

Cornhusk Weaving



FOR TWO CENTURIES, COUNTRY FOLK CREATED SIMPLE CHAIRS WITH SEATS WOVEN WITH CORNHUSKS. TODAY, THESE CHARMING CHAIRS AND PEOPLE WHO CAN WEAVE THE SEATS HAVE BECOME TRULY RARE.

Cornhusk weaving these days is about as close as you can get to a lost country craft. After a couple hundred years, only a handful of people still know how to create strong chair seats from the shucks of corncobs.

One of them is David Russell of Washington, Georgia. He learned the craft about twenty years ago from a woman in South Carolina who was in her nineties at the time. She showed him how to weave together the shucks and then had him try it, laying her hands on top of his to guide his fingers along.

“She wanted me to get the feel of it,” David recalls. “She was nearly blind at the time and could weave shucks in the dark. So she taught me how to feel the way they go together.”

Since the early 1700s, farmers and handymen too poor to buy fine chairs have built their own from scratch. While many of the better ladder-back and banister-back chairs of the time featured rush seats – woven in a time-consuming process from durable cattail stalks – country folk lacking time and materials could rely on a more humble seating.

By Gregory LeFever



We'll never know who first wove together the leaves of dried cornhusks to make a seat for a chair or stool. Native Americans had been using cornhusks for thousands of years, braiding them into baskets, sleeping mats, masks, shoes, and little cornhusk dolls. As corn became a necessity for America's early European settlers, they likely picked up from the Indians the technique for cornhusk weaving.

Seating With Strength

Popularity of cornhusk weaving grew quickly throughout the 1700s and 1800s on the South's sprawling plantations and on the smaller farmsteads where corn was plentiful but money was not. To make do, many homegrown carpenters created sturdy furniture from local wood, with cornhusks for seating.



"These chairs were much in vogue in the country in early days, because they answered all plain purposes," Letitia Alexander, a writer for *The House Beautiful* magazine, explained in a 1903 article. "The wood of which they were made grow on the farms, as did the shucks for the seats. The maker was also of the soil, for he was generally the dusky carpenter who attended to the many odd jobs necessary to carrying on the business of the farm."

By the early 1900s – around the time Letitia Alexander wrote her article – mass-produced chairs were affordable to all, and much homemade furniture was tossed into burn piles. Soon, lovers of antiques and folk crafts began collecting the rapidly disappearing primitive chairs. But finding shuck-bottom chairs involved searching high and low through old barns and on porches.



"I had hunted, with diligence, for ten years for one of the old handmade hickory chairs, bottomed with corn shucks," Letitia wrote in her magazine article. "One day, while calling on an old lady in a sleepy country town, my eyes wandered to a sunny back porch and rested on one of the homely, honest little chairs of my search."

The chair's owner was past seventy years of age at the time and said the little chair was older than she was, putting its origin around 1830 or so. The woman was "amused" at Letitia's interest in the chair, so she gave it to her.

Here are some excellent examples of cornhusk weaving. A country carpenter likely used wood and cornhusks from the farm to build the frame and weave the seat of the top two photos. Many of these chairs had hand-hewn frames and joints, where no nails or glue were used, yet they could last a century or more.



Letitia found a cabinetmaker familiar with slave-made furniture who expertly repaired the hickory chair, noting that it was constructed only with pegs, using not a single nail or bit of glue. But the chair's repair stalled when it came to the seat. The cabinetmaker was convinced that anyone who knew how to weave cornhusks was long deceased.

Letitia hunted for a cornhusk weaver and eventually returned to the village where she had acquired the chair. There she found an elderly man who still was proficient in the technique.

“His (cornhusk) cable, when finished, was beautifully smooth and his patterns quite varied,” she wrote. “His chair seats remind me of some of the coarse rush-seated chairs I have seen in New England.”

“In these chairs, the shuck is not so fine as some of the rush seats which graced the parlors of our grandmothers,” she continued, “but used on the sturdy handmade hickory chairs, it seems to complete perfectly their expression of unassuming durability and strength.”

A Disappearing Craft

The contemporary Georgia cornhusk weaver David Russell was featured a few years back on Public Broadcasting's television program “The Woodwright's Shop” with Roy Underhill (Season 25, Episode 11).



That day, he brought three rare shuck-bottom chairs to the studio. One was an unusual Civil War-era chair created on a plantation in Alabama. Of special interest were the two uneven finials on the back of the chair that he learned were for holding yarn as it came off a spinning wheel, similar to a niddy nobby at the top of the chair. “I learned it was called a weaving chair,” David explained.

Another primitive chair David brought from his collection had a cornhusk seat where the shucks had been formed into a thick rope, so the seat was thick and bulky. David said the seat would be less comfortable than a finely woven one, but that the bulky one took far less time to create. His third chair had a well-woven shuck-bottom seat that had survived many years, as could be seen from the amount of wear on the rustic chair's wooden parts.

Top: David learned his skill from an elderly woman in South Carolina who was nearly blind. Today, his weaving shows the tight weaving that enables a cornhusk seat to last many years.

Above: David Russell of Washington, Georgia, has been weaving cornhusk seats for twenty years and is one of the few people preserving the craft.



Many original corn husk seats are still seen and being used in chairs today due to the durability of the husk and the skill of the weaver.



Some thirty years ago, a cornhusk weaver named Irene Haymes was already quite elderly when high school students from Lebanon, Missouri, interviewed her for a 1981 issue of *"Bittersweet,"* a publication dedicated to preserving crafts of the Ozarks.

"Making seats of corn shucks is a very old craft," she told the students. "It's an example of the pioneers making do with whatever was near at hand."

Unlike David Russell, who weaves the husks together as he works along, Irene would create a long rope of woven-together husks and then weave the rope onto the seat rails. Irene said she preferred making seats for stools instead of chairs because the stool seats were smaller and took less time to weave.

"This craft has almost been lost down through the years," she went on. "It's almost gone, really. I don't know of anyone else who knows how to do this. If I knew of anybody, I'd go see them."

For such a simple piece of furniture, the shuck-bottom chair presents two challenges. For the collector, finding one is even harder today than when Letitia Alexander found hers in 1903 after searching for ten years. But they can be found, as David Russell has proven. The second challenge is for people wanting to learn cornhusk weaving, due to very few teachers still being around.

Perhaps Letitia Alexander summed up the situation best over a century ago when she wrote: "This was always a fireside industry, needing no special appliances for seating the chairs, and the material is to be had without cost on any farm. The frame can be made by any carpenter having some idea of proportion and a little skill in the use of tools. Inasmuch as old furniture is now so highly prized, the shuck-bottom chair should not be forgotten."



Left: David's technique involves twisting together the individual husks as he's weaving a seat. He says it creates a finer weave than the other technique of first creating a long rope of twisted husks and then weaving a seat with it.

Middle: Maintaining steady tension on the cornhusk rope is key to a good weave. Here you can see the pattern David is weaving, sure to create a strong seat.

Bottom: Like the shuck-bottom chair weavers of old, David relies on simple knots and twists to anchor the rope of twisted husks. Often these primitive chairs were built with no nails or glue on either the frame or seat.



Please Note: David Russell will be joining us at our Days of the Pioneer Antique event in Clinton, Tennessee on September 11th and 12th. He will be doing cornhusk weaving demonstrations both days so stop by and visit with him!