



The Old Cupboard Speaks

by Alice Poling Good

In telling the tale behind a family heirloom now belonging to her daughter, guest columnist Alice Poling (Mrs. Paul) Good of Van Wert, Ohio, makes us ponder the inherent value of antiques.

Who wants the old green cupboard? Why would anyone want that?

The summer before Grandma Dora (Paul's mother) celebrated her 90th birthday she insisted her family meet at her home and divide the family treasures. All her children agreed that Libby, a retired missionary and the only girl in the Good family, should have all she needed and wanted from the old home. Then Paul, the eldest living son, said, "If no one else wants it, I want the old green cupboard."

The old cupboard had stood there in the corner of the summer kitchen for years on years. Grandma Dora said it had occupied that same place when she came to the farm home on Mendon Road 70 years ago. "I don't know how long it had been there but it was old then. I think it belonged to Granddad's folk," she added. She was referring to her father-in-law, Calvin Good.

You didn't really look at the old cupboard as you passed through the summer kitchen. Your gaze skirted that corner. You might notice that the ugly, dull, cracked, buttermilk paint could use a scrubbing, but who would bother with that job? Gashes and gouges covered its ledge where someone once cracked hickory nuts. The cupboard's door didn't quite meet. Sometime in the past, the edge of the right door splintered off. But time and much opening and closing healed the scar.

When a family member came to visit and found no one home, he would open the cupboard's shaky door, reach up to the second shelf midway back on the right side and poke his fingers inside the carnival glass bowl for the house key. Any of us could find that key without thinking.

Behind the cupboard doors you could find any of those small items needed in a farm household: string, nails, a hoof knife or shears, a useable broken shoe lace, the last box of homemade soap, a fish hook or what have you. That cupboard bulged with all sorts of needed things.

On this day when we divided Grandma Dora's treasures, all present agreed Paul should have the old green cupboard. Why would anyone else want it?

A strong soccer-playing nephew along with his father moved the cupboard to an empty corner of the barn at Paul's ArtAnnA Farm. The thick roughly hewn back boards of the old piece made it heavy and cumbersome. At Paul's farm it waited in the corner of the milk room for a more permanent home.

Our daughter Ava Kay, then 29, and a great great granddaughter of the original owner of the cupboard, planned to restore it to use in her apartment when she married.

Again they moved the old cupboard, this time to Paul Young's home workshop. The fine craftsman called Ava to his workshop several times as he removed the years' accumulations from the heirloom. He said to Ava, "I thought you told me this was a Van Wert primitive. Under the top layer of green buttermilk paint, I found gray buttermilk and under that is Lancaster County, Pa., barn red paint. Lancaster County is the only place they used that color."

As Ava searched the family history she read that Israel, the first younger brother of her great great grandfather, George Washington Good, was a skilled carpenter. Both brothers came from Lancaster County with their parents. She learned that Israel built the log cabin and later the first frame home for his brother. From further evidence in the family history we also believe Israel built the old cupboard.

According to the same history, Pierce, another brother of George, lived on a farm northeast of Van Wert. One summer day, Cal, his brother, and two of his brother's sons rode in a farm wagon pulled by horses to visit Pierce's farm and to pick the abundant elderberry crop. Their wives canned their harvest. Can this account for the elderberry stains in the top of the old cupboard?

Ava made several visits to the craftsman-restorer to note

his progress. Mr. Young found carved initials too faint to be read in the cupboard. He told her, "Cupboards of this vintage usually have candle burn marks and I found one here on the corner of the top right door. The candle sat on the ledge and made a small concentrated burn spot on the open door above it, many years ago."

He then asked, "Have you seen the rat holes in the drawers? . . . And the fine pointed dove-tailing denotes careful workmanship. Rub your hand across the inside of the doors and feel the much-desired even vertical hand-planed ridges."

With each successive visit to Paul Young's workshop, Ava became more excited as the old cupboard revealed its secrets. One day she asked, "Mom, will you go with me to see the cupboard? It's nearly finished."

We admired it from all angles. Mr. Young had replaced the chopped ledge with a matching poplar board. He made the front edge of the right front door smooth with an inlay. He fashioned a plain crown to replace the lost one and turned walnut pulls for the drawers and doors. He left the burn mark and the elderberry stains and the chewed rat holes intact to document past living to future generations. Shadings of the red barn paint remained on the heads of the square nails. The green tones in the clean poplar now highlight the cupboard doors. A mellow glow emanates from the wood, a glow that only time can bring. The once green, once gray, once Pennsylvania barn red cupboard is probably now more beautiful than it has ever been.

On impulse, one recent July day, Ava knocked at the door of the old house that had been home to George Washington Good. She introduced herself to the young couple who now cherish that abode. They invited her into her great great grandfather's former home and much to her surprise, she found an identical mate to her cupboard with the addition of a meal bin beneath it; the unit was built into the wall.

Perhaps Ava's old cupboard will be used and cherished by future generations and continue to reveal its secrets to them. Might it help bring a greater understanding of those who pass this way?

AJ