conditions of 19th century Texas culture. In the authors' own words, "This book is about one class of . . . objects, furniture, and the men who made and sold it, and, by extension, the people who used it and the kind of society they lived in" (p. 3). Nineteenth century Texas was isolated, and the lack of political, psychological, and geographical communication with the rest of the United States forced craftsmen to be independent. Paradoxically, at the same time, eastern Texas maintained a plantation system dependent on international economics, while western cattle ranches were tied to Mexico. The decline of cabinetmaking in Texas resulted from the conflict between local, traditional furniture and imported, mass-produced furniture, particularly after the 1880s. For this reason, the authors chose the 1840-1880 dates, assuming that outside influences during this period would not have been as strong.

The first part of Texas Furniture is a well-annotated, descriptive study of mid-19th century Texas and the cabinetmaking of that time. Warren and Taylor divide Texas into six major furniture producing centers: the two urban areas of Austin and Galveston, the Piney Woods of East Texas, the Blackland Prairie, the lower Brazos-Colorado region, and the Hill Country. Of these centers, the last two seem to have been heavily influenced by Germanic continental styles such as Biedermeier, although the cabinetmakers had many Anglo customers.

The second part of the book consists of photographs and annotations of the furniture, arranged by type to include beds, cribs, and cradles; wardrobes; chests of drawers; chairs and stools; sofas, settees, benches, and day beds; tables and stands; desks; cupboards; and safes. The authors introduce the catalogue with the caveat, ". . . There is always a gap between the reality of the past and its surviving material evidence, and we hope that readers will examine these photographs with the thought in mind that they show only what remains, not what was" (p. 40). The data for each piece includes object, maker, date, material, measurements, history, owners, photographer, and a brief paragraph describing construction features, references, and other notes of interest. The photographs are excellent throughout and in some cases construction details are shown. One detail, a carved pilaster on a wardrobe by Christofer F. C. Steinhagen (p. 103), is shown upside-down.

A "Checklist of Texas Cabinetmakers" includes 874 men who worked before 1875. The data, taken from censuses, newspapers, county histories, and county records, lists not only cabinetmakers but also (where evidence warranted their inclusion) chairmakers, carpenters, woodworkers, or farmers. The authors are careful to note the special problems in dealing with the census material (misspellings, absences at time of recording, boundary shifts, and so on). The alphabetical listing apparently includes as much data as is documentable, including dates, place of birth, or advertisements.

The appendix contains three tables summarizing information on Texas cabinetmakers of 1850, 1860, and 1870 who were recorded as earning over \$500. The authors also very thoughtfully include a useful glossary of cabinetmaking and stylistic terms, a bibliography of sources, and an index whose only failing is that it does not refer to the glossary or the bibliography.

Any book covering such a broad topic as cabinetmaking has a potential organizational problem. Although the authors successfully divide the catalogue into furniture types, it would have been instructive to also group at least one craftsman's entire repertoire, indicating the scope of the cabinetmaker's labors (which might range from building coffins to day beds).

Taylor and Warren explore the usual documented and oral historical sources: interviews with descendants of cabinetmakers, newspapers, advertisements, administrators' inventories, and U.S. census reports. In 1860, according to U.S. census data, a disproportionate number of all Texas cabinetmakers (33 percent) were Germans, who actually constituted only 6 percent of the Texas population. The authors note that the census lists include no Spanish-surnamed cabinetmakers, which may have been due to language barriers or to the prevalence of multiple professions, such as carpenter- or farmer-cabinetmaker. The authors, in their quest for Texas furniture, do not compensate for this omission by seeking out Spanish-American furnituremakers; those listed are primarily German or Anglo-American, despite the importance of Mexican culture in Texas.

According to their maps, Warren and Taylor found no major furnituremaking center west of the 100th meridian. In fact, the whole western half of Texas is omitted from most of the maps in the book. One can only wonder what people in the western part of Texas did for furniture (one maker is listed for El Paso, but his work is not illustrated).

Obviously, then, there are questions to be answered concerning some of the material in Texas Furniture. Are the pieces depicted representative of Texas furniture in general? The authors don't state their selection process other than that it was dependent on furniture still found in the hands of a craftsman's descendants, in its original institutional site, or in a museum of county historical collection. What accounts for the exclusion of Spanish- and Afro-American pieces? That the census lists were inadequate is only an excuse, not a reason, for omitting artifacts representing these important Texas cultures. Most important, what is Texan about the furniture included in the study? Is Texas furniture different from the furniture of neighboring states, or of areas with similar settlement populations? For example, is the German furniture produced in Texas different from that in Wisconsin or Missouri? Were the borders of cabinetmaking really so clearcut as to have produced a Texas style of furniture, or have the authors chosen Texas because it is a convenient political boundary? What did happen west of the 100th meridian?

These are only a few of the questions that Warren and Taylor's Texas Furniture, The Cabinetmakers and Their Work, 1840-1880 leave unanswered. Although the authors have made a substantial contribution to our knowledge of what and who produced furniture in Texas, they have made no theoretical advances in the study of material culture. Texas Furniture is a superb catalogue and reference book, and it is hoped that Taylor and Warren's work will stimulate further research into local and regional cabinetmaking.