

# CARA

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# PINE APPEAL

## Nick Weber finds Cork a a haven for fashionable dressers

The story is often told in County Cork about an antiques dealer dressed as a priest who would stop in rural cottages on remote lanes in the countryside. He'd spot an old worm-holed dresser and say that it was just what was needed for the parish house back up in Waterford. "But Father, we thought we would cut it up for firewood. It's been here since my great grandfather's day, and it hardly stands anymore." Realising that the owner of the piece did not think it worthy of giving to the church, the alleged priest would quickly explain that it wasn't the whole thing that he wanted, but simply the two door panels — perfect to fix up a dresser he already had. Then he would think up a sum of money to offer for it, enough to tempt the owners but not so much that they would sense its value.

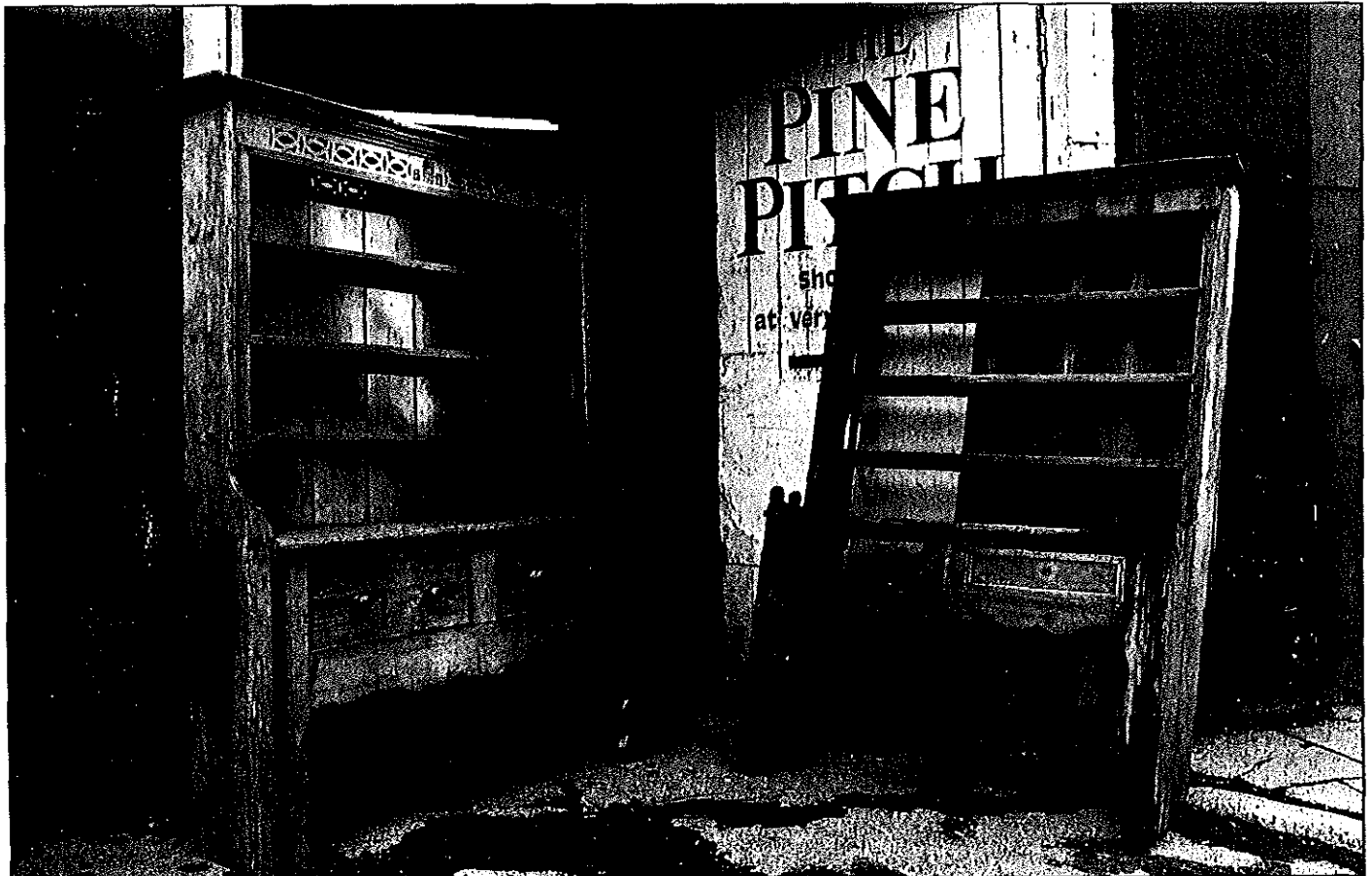
From that point on, the tale has various endings. The most popular one is that the owners say they'll think over the offer — usually in the range of thirty to

forty pounds. When the priest returns the next day, he sees the splendid hand-planed planks of the shelves broken apart, the back in shreds, the rough but well-carved cornices and other bits of ornament about to be thrown into a fire. "Ah, Father," the owner smiles, "The door panels are yours, a gift of course. As for the rest, we decided to keep to our original plan; it wasn't good enough for ye. We couldn't rob the church, you know."

The dealers don't always lose out, however. The owners of the Pine Pitch in Cork City may not dress up as priests when they roam the local countryside, but they manage to get some extraordinary pieces of country pine furniture in their travels. In little time those battered dressers, cupboards, tables, settles and chairs — often discarded and sitting out in someone's shed, moulting their multiple layers of paints — are stripped and fixed to look and function at their

optimum. What was thought no longer fit for use is six months later in a fine Irish residence or en route via container to the East Coast of America or to California, where it will grace a very different sort of home from the one of its origins.

The headquarters of the Pine Pitch are a few blocks from the commercial centre of Cork City. In a warehouse building on Hanover Street that bears the name "Countrywide Textiles Ltd.," the lettering painted on the door says "The Pine Pitch. Showrooms at very end of lane." In the eighteenth century, the Cork Glassworks were on the right hand side of that 'lane' — or narrow passageway. Today it is a veritable heap of country furniture: pieces crammed together and stacked on top of one another, most still in the 'before' stage. The passageway leads to a yard in which, weather permitting, objects are being worked on. To the right of that yard is a shed in



Dresser in a state of undress (right) and restored to new finery (left)

which those nimble of foot can get round the mass of hoop-back Windsor chairs, bed settles, and rugged kitchen tables — and on rare occasions items like 'famine chairs' and 'cleavies' (spit racks) — all full of primitive country character. These are arranged in no particular order, some still rough and others ready to go, some already sold and others still available. To the left is an office and two-storey warehouse space full of more of the same, but with definite footpaths between. The back of the building looks out onto the south channel of the River Lee, the body of water that makes the centre of Cork, in which the Pine Pitch is located, into an island.

Until seven years ago the building belonged to Dwyer & Co., a wholesaling and manufacturing company set up in 1821 by the ancestors of the owners of the Pine Pitch. In 1981 Mike and Joe Dwyer, age 27 and 31, one trained in accounting, the other in business and marketing, had been closing down their father's business, liquidating the assets and "casting around for something to do." Having read in an English magazine about 'dip and strip' franchises, they decided that they could simplify the process, and set up shop with an old water cistern filled with a solution of caustic soda.

Having grown up in an affluent Cork household in which most of the furnishings were well-polished mahogany, the Dwyer boys had scarcely seen the sort of painted country pieces that wanted stripping down. But after three or four months they decided to expand their business and start buying furniture of the type they were helping restore for others. They scoured the local auction rooms and bought pieces from 'tinkers' selling them at the side of the road. The tinkers remain a key source for the Dwyers and for their associate, Brendan Mulcahy. Also called 'the lads' or 'travelling people,' these roadside merchants descend from horse dealers who used to travel to horse fairs and are, according to Joe Dwyer, 'reputed to have sold chargers to both Napoleon and Wellington.' Like their ancestors, they live on the side of country roads for four months of the year. Today they provide farmers with modern furniture, carpets and farm gates, in exchange for which they often take old furniture, like dressers and blanket chests thrown out in a field.

At times the Dwyers' dealings with the travelling people have their share of acrimony. Joe recalls a time when one of them came to him in a van. After selling a chair and a chest of drawers, he offered,

for £150, a 'bed press' (cupboard with a folding bed inside) that was on the top of his vehicle. Joe thought it was worth about forty pounds and told him to go away. "The fellow followed me into the workshop. He stood in front of me bringing it down minute by minute. Eventually he said thirty pounds, but I wasn't biting. I was too annoyed. So he went out and met my brother, to whom he offered it for seventy pounds. Mike kind of led him back into the laneway while they were still talking and asked him in front of me how much he was looking for. And when he said seventy pounds we lit into him and had a right shouting match. We used every word in the book and ended up buying the piece for fifteen pounds."

By the time The Pine Pitch people acquire a piece from the travellers it has generally changed hands several times. If "junior members of the tribe" acquired it from the farmers, they often sell it for cash the next day so that they can buy more goods for trade. By the time it is available to outsiders, any chance of a provenance or history of the piece is lost. Therefore it is almost impossible to ascribe a precise date or origin to most of the furniture at the Pine Pitch. Joe Dwyer says that the exceptions are the very



designs made in mahogany in recognisable styles in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries. Beyond that, "The style of the furniture simply depends on the shape of the house it was in. In coastal regions the furniture is lower, because the low-ceilinged houses were built for protection against the winds of the sea. The materials were poor, and they didn't have boards strong enough for big pieces. But from the midlands — Waterford, Limerick and Kerry — where the farmland is very rich and the houses larger, you see a different style. 'Strong farms' is our term for those places that didn't suffer during the famine and that produced well made, bigger proportioned, carefully decorated pieces" — a bit more 'up market' than what would have been used in thatched cottages. The pine furniture on those strong farms was generally in the kitchen, painted annually in lead-based ochres and reds that are virtually unreproducible today.

About the only other regional distinction that can be made is that dressers from the west of Ireland have a 'boot foot' — a simple rectangular base underneath the leg. "The idea was that with mud floors the foot was going to rot,

was not necessary in the midlands, where the houses were dryer, but there is no explanation for why it occurred only in the west and in Ulster, since the dampness problem is the same in all coastal regions.

The reason pine was used only in small cottages or in the kitchens or larger dwellings is that, although it was imported into Ireland, it was considered inferior stuff. Brendan Mulcahy points out that often the pine in fancy houses "would have been covered with screed or plaster of Paris, to give it a very flat finish. Then they grained it to look like oak or walnut or mahogany." Oak, once plentiful in Irish forests, had been largely used up for timber or shipbuilding, which explains the popularity of an ancient Irish lament — from a necessarily anonymous poem about the rape of the forests by the English — 'Cad a dhéanamid feasta gan ahmaid?' ('What will we do from now on without timber?').

According to the Dwyers and Brendan Mulcahy, pine began to be brought in from Russia, Scandinavia and North America in the eighteenth century, initially for all the joinery work — internal doors, staircases, skirting

Dwyer has a theory as to how the wood made its way to the countryside, particularly in the south. Cork was a major butter centre. From all over Cork and Kerry, there were wagon loads of butter constantly arriving in Cork City. When those wagons went back to the country, presumably they took the necessities like timber that were otherwise unavailable. In addition, timber reached coastal regions by boat.

"The pieces of furniture were made either by local craftsmen or journeymen carpenters who would go around to the various towns or villages, as did journeymen tailors. They travelled to places where the population was too scattered to employ such people full-time. Naturally the carpenters didn't take their timber with them; it had to be waiting."

One of the few indigenous materials used in the early furniture was Sugán — intertwined hay or straw. It is used for chair seating. The lucky visitor might see a Sugán chair or two in the laneway leading into the Pine Pitch. Generally these belong to Brendan Mulcahy, whose love for the most rustic Irish furniture led him three years ago from graduate school in psychology to the antiques business.



Pine Pitch practitioner at work

He works by happy arrangement with the Dwyers, helping to sell everything at the Pine Pitch but owning some of the smaller pieces himself. He often ferrets them out in derelict houses that have their doors open, after going to the nearest habitation and finding out the name of the owner, generally someone's heirs who consider the remaining contents of the house of little value.

The Sugán chair, hand-pegged, almost has a look of Adirondack stick pieces, but seems centuries older, part of a more ancient culture. Its interwoven straw seat, on which the seed heads of wheat are still visible, would have been redone every year before the harvest. Brendan had to look hard to find a source for proper Sugán today. He finally located someone who knew the weaving technique and bought a whole field for the hay. Harvested in late June or July, that hay takes about three months to prepare. Brendan's only concession to modern technology is that he then uses sealer on it, eliminating the need for annual repeats.

Sealing the pieces, taking them apart and reassembling them with the boards tighter, using filler as necessary: these are the sort of services the Pine Pitch provides. They respect the pieces for what they are, but want them in working order. Often buying furniture when it is still painted, after immersing it in the tepid bath of caustic soda solution they then pressure-wash it before removing

softened paint. They do leave some gaps and wormholes, however, which is why many Irish people still view the roughest of their wares with contempt. The reminders of poverty are too strong.

Brendan Mulcahy points, however, to "a growing awareness among Irish people" of their native furniture: hence the sales to Cork City inhabitants. But country pine furniture is not yet held in great esteem on a museum level. Rumour is that the National Museum in Dublin has a good collection that was given to it all at once years ago, but that is never on display. At Muckross House, a folk Museum, Brendan has seen items he considers gems, but sitting out in the rain. Most of the clients of the Pine Pitch remain outside the country — Germany, France, South America, and the U.S., where the trade buys it in bulk. An afternoon's work for the Dwyers can consist of negotiations with visiting tinkers interrupted by phone calls with a San Diego antiques dealer (for whom it is early morning) and with Simon Pearce, the Irish-born potter, who sells some of their items in his shop in Quechee, Vermont.

The quality of their service is one of the great distinctions of the Pine Pitch. They fix things up according to the clients' wishes and happily deliver to obscure locations. One American family with a cottage on the southwestern coast of Cork arranged on one occasion for the Pine Pitch to include large cartons of duvets

(bought a few blocks away) with a van load, and on another for a see-saw to be part of a delivery. Their apologies were met with the reply that this is the sort of thing the Pine Pitch likes to do.

But what a laugh there was on the other end. When the van pulled up at the renovated cottage over an hour from Cork City, the neighbours gasped. If the Americans wanted a settle like that, they need only have walked down the road to the lobster fisherman's; he would gladly have swapped his for something new. The farmer at the corner had just that sort of dresser, albeit in yellow and brown, which he didn't much care for. Well, what could you expect from people with their odd appliances and different ways? But there's no saying who had the last laugh. After all the neighbours' talk of their hidden treasures, the van from the Pine Pitch returned to Cork City far from empty.

*The Pine Pitch, at 20 Hanover Street, Cork, is open from 9 to 5.30, Monday to Friday. They also have a small shop, with fully restored pieces only, at 29 Washington Street West, that is open from 10 to 5.30, Monday to Saturday. The phone number for both is 021-373131. Brendan Mulcahy also shows pieces at antique shows on the east coast of the U.S. and has some of his furniture for sale through Frederick Brown Custom Finished, 20 Wareham Street, Boston.*

