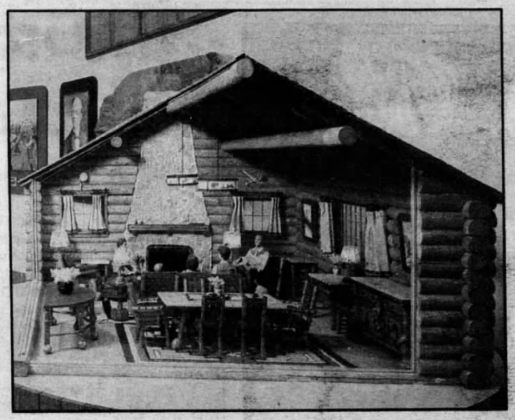
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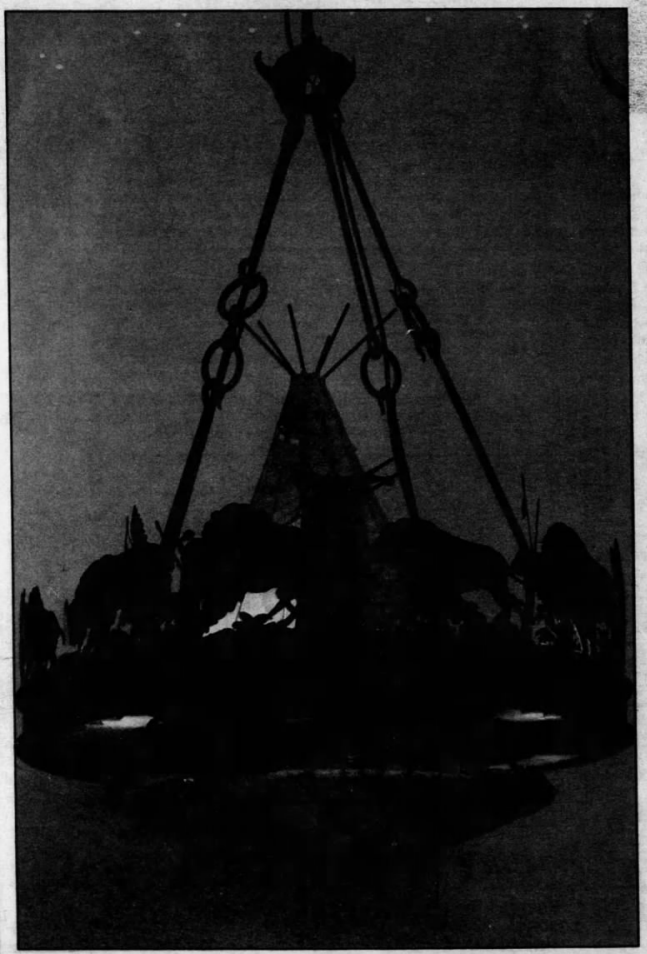
The work of Thomas Molesworth retains its vigor over the years

WILD WEST FURNITURE



Originally used as salesman's samples, this tiny furniture was shown to prospective clients to generate orders for Thomas Molesworth's craft. It is currently used as an exhibit in the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints Visitor's Center in Cody, Wyo. With dining room chairs only 6 inches high, this miniature suite was constructed with the same material as the full-size pieces.

Photo by Bob Weiglein



Measuring more than four feet from edge to edge, this hand-wrought chandelier shows Indians and buffalo circling a painted rawhide tepee. It comes from the lounge at Pahaska Tepee Resort, west of Cody, Wyo.

By TOM HOWARD
Gazette Cody Bureau

CODY FURNITURE MAKER Thomas Molesworth left his mark on American culture with sturdy, rustic furniture that evokes the spirit of the American West.

A summer exhibition at the Buffalo Bill Historical Center in Cody, Wyo., pays tribute to Molesworth, whose Shoshone Furniture Co. turned out the wood and leather furniture that is admired for its design and cherished for its durability.

"Interior West: The Craft and Style of Thomas Molesworth," also represents a departure from tradition for the Historical Center, a world famous repository of Western art and culture. It is the first decorative arts exhibition ever held at the Historical Center. The exhibit runs through Sept. 10.

A Molesworth trademark was the use of pine burls — knobby, rounded growths from diseased tree trunks — in his wood and leather furniture. The more common use of a wood burl in furniture construction involves cutting it crosswise to reveal its intricate grain, said Wally Reber, the BBHC's assistant director and co-curator of the Molesworth show.

But Molesworth incorporated burls into the structure of his furniture, creating massive, gnarled arms, legs and feet.

Molesworth was born in Kansas in 1890, and his father moved his family to southeastern Montana during his early years. Molesworth attended the Art Institute of Chicago in 1908-1909 with the idea of becoming a painter. He returned to Billings to make a living after the completion of his first year of school.

After a series of jobs and a stint in the U.S. Marines during World War I, Molesworth moved to Cody in 1931 and opened his own furniture company, deciding "he'd rather die broke than work for someone else," in the words of his son, Lee Molesworth. His Shoshone Furniture Co. operated for 30 years.

Molesworth's career took off in 1933 after he received a commission to furnish the Wyoming hunting lodge of Pennsylvania publishing magnate Moses Annenberg. His work soon appeared in famous western hotels such as the Pendleton Hotel in Pendleton, Ore., the Wort in Jackson and the Plains Hotel in Cheyenne.

Molesworth was influenced by the Arts and Crafts Movement, a school of design that began in the 1880s as a response to the machine age and the accompanying loss of craftsmanship.

His pieces incorporated contemporary design reinterpreted with western rustic themes. "He was a leader in the decorative arts movement of the 20s and 30s," said Paul Fees, senior curator of the BBHC and co-curator of the show.

Researching the exhibition grew into an engaging, multiyear task for Fees and Reber.

The exhibition was originally planned as an early-season show, but grew into a major exhibition after Reber and Fees learned more about the depth of Molesworth's work.

The 125 pieces included in the show "is just scratching the surface," of Molesworth's career, Reber said, noting that Molesworth furnished at least two yachts. "It was really fun putting this show together."

Molesworth's furniture has a western flair but it's also functional, a theme that's emphasized in the show. Many visitors have to be reminded not to sit on the furniture, Reber said.

BUT MOLESWORTH did more than build furniture. He often designed a room from floor to ceiling, as illustrated in a room re-created for the exhibition.

His work includes intricately welded chandeliers, wrought iron ashtrays, burl lamps and fireplace screens decorated with western motifs. Even a wooden table included in the exhibition is decorated in Molewsorth's unique style.

National publications are taking a renewed interest in Molesworth. In a 1987 article about Buffalo Bill's TE Ranch southwest of Cody, Architectural Digest described Molesworth as "one of the most original and considerable figures in American design. The work reflects a keen awareness of Art Deco translated into wilderness terms."

One of Molesworth's finest commissions was done in 1940 for TE owner Robert Woodruff of Coca-Cola.

A New York Times article published in June places Molesworth at the forefront of a boom in Western- style cowboy furnishings that were inspired by Western movies of the 30s through the 50s.

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