



AN UNUSUAL WELSH COMB BACK

ONE OF MY FAVORITE CHAIRS, THIS COMB BACK HAS THREE STICKS FOR THE BACK, WHICH IS UNUSUAL. MOST COMB BACK CHAIRS HAVE FOUR STICKS OR MORE. THIS CHAIR IS ON DISPLAY AT ST FAGANS.

CHAPTER IV

STICK-IONARY

One day a woman stopped by the shop to buy a chair. She looked over a pair of stick chairs on my workbench and asked the price. At the time I was charging about \$800 to \$1,000 for a simple armchair. I told her the price, and it was like I had initiated romance using a cattle prod.

“Uh,” she said, trying to collect her composure, “how much for a ‘regular’ chair?” I must have looked confused.

“You know, just a regular chair with... regular chair parts and a seat,” she said.

I sent her to a local antique store on Madison Avenue that always had some 19th-century chairs in the window for less than \$100. She was grateful and headed that direction.

It was then that I decided that stick chairs must therefore be “irregular chairs.” To be honest, calling them “irregular chairs” is a good label for them. For the most part these chairs were made by farmers or people who weren’t professional woodworkers. But the term doesn’t help us discuss the different forms these chairs can take.

Some forms of stick chairs look like the maker imitated a high-style chair from the city or a painting. Other times the chair looks like it appeared to the maker after eating expired mayonnaise. As a result, sorting them into categories can be difficult. Some chairs are obvious; others are on the far side of odd.

This chapter is an attempt to bring some order to the vernacular chairs I’ve obsessed about since the 1990s. I am concerned here with stick chairs only – sticks that are driven into a solid seat. I’m not trying to classify the different kinds of ladderbacks or chairs made predominantly with square mortise-and-tenon joints (sometimes called framed chairs).

For the most part I have used terms that I’ve seen in descriptions of antiques in catalogs. But sometimes I had to make up a category to explain the chair before me. Please forgive me.

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SOME CAVEATS, ETC.

Almost all of the following chair forms have been built as (or converted into) “necessary” chairs – basically toilets. Additionally, almost any form of stick chair can be reduced in size for a child. Sometimes they will add restraints to keep the child in place. Sometimes not.

This is also the best place to answer some general questions about stick chairs. These questions (and answers) can apply to almost any chair in the taxonomy below.

Q: Why would a chair or stool have three legs? To keep it stable on an uneven floor.

Q: Why four legs? To provide additional stability on an even floor. Three-legged chairs are stable to a point, and when you pass that point you will have found the floor.

Q: Why would a chair have five legs? To improve the stability of a four-legged chair that might be too tippy. This is fairly common with vernacular chairs. The maker didn’t rake the chair’s back legs enough to accommodate a sitter as she leaned back. To make the chair more stable, she added a fifth leg at the rear to steady things.

Q: Why would a chair be built without stretchers? It’s simpler to make. And when a leg becomes loose, it is easier to repair. However, chairs without stretchers might not withstand overweight sitters as well. Many stretcher-less chairs have survived hundreds of years, so they can be strong. A thick seat, stout legs and good joinery go a long way.

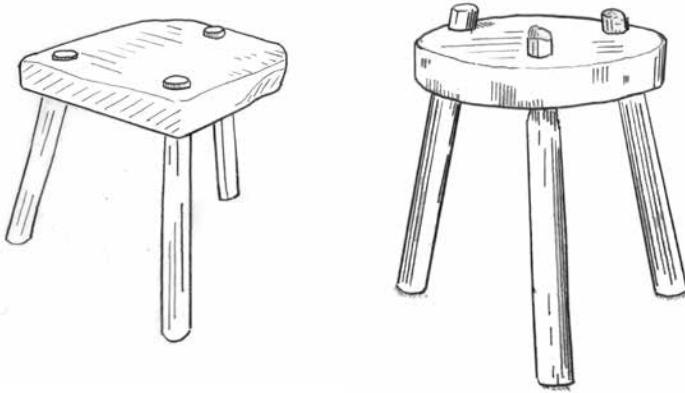
Q: Why would a chair have stretchers? The construction can be stronger. Or stretchers can be added to shore up a chair with a thin seat or thin legs. Stretchers can also add ornamentation.

Q: Are the seats saddled (e.g. carved to fit the buttocks)? Sometimes. In my experience, most vernacular chairs have a flat seat. Sitters could make these flat seats more comfortable with an animal skin, blanket or pillow. Some vernacular have some material scooped out for comfort. And occasionally you’ll find one that is beautifully shaped.

Q: Are the legs’ tenons tapered or cylindrical? The vast majority of vernacular pieces use cylindrical tenons. Tapered joints can require additional tooling and were more common on quality factory chairs.

Q: Were the chair parts rived, sawn from solid or harvested from hedge-rows? Yes. The builders would use whatever was on hand and best for the task.

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TWO LOW STOOLS

THE STOOL AT LEFT IS LIKELY WELSH. THE ONE ON THE RIGHT IS IRISH. THE PROTRUDING TENONS ARE A COMMON PROBLEM ON THESE HARD-USED HOUSEHOLD ITEMS.

CREEPIE, MILKING STOOL, FOOTSTOOL, LOW STOOL

A very low stool, usually about 10" or lower. This low stool can be a single block of wood at times (i.e. a thing with no legs). Often a creepie has an irregularly shaped seat and three legs. Stretchers are uncommon. The seat can be lightly saddled (or perhaps worn to a concave shape) or flat. Legs are usually shaved, hewn or rough splits. But turned legs show up in the furniture record.

The low seat height was useful in homes heated with wood without good ventilation. By sitting low to the ground on a creepie, the sitter could breathe easier. They were also ideal for children.

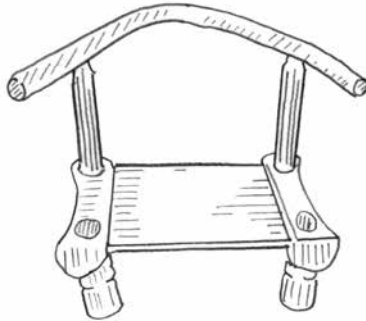
The milking stool is a common variant on the low stool. It is similar to a creepie but is designed to be used for milking cows and goats. Milking stools can have three legs or even just one leg, with the stool attached to the sitter with a belt. Another common feature of milking

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A SEAT-HEIGHT STOOL

THIS STOOL, SOLD AS A WELSH EXAMPLE, HAS A TYPICAL SIX-SIDED SEAT THAT IS SIMPLE TO MAKE WITH ONLY A HANDSAW.



A CHILD'S STOOL

AN UNUSUAL STOOL THAT HAS TURNED LEGS AND A BRANCH THAT MAKES A SIMPLE BACK.

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A SHEFFIELD WORKSTOOL

THESE THREE-LEGGED STOOLS WERE FOUND IN SHEFFIELD FACTORIES. THE LEGS ARE ROUGH BUT THE FORM IS APPEALING.

stools is the seat is pierced with a hole (usually oval) that acts as a handle to make it easy to carry the stool at the farm.

STOOL, SEAT HEIGHT

A seating platform that is higher than a creeper – typically 10"-18". The seat can be a variety of shapes: round, square, rectangular, elliptical, pentagonal, irregular etc. Stools can have three or four legs and may or may not have stretchers connecting the legs. Legs can be rude splits, shaved, six- or eight-sided or turned.

Like with any staked piece of furniture, the mortises for the legs can be blind (they terminate inside the seat) or they can pass through the seat and be wedged from above.

WORKSTOOLS, HIGH STOOLS

Workstools are similar in all respects to the stool but are taller than chair height (18"-30"). Typically used for working at a bench, workstation or machine.

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A GERMANIC BACKSTOOL

NOTE THE BATTENS BENEATH THE SEAT. THESE THICKEN THE THIN SEAT AND MAKE THE BACKSTOOL MORE ROBUST.

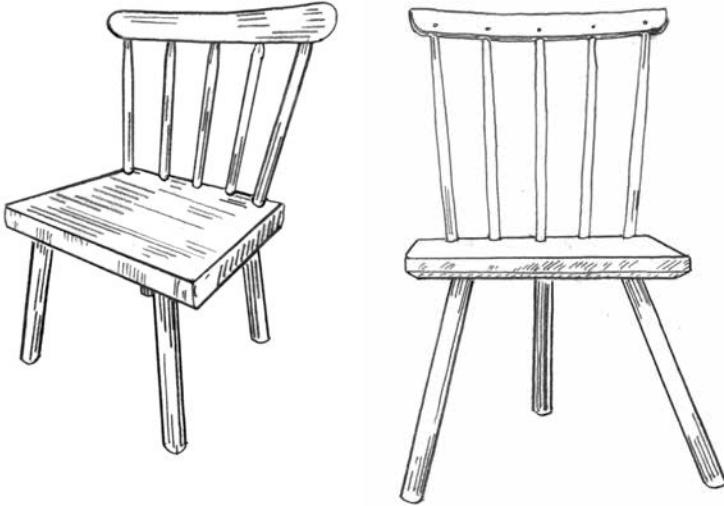
BACKSTOOL

A stool that has a simple back – usually a solid plank – added for back support. Backstools can have characteristics of any of the other members of the stool family (a tall workstool with a back might be used as a barstool, for example). The back is typically tenoned through the seat and held in place with wedges or pegs. Backstools are sometimes stools that have been converted with an added back.

Backstools have several styles of seats. They might have a seat that is a single slab of wood. Another common variant uses a thinner plank of wood as the seat with two battens on the underside that thicken the seat where the legs are attached. These battens can be attached to the seat with fasteners, or they can be held in place in dovetailed housings cut into the underside of the seat. This style is common in the Germanic countries.

Any slab seat can be made with a single plank of wood. Also common is what some call a “modified” seat, where a seat has been made

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TWO SIDE CHAIRS

SIDE CHAIRS ARE BACKSTOOLS WITH A BACK MADE OF SPINDLES – INSTEAD OF A SINGLE PLANK.

deeper by adding another piece of wood to it (usually with dowels or other fasteners). These modified seats may have been created by the original maker. Or the wood was added later to make the seat deeper and more comfortable.

Like with any stick chair, the legs can be rough splits, octagonal, six-sided or turned. They can also taper in diameter. Germanic stick chairs will taper down toward the floor. Many other cultures reverse this with the legs tapering down toward the seat.

SIDE CHAIR (A BACKSTOOL WITH SPINDLES)

A seat at typical chair height (15" to 18"). The chair features a crest/comb that is supported by spindles. The crest supports the sitter's back only and does not extend around to support the arms. Plus there are no added arms (that's an armchair and is covered later). The legs can be made by various techniques, from shaving to turning. The undercar-

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SIDE CHAIR WITH A DOOR SEAT

THE FRAME-AND-PANEL CONSTRUCTION OF THE SEAT ALLOWED THE MAKER TO USE SMALLER BITS OF WOOD TO CREATE A SEAT.

riage may or may not have stretchers. The chair may have three, four or five legs. The seat, typically a single plank of wood, can be almost any shape, as per the backstool.

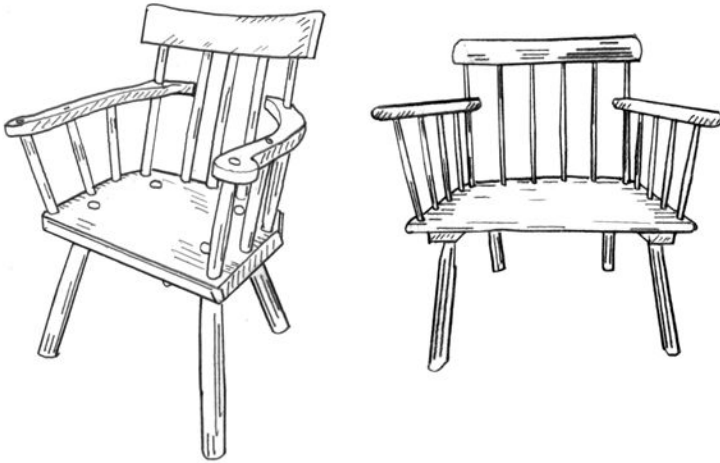
Another less-common form of seat is a frame-and-panel construction that is skinned with thin wood. It can look – at first glance – like a slab seat. But a closer look reveals the frame construction. The legs are tenoned into the thick frame members. These are occasionally called “door seats” because their construction resembles a door somewhat.

The sticks above the seat can be straight cylinders (like a dowel), slightly cigar-shaped (this bulging is called “entasis”), turned or irregular. Sometimes they are branches right from the tree.

ARMCHAIR

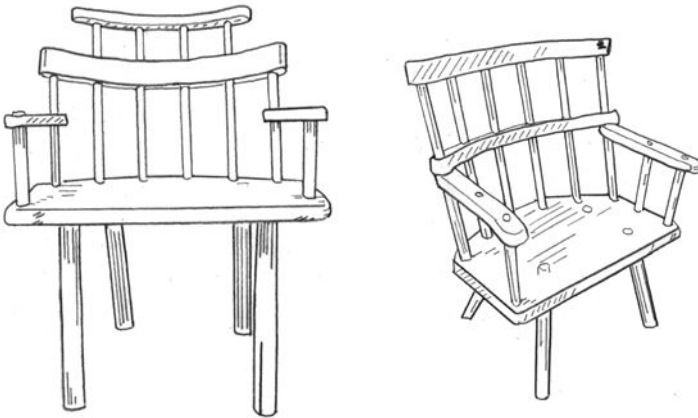
Armchairs are a side chair with two separate arms that are linked in some way to the chair’s back, usually via the chair’s back spindles. The arms are at a lower height than the crest of the back. The back itself can be nearly upright or pitched backward at a dramatic angle (such as the Irish Gibson chair). The seat and legs can take almost any form, as per

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TWO ARMCHAIRS

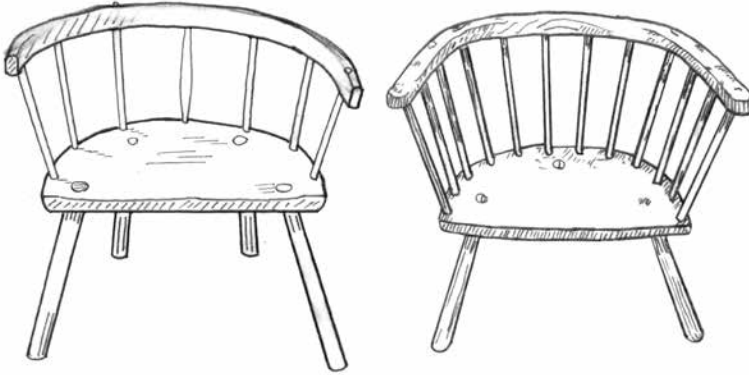
NOTE HOW THE ARMS ARE LINKED TO THE BACK STICKS. THE ONE AT LEFT IS IRISH. THE ONE AT RIGHT IS INTERESTING BECAUSE OF ITS THIN SEAT AND BATTENS.



TWO ARMCHAIR VARIANTS

THE CHAIR AT LEFT HAS AN ADDED LOW CREST RAIL (SOMETIMES CALLED A COMB). THE CHAIR AT RIGHT HAS AN ADDITIONAL BRACE ABOVE THE ARMS.

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TWO TYPICAL LOWBACKS

IN LOWBACK CHAIRS, THE ARM SWEEPS ALL THE WAY AROUND THE SITTER, PROVIDING SUPPORT FOR THE BACK AND ARMS.

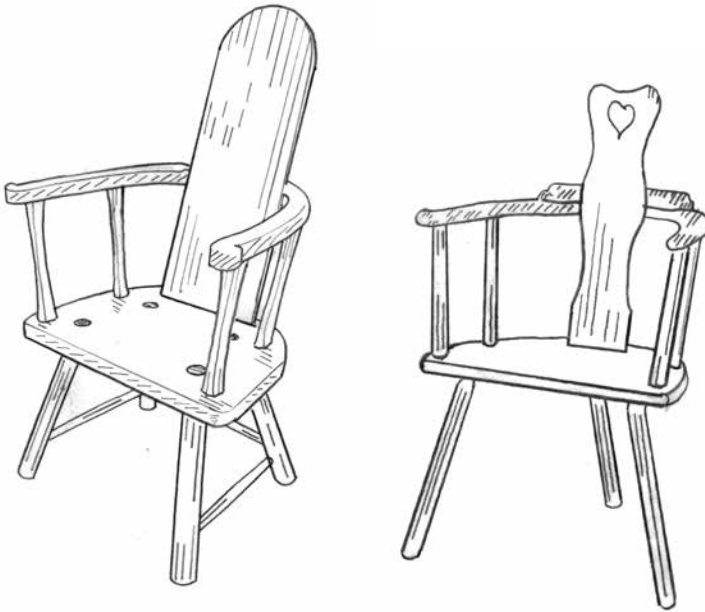
all the stools and chairs above. Stretchers may or may not be present.

A common variant on the armchair is where additional structures have been added to the back assembly. Sometimes the addition is a small crest above the lower one. Or it can be a horizontal support below the crest that links the arms. These additional structures are typically added to increase the strength or comfort of the chair.

LOWBACK

Lowbacks features a seat that is chair height (15" to 18") with an armbow that surrounds the sitter on three sides. The armbow can be a single piece of wood – bent or naturally curved. Or it can be pieced together from multiple pieces of wood that are joined. Sometimes the armbow is thickened at the back with an additional piece, sometimes called a doubler or a shoe, which can provide additional support for the sitter's back. The armbow is typically attached to the seat via a number of spindles, though sometimes there is a solid splat or larger turned posts as well. The undercarriage can have three, four or five

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LOWBACKS WITH BACKPLAT

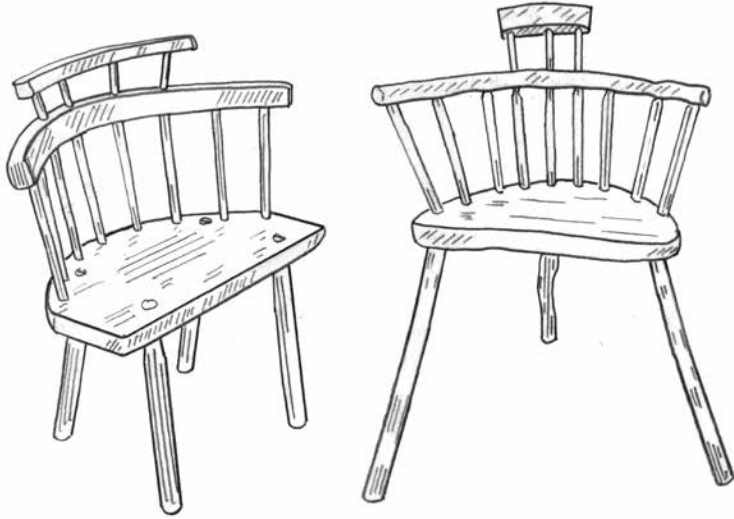
THESE LOWBACKS FEATURE A BACKPLAT – MUCH LIKE THAT ON A BACKSTOOL
– TO HELP SUPPORT THE SHOULDERS OF THE SITTER.



ROOTBACK VARIANT

A COMMON AND EARLY WELSH CHAIR, THE ROOTBACK FEATURES A NATURALLY
CURVED LIMB TO SUPPORT THE BACK AND ARMS.

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TWO LOWBACK VARIANTS

THESE LOWBACK CHAIRS HAVE AN ADDITIONAL CREST THAT IS ONLY SLIGHTLY ABOVE THE ARM.

legs. The legs may be shaved, sawn, split or turned. The chair may or may not have stretchers between the legs.

Lowback and backstool variant: Sometimes a backstool also has an armbow supported by spindles. This common variant has a solid backsplat that is tenoned into the seat and is wrapped by an armbow. The armbow is joined to the backsplat. And the armbow is also attached to the seat via spindles.

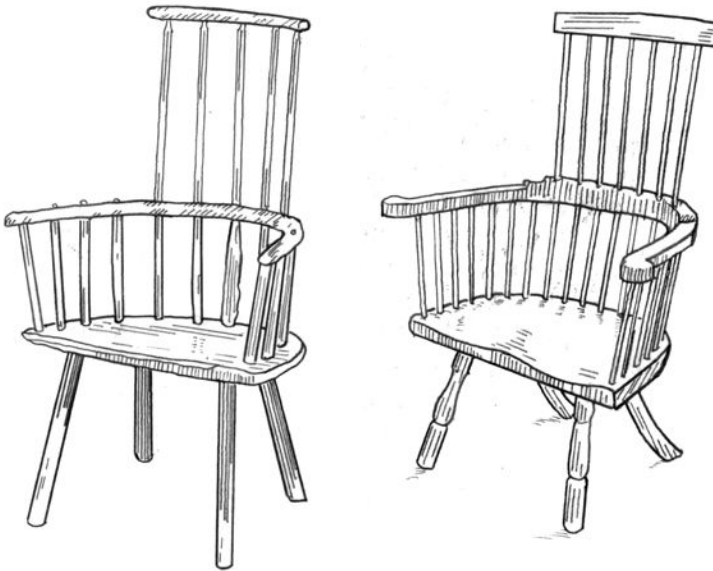
Rootback variant: A variant of the lowback chair where the arm is a single curved branch or root with a shallow curve. The typically massive arm is curved enough to provide some comfort to the sitter's arms, but it rarely has the 180° turn of a typical lowback's arm. The arm occasionally has a doubler or can feature a thicker section of the arm that acts as a doubler. The arm may be supported by shaved, turned components or squared-off spindles. The undercarriage features all

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LOWBACK WITH LINKED ARMS

THE ARMS OF SOME LOWBACKS ARE STACKED ON TOP OF ONE ANOTHER INSTEAD OF BEING JOINED TOGETHER.



TWO TYPICAL COMB BACK CHAIRS

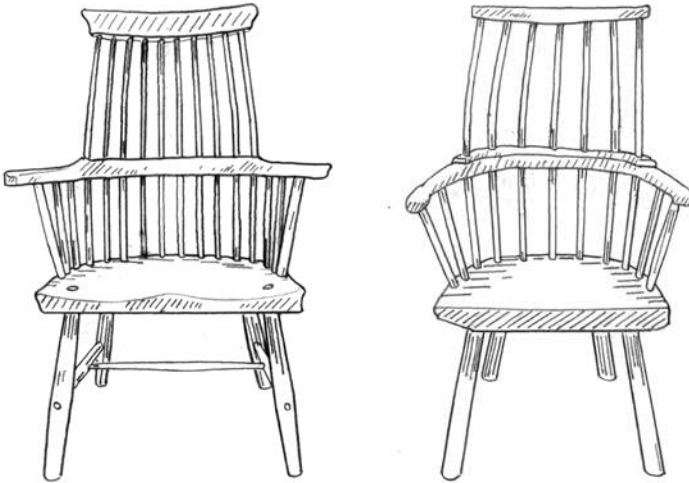
THEIR KEY FEATURE IS THE COMB OR CREST HIGH ABOVE THE ARM.

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COMB BACK WITH SPLAT

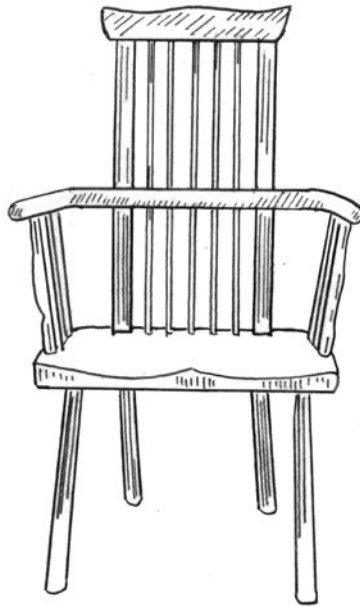
A COMMON VARIANT ON THE COMB BACK IS TO ADD A SOLID BACKSPLAT THAT LINKS THE SEAT, ARM AND COMB.



LOBSTER POT COMB BACKS

NOTE HOW THE STICKS ABOVE THE ARM TEND TO BEND TOWARD THE CENTER-LINE OF THE CHAIR.

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COMB BACK WITH A FRAMED BACK

IN THIS VARIANT, THE BACK (AND POSSIBLY OTHER PARTS OF THE CHAIR) HAVE BEEN BUILT WITH SQUARE MORTISE-AND-TENON JOINTS.

the variations found on lowback chairs, stools etc.

Lowback with additional low crest variant: A variant of the lowback with a crest/comb that extends a bit above the arm but does not provide complete support to the sitter's shoulders. These uncommon chairs appear aimed at supporting the small of the back.

Lowback with linked arms variant: A lowback variant where the arms and back pieces are not joined together but are stacked or somehow linked together, occasionally via the spindles.

COMB BACK

These common chairs feature a seat that is chair height (15" to 18"), a single and continuous armbow and a crest/comb that is tall enough to provide support to the sitter's shoulders. The comb can be simple

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COMB BACK WITH ADDED BRACING

SOME COMB BACKS CAN BE QUITE COMPLEX, WITH ADDED BRACING ELEMENTS BETWEEN THE ARMS, BACK AND OTHER MEMBERS.

– just a flat board. Or it can be curved or ornate with scrollwork. The undercarriage of the chair features three, four or five legs, which may be turned, shaved or split. There may or may not be an undercarriage. The seat can be a wide variety of shapes, from a natural-edged plank to more complex geometric forms.

The armbow is typically supported by spindles, which can be turned, shaved, split or scrounged. The armbow can be a single piece of wood that has been curved by the maker or features a natural curve found in the tree or hedgerow. The arm may also be pieced together using several pieces of wood that have been joined together via stacking or with scarf joints. It is rare to find steam-bent components in vernacular chairs. The arm may or may not feature a doubler/shoe. The crest/comb is supported by multiple sticks that are tenoned into the seat and

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COMB BACK WITH MODIFIED SEAT

THIS TYPICAL COMB BACK CHAIR HAS HAD ITS SEAT EXTENDED AT SOME POINT IN ITS LIFE. THE EXTRA PART IS COLORED RED.

pass (unglued) through the armbow and are then tenoned into the crest/comb. These sticks are tall enough to support a sitter's back.

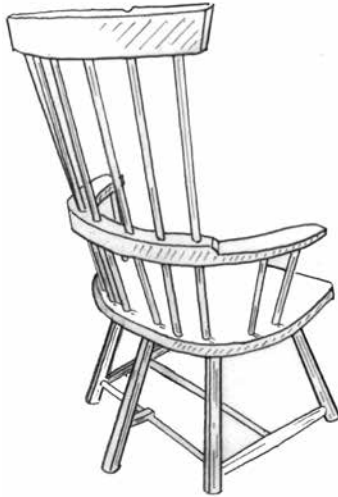
The crest/comb may or may not come in contact with the typical sitter. The comb can be a straight piece of wood, a naturally curved branch, a piece that has been bent by the maker or a curved piece that has been sawn out from a larger piece of solid wood.

Comb back with a splat variant: A comb-back variant that features a center plank between the seat and the crest/comb called a "backsplat." The splat is typically shaped and may at times be pierced with decorations. The splat usually joins the armbow in some manner.

Lobster pot variant: A comb-back variant where the back sticks are bent above the armbow to pinch in toward the centerline of the back.

Comb back with a framed back variant: A comb-back variant where

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COMB BACK WITH FIFTH LEG

THE FIFTH LEG RESTRAINS THIS CHAIR FROM TIPPING BACKWARD. THIS EXTRA LEG APPEARS ON CHAIRS WITH REAR LEGS THAT DON'T HAVE A LOT OF RAKE OR SPLAY.

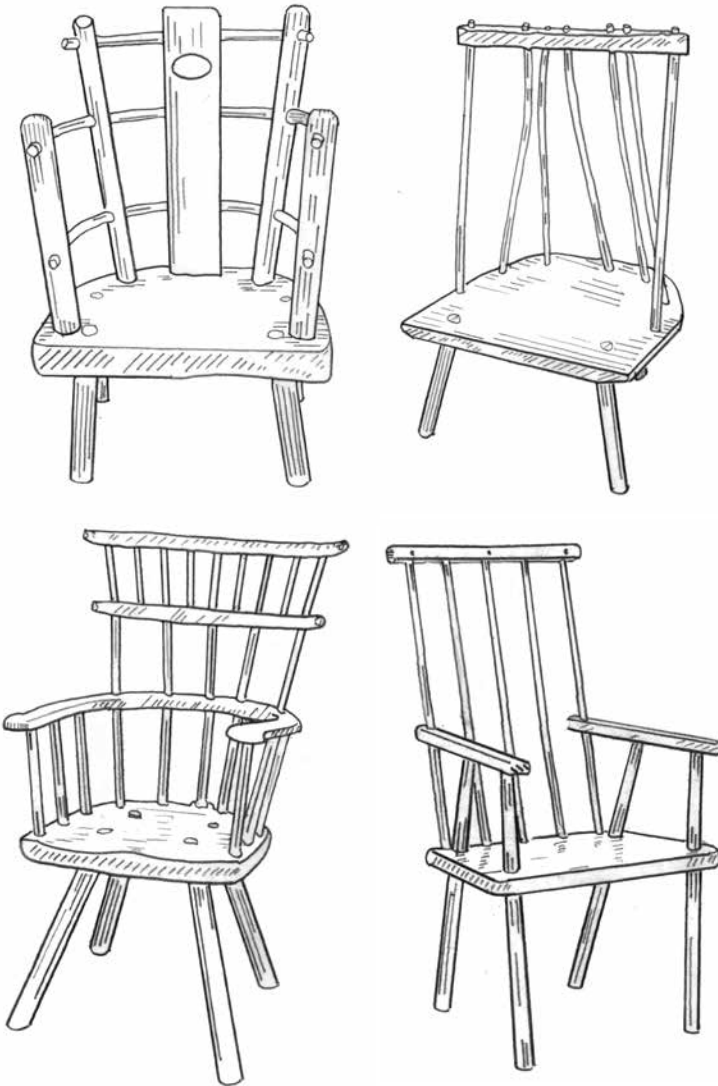
the back members (and perhaps other elements of the chair) are built more like a window or door frame than a stick chair. These frames may feature square mortise-and-tenon joints.

Multi-tiered comb-back variant: A comb-back variant where additional supports have been added during construction for decorative and/or structural reasons. These additional tiers may join the back spindles to the arms.

ESPECIALLY IRREGULAR CHAIRS

There are many chairs that don't fit into any category because they are singular. Sometimes it could be a bent root (or two) fashioned into a chair-like object. Or a chair built more like a boat, but with stick chair construction.

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HIGHLY IRREGULAR BEAUTIES

ONE OF THE JOYS WITH VERNACULAR CHAIRS IS THAT SOME OF THEM DEFY CLASSIFICATION (OR LOGIC).

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SUTHERLAND CHAIR

MANY VERNACULAR CHAIRS DEFY CATEGORIZATION, SUCH AS THIS EXAMPLE IN “IRISH COUNTRY FURNITURE: 1700-1950” BY CLAUDIA KINMONTH.

Other irregular chairs include Windsor forms, such as a sack back chair, that has been built with a seat, legs or arms that would look more at home on a vernacular chair. Also in this category are chairs that look like stick chairs but are built using square mortise-and-tenon construction throughout.

In fact, this category of chairs is so diverse that it could encompass an entire book – a book that I (and perhaps four other people) would enthusiastically purchase.