



Chairmaker

Mr. Fisher Snell was born on January 6, 1922 in Barham, Louisiana. Mr. Snell was an orphan raised by his grandfather and uncle. His uncle, Mr. Henry Ford, was a professional stockman who taught Mr. Snell how to work with rawhide. His uncle used all possible materials from his animals in order to support himself and his family, including processing skins for sale. Mr. Snell dropped out of school after the seventh grade to live with his uncle and work with him. After he was shown how to use a lathe, chairmaking was always a side job for him. His actual profession was operating a body shop. Upon retirement to his home in Provencal, Louisiana, he and his wife, Robbie, began making and selling chairs. He is presently teaching his great-grandson the family's chair-making craft.

While Snell uses the Prewitt pattern, he, like many modern chairmakers, does not make the bent chairs that Sims and Prewitt made; he cannot afford to wait all winter for a chair back to cure and bend. Snell also makes a chair called the Hagan Rocker, a chair that he and friend Theron Hall redesigned to make more comfortable and attractive. Snell also has his own designs and often makes a piece of furniture completely from scratch. Snell, who also makes toyboxes and chests of cedar, attributes much of his success as a chairmaker to his versatility. He explains, "while other chairmakers make one type of chair, one pattern of a straight chair, one pattern of a rocking chair and maybe a little chair, I can make two kinds of little ones. I make five different rocking chairs, I make three cornered stools. I make square stools. That's what a lot of them can't do." When making his chairs, Mr. Snell uses very simple materials and tools. His materials are hide and local wood; his tools are a utility knife, sandpaper, and a pattern lathe.

He explains, "I'd take a hickory pole about three inches in diameter, and drive it between logs. I went through three chairs before the part being rounded or turned on the lathe would come up." Although Fisher lives thirty miles from the Texas border, he is closely tied to a Texas chairmaking tradition. Two of the patterns that they use, the Prewitt Ladder-Back Straight Chair and the Prewitt Rocker, were used by Texas chairmaker Creighton Sims, who began making chairs in the late 1800s or early 1900s. Sims passed his craft down to his son-in-law John Prewitt, who moved to Florien, Louisiana.

While Mr. Snell no longer travels to Festivals to demonstrate his craft, he was included into the Louisiana Folklife Center, Hall of Master Folk Artists in 2001.