

BAD CAMP FURNITURE GETS NAILED!



Take a look at the illustration above. You have seen lots of chairs like this around reenactment camps, haven't you? Well, it is likely that no Civil War soldier ever saw one in his camp, and if he did not see them between 1861 and 1865, you should not be seeing them now.

The author does not know the history of these two-piece, take-down "camp chairs" for sure, but he has been told that they were invented by a prison inmate in the 1930s. His earliest recollection of them is in "L. L. Bean" or similar catalogs in the mid-1970s. No similar chairs appear in any Civil War era photograph known to the author, and he has examined hundreds searching for them. They appear in not one of the many 19th century furniture history books available to the author, nor do they show up in period catalogs or advertisements. They superficially resemble folding "miner's chairs" of the 19th century, but the resemblance is not close enough to permit their use in simulating such chairs. Yet they have become among the most common styles of seating seen at reenactments. No matter how handy and comfortable they may be, these chairs have no place at reenactments. Their best use at Civil War events is as kindling.

A curious feature of most such chairs offered to reenactors is that they are assembled with Phillips head screws. Screws of this sort only came into use decades after the Civil War.

What to do for a good "camp chair," then? For most impressions, do without. For the great majority of the time, the great majority of the soldiers had nothing but *terra firma* upon which to sit, perhaps padded by a gum blanket and/or a wool blanket. A log, before it found its way into the camp fire, might have provided a good seat. A split log with stick legs might be crafted into a primitive puncheon stool. An empty ammunition box or hardtack crate or other shipping box would have provided really luxurious seating, until they, too, failed to survive a frosty morning. (*We hope*

to have articles about boxes soon.) There were "camp chairs," the most common apparently being the ones with canvas bottoms and backs and curved arms so often shown in pictures of General Grant and other high-ranking officers. But the key phrase here is "high-ranking" -- privates did not carry such seating around in their knapsacks and could not have afforded such specialized furniture in the first place.

If you portray ranking officers or troops pretty well settled in for garrison duty or someone who has just looted a nearby residence (*which ideally should be on site and in sight!*), you might be able to justify a real chair. Many styles of 19th century American chairs are then available to you. You can get old ones at antique shops and, sometimes, decent reproductions in unfinished furniture stores and elsewhere. Check out a good furniture history book from the library for guidance. Look for "country" or "ladder-back" chairs. "Arrow-back" chairs, often with the backs missing, were common country seating and the kind of thing you might have seen around camp. Take a look at Harold Peterson's *American Interiors* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971, ISBN 0-684-16182-6) to see what was available for soldiers to swipe.

Beware of modern, shiny finishes. Avoid modern aluminum hardware, too -- the author heard of a reenactor recently, who, when asked if his modern director's chair (with aluminum alloy fixtures) was authentic, responded, "*Sure, it's made out of wood and canvas, isn't it?*" Nonsense -- by that standard World War One airplanes made out of wood and canvas would be OK for Civil War events!

The above essay is directed primarily at soldiers, but ladies who portray refugees, please pay heed! Do you really think that many mid-19th century American households, especially southern ones, had large supplies of collapsible "camp" furniture conveniently on hand when it came time to flee the old homeplace? It seems most unlikely.

Copies of the canvas-bottomed, curved-armed folding chairs seen in period photographs are available. We will bring you review of them in a future edition of *The Watchdog*.

SOURCES

- Fairbanks, Jonathan L. and Elizabeth Bidwell Bates. *American Furniture 1620 to the Present*. New York: Richard Marek Publishers, 1981.
- Neave, Milo M. *Identifying American Furniture*. Nashville: American Association for State and Local History, 1981.
- Yates, Simon. *An Encyclopedia of Chairs*. Secaucus, NJ: The Wellfleet Press, 1988.

-- N.H.