Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society

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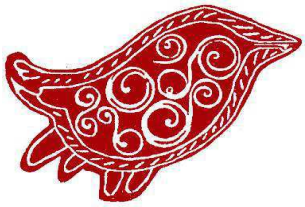

Title: West Cork vernacular furniture makers: comparative analysis of field studies in a coastal community, Part I

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Journal of the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society, 1997, Vol. 102, page(s) 121-132

Published by the Cork Historical and Archaeological Society

Digital file created: September 20, 2017

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West Cork Vernacular Furniture Makers:

Comparative analysis of field studies in a coastal community (Part I)

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INTRODUCTION

The following article is based upon fieldwork and archival research done in the late 1980s towards the author's MA thesis for The Royal College of Art/Victoria and Albert Museum's joint History of Design Course. Since that thesis was finished in 1988 further research was carried out culminating in the publication of the book *Irish Country Furniture 1700-1950* (Yale University Press, 1993, 1995). The book deals with furniture from the whole of Ireland, whereas this article focuses in detail upon aspects of a handful of vernacular furniture makers from a range of trades, in an area well known to the author. The time span encompasses the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, reflecting the age of the surviving artifacts upon which the work depends.

The region under study encompasses the market towns of Rosscarbery to the east and Skibbereen to the west, concentrating on the immediate vicinities of the villages of Union Hall, Glandore and Leap. The present population is small and rural. The villages traditionally were centres for people to live, work, converge on for provisions and to attend church. In many ways this pattern has remained unchanged, although the influx of tourism, and developments in the fishing industry, in the economy and in communications have increasingly wrought changes. In the 1800s the post office district of Myross, on the western side of Glandore was described thus: 'population of parish 2,221; of village (including fishermen off coast), 869.'[1] The coastal area is one of wild and contrasting scenery and rugged terrain, visited in 1723

Fig. 1. Early nineteenth-century, two-storey, three-bay stone and slate house, occupied by Paddy Crowley's family until the middle of the nineteenth century. Situated in Cooldurragha townland, near Raheen. Photographed in 1988 prior to modernization.

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by Dean Swift, who was so enchanted by its beauty that he wrote the Latin poem *Carberiae Rupes* in its praise. Daniel Corkery, writing during the 1920s described it as 'one of the most secret places in Ireland, without traffic, almost without the pulse of life.'[2]

The two different main market towns turned out to serve two distinctly separate sections of the rural community. Geographically the village of Union Hall was not closely linked with neighbouring Glandore and Leap until a wooden bridge was erected at some point between 1850 and 1885.[3] This would effectively have reduced the distance between the two areas from about five miles by road to less than two. Before the bridge was built there was at least one ferry point, but it is unlikely that the cost and time of the journey would have been effectively offset by the wages of a working carpenter. People wanting furniture built would have been likely to employ someone from their own side of the estuary. This geographical separation of the two communities helps to explain some distinct differences in the furniture found in each area. Styles were also dictated by relationships between master and apprentice and the trade in which the makers were initially trained. The area was not wealthy enough to support specialist furniture makers; instead items were made if and when the need arose by a whole range of people: boatbuilders, wheelwrights and cartwrights, coopers, masons and householders themselves. Each worked in his own distinctive way, rarely leaving a signature other than the marks of his tools and the memories of the owners of the furniture, sometimes passed down through the generations.

ARCHITECTURAL VARIATION WITHIN THE FIELD STUDY AREA

Although my field studies were based initially on discussion and enquiry with people I already knew locally, followed by visits to suggested houses in the locality, they were not, as might be expected, confined solely to the older houses in the area. (The term 'houses' in this context covers the smallest one or two-room dwellings, which in England might be termed cottages, as well as larger and more complex arrangements of farmhouses and outbuildings).

The majority of the houses included in the survey were of a type ubiquitous in west Cork, two-storey, three-bay, gable-ended, with a chimney on both of the gables (see fig. 1). These generally date from the mid-nineteenth through to the early twentieth century, with slate roofs which sometimes were a replacement of an earlier single-storey stone house with a thatched roof. Ruins of the single-storey dwellings still remain and can be distinguished from animal sheds by the presence of a chimney; one or two in the region were still occupied in the late 1980s (see fig. 2).

Examination of Ordnance Survey maps of this area drawn up in 1842[4] shows scattered groups or single houses distributed along a network of tiny roads. Settlements of half a dozen or more houses sometimes attached to one substantial farmhouse were common, and used to be referred to in other areas of Ireland as 'clachans'.[5] Many of these groups are now ruined and often roofless, bearing witness to the terrible devastation wreaked on this area during the potato famine of 1845-47 and other subsequent famines that together claimed thousands of lives in this area alone.

The ruins of these early nineteenth-century settlements provide many interesting clues as to early forms of furniture: deeply-recessed cupboards on one or both sides of the fireplace, with stone slab shelves set into the thickness of the walls, suggest the predecessor to the built-in food press. Rotting timber frames around the fronts of these recesses indicate where a door would have been hung. Cupboards or presses such

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Fig. 2. Rare surviving single-storey stone and slate dwelling, consisting of two downstairs rooms connected by a steep fixed ladder to a loft above. Probably dates from the mid-nineteenth century.

as these still survive in many of the 'unmodernized' houses surveyed, and have often been lined with wallpaper. They are also a particular feature of the majority of west Cork castles and tower houses.

During field studies I noticed that many of the ruins and derelict houses which I explored contained wide hearths with built-in stone seats. Often the back wall of the hearth contains two tiny recessed cupboards, each with the capacity of about a square foot; these usually have a wooden door and would have been used to store small things that needed to be kept dry. An extraordinarily large number of houses are left to decay once their inhabitants have died or moved to different accommodation. Frequently I came across an overgrown house, with holes in the roof but still completely full of furniture and furnishings. Often there was a dresser still adorned with ware, and a settle beside the fire, all left to decay. Such houses provided an excellent source of study; sometimes it can be easier to photograph and examine furniture in an empty house than in an occupied one, although of course one doesn't benefit from discussions with householders.

Surprisingly perhaps, some of the oldest furniture is sometimes to be found in modern bungalows and council houses; it seems that a considerable number of people (mainly older, unmarried men) prefer to retain their old case furniture rather than adapt to a fitted kitchen. Although initially I tended to search out what appeared to be the older house type, I was often directed to modern buildings.

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FURNITURE MAKERS

Much of the furniture surveyed would have been made by woodworkers whose primary concern was not necessarily furniture making. A wheelwright might find enough work in that trade most of the year, and he would build furniture when the need arose. There was probably not a huge demand for new furniture anyway in the nineteenth century; the area was not prosperous, and the surviving examples show that once a dresser had been built, it was kept for as many generations as it could survive. There is likely to have been as much work repairing old furniture as there was building new.

Blacksmiths and wheelwrights were just two types of local craftsmen whose work had an important bearing on the locally-produced vernacular furniture. Throughout the research it became clear that it was rare to find a woodworker whose sole occupation was furniture making. In the majority of instances the furniture was made by someone who was also involved with a multiplicity of jobs concerning woodwork, from repairing the barrels used to salt fish on Union Hall pier to converting the steep ladder-like steps in the older houses to proper staircases, or making coffins, or building boats, all highly skilled and specialized aspects of woodwork on which the local community depended greatly.

Pat Cleary (schoolteacher, author and local historian) discussed the local area where he had been brought up,[6] and pointed out that because the village of Leap was situated on the main Cork to Skibbereen road, the inhabitants were more used to people passing through. Union Hall and Glandore were off the beaten track and thus considerably less open to strangers. He said that people travelled so little that as a local person you could tell from which townland a man came by his voice. Accents in very small areas were quite distinct and some people hardly travelled beyond their local church.

SHIPWRECKS AND THE SEA

> . . .there was plenty and abundance in the island — food of all sorts, clothes from head to heel, every man, woman and child with a watch in their pockets; not a penny leaving home; everything a mouth could ask for coming in with the tide from day to day — all except the sugar, which melted as soon as it touched the water.[7]

This description is of the aftermath of a shipwreck off Dingle Peninsula during the Great War of 1914-18. Ironically war time brought prosperity to some of Ireland's poorer coastal population through salvage of wreckage.

A high percentage of the rural population was involved in fishing, either employed on large boats off the coast or on a smaller scale; they went out spillering (a spiller is a type of fishing line with quantities of hooks, lowered off the side of the boat) in yawls fourteen to eighteen feet long. One of the few ways of making a living was by working a smallholding. Many people did both. Fish landed at the piers at Union Hall and Glandore would be salted and packed into barrels.[8] Life was centred around the sea, and so perhaps it is not surprising to learn that an interest in salvage of shipwreck was uppermost in many people's minds. The coast here is particularly rocky and was prone to regular navigational mishaps. People living next to the coast were able to keep a constant eye on anything the tide might bring in, claiming baulks of timber by dragging them up above the tide line. A single shipwreck could mean that local inhabitants prospered, for a while. The inhabitants of Rabbit Island gathered piles of wood and rubber and anything else that the sea brought their way, which they could then barter or sell to people on the mainland.

THE WRECK OF THE *ASIAN*

One story in particular stands out as being illustrative of the high value of 'wreck' to

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Fig. 3. Three-legged stool made from one of a pair of winch covers by Denis O'Mahony, who salvaged them from the wreck of the steamship *Asian* which sank in 1924. From the collection of Therese O'Mahony, curator of the Céim Hill Museum, Union Hall.

people who otherwise would find timber beyond their means. The ship concerned was a large steamer, *Asian*, built in 1898 and bound from New Orleans to Liverpool, carrying a load of cotton and general cargo.[9] On 17 September 1924 at 5 a.m. she struck the west side of the Stag Rocks. The same day the Bantry wireless operators reported to Lloyds of London that Captain Wood, his officers, crew and six passengers had all been picked up by HM destroyer *Seawolf*, and that one of the crew of the *Asian*, Fireman Flood, was the only casualty. By 10.30 a.m. the ship was 'breaking up fast' and the same day was declared a 'total wreck'. On 22 September the Liverpool and Glasgow Salvage Association's surveyor telegraphed this message to Lloyd's:

> Steamer *Asian*: Wreck totally submerged, approach impossible. Believe bulk cargo still in vessel, small quantity picked up floating consists 60 bales cotton, 330 barrels wax, 10 barrels oil, small quantity oak boards, stores. Local motor fishing boats on look out for cargo washing out.[10]

Such news always spread fast, and late in the evening of 17 September when Pat Cleary's father heard that the cargo ship had gone aground and was breaking up on the Stags, he put to sea from Leap in a rowing boat with several men to row through the storm some twelve miles to gather wreckage. Early the following morning they returned, physically exhausted, but towing behind them as much timber as they had managed

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Fig. 4. Built in pitch pine, 'four-door food press', kitchen table and 'carpenters' chairs', made by Paddy Crowley (born 1857, died 1940s). This example is unusual because of its central drawer.

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to gather. The family's kitchen table was then constructed by the local carpenter using the wreck timber for which they had risked their lives; his wages consisted of more of the same timber.[11]

The memory of this huge ship breaking up on the Stags is still clear in many older people's minds. The Customs Officers were so used to the frantic gathering of 'wreck' that went on, that they simply waited for a week before going from house to house searching and confiscating salvaged goods. One woman was pleased to have got hold of the captain's tablecloth, and upon seeing the uniformed officers approaching her farm, quickly threw it into the bottom of a bath full of washing, covering it up with clothes. They searched her house so thoroughly that the tablecloth was nevertheless found and confiscated.

Amongst the furniture in Céim Hill Museum is a three-legged stool which has been made out of a lathe-turned winch cover, one of the 'small deck fittings' noted by the salvage association (above) as having been picked up from the *Asian* as she broke up (see fig. 3). It was made by Denis O'Mahony (whose daughter Therese is the museum's curator) by adding three legs which are through morticed and wedged in the manner of 'hedge chairs'. He was a carpenter at one time apprenticed to Paddy Crowley, who had his workshop nearby. He made other furniture in the house and is known to have built boats as well as being the manager of the local creamery.

PADDY CROWLEY

One woodworker whose name kept being remembered by many of the older members of the parish of Union Hall and Myross was Paddy Crowley. A considerable number of pieces of furniture built by this man survived until recently in houses in the extreme south-western point of the parish of Myross. Paddy Crowley was baptized on 28 March 1857,[12] indicating that he was probably born a few days before, as babies were baptized in those times as quickly as possible. His parents, Catherine and Patrick James Crowley, lived in a small stone house on the top of the hill facing south, in the townland of Cooldurragha; it still survives today (see fig. 1). Paddy Crowley married a local woman in the nearby townland of Maulicarrane and he moved to live in her family house. There he had a small stone-built workshop, which still stands. An elderly neighbour can remember, as a small boy, watching him at work:

> It wasn't a very big workshop you know, he would do any big work outside, making cabinets like. He used to make cars (carts) too and then he would have to make the wheels . . . chairs and tables and cupboards were the most things. . .I'm sure it must be all wreck timber they used. . . .

In a house nearby survives a large 'four-door press' (cupboard) which the family say was built by Paddy Crowley (see fig. 4). It is of a traditional Irish style, almost two feet deep and with two shelves in each of the upper and lower sections. This one is unusual because it has a single drawer stretching the whole width of the cupboard, effectively dividing the top half from the bottom. The drawer construction is with nailed lap-joints rather than dovetails, and instead of the drawer bottom running in a rebate as one might expect, it is nailed upwards onto the drawer sides, with the grain running from side to side. The owners decided that it had probably been built around the turn of the century, as it was before they were born, and they didn't recall Paddy Crowley building anything as huge as that once he was an old man. He died sometime in the 1940s, and was buried in nearby Myross graveyard, where no headstone commemorates him.

The timber he used for the doors is pitch pine, which would probably have been salvaged 'wreck', and for the drawer linings

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white pine. At the same time as building the food press he had built the back door into the kitchen, which is a rare surviving example of a door in two halves, complete with wooden latch. I was shown the carpenter's tool chest salvaged from the wreck of the *Arona* which went down off the Stags in 1889. It still had some of its original tools inside and the story goes that at the same time '. . .big puncheons of rum and cotton and flour. . .' were also rescued.[13] The salvage tradition is just as strong today as it was a century ago, although the prizes have changed; above the *Arona*'s tool chest I was shown a long oar from one of the lifeboats of the *Kowloon Bridge* which sank with a terrible spillage of fuel oil on the same treacherous rocks in November 1986.

At right angles to the hearth in the kitchen is a rare surviving example of a settle-bed. Painted pale blue to match the other kitchen furniture, it is of a type that has through mortice and tenoned 'open arm' construction at each end (as opposed to the slab-ended variety common in Ulster). Underneath the arm-rests the carpenter has taken a spokeshave and cut a series of curving 'Cupid's bows' which are a favourite local decorative motif. The settle remains customarily unpainted on its seat, and the base would have opened out forwards onto the floor to create an enclosed double bed. It has been painted repeatedly to the stage where it can no longer be opened, but it still retains the blacksmith's wrought iron hooks and eyes attached at each end to hold it shut. Along the front below the seat is a series of six tall rectangular panels, set in rebates. The front edge of the panels have been chamfered all around rather than having an applied moulding, a technique typical of a wheelwright, as it lightens and decorates simultaneously, without the need to use extra valuable timber.[14]

A tale that is told frequently around Union Hall describes how when travellers used to visit long ago they would be fed in the kitchen and offered the settle-bed to spend the night in next to the fire. They used to be trusted and welcomed then in a way seldom found today, but it was considered safer to have them sleep indoors than out in the barn, where they might smoke and start a fire accidentally.

CARPENTERS' CHAIRS

Amongst the other furniture in the same kitchen are several pale blue painted chairs, of a type referred to locally as 'carpenters' chairs' (see fig. 4), which were also made by Paddy Crowley.[15] This chair type was once locally common, varying considerably in detail and decoration, but they all have in common thin boarded seats, pegged mortice and tenon construction, and back supports that are continuous with the back legs. Frequently they display the fashionable influence of the English Regency 'sabre-leg', which when viewed from the side curves inwards below the seat. Paddy Crowley's 'carpenters' chairs' display this subtle curve on the front legs only, while some others have curved back legs. An interesting point concerning this emulation of Regency design, is that in incorporating such a curve, the carpenter would have had to use a wider piece of timber than if the back of the chair was straight, so the concession to fashion was an uncharacteristically extravagant one in an area short of timber.

The arrangement of stretchers and their relation to each other as well as the patterns of the chair backs and legs are the best way of differentiating one maker's work from another's. This type of furniture is so rarely signed that identification via signature would be impossible. Sometimes these carpenters' chairs have lathe-turned front legs, although they were the exception rather than the rule (see fig. 8 in part 2 of article in next issue). There is evidence that they were batch produced on a small scale; several of the

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carpenters locally kept thin wooden patterns or 'jigs' of the special curves on the front and back legs, indicating that they were used to making matching sets, and that it was the sort of thing that they would be called on to make again and again (see fig. 5).

Certainly this theory is born out by the remarkable number that still survive. One retired carriage maker in Skibbereen proudly showed me the hand-morticing machine that was used to cut mortices fast and accurately to make such chairs.[16] It is highly unlikely that a small-scale maker like Paddy Crowley would have been able to afford such machinery. The surviving majority of these chairs were made of pine, not an ideal chair-making timber as its weakness across the grain calls for thicker cuts of wood than oak, or any of the other less easily obtained hardwoods.

The kitchen table is a typical example of the local straight-legged, double stretcher variety; it has one drawer at one of the short ends, and the top, which would once have been scrubbed regularly, is now covered in the ubiquitous oilcloth. It is kept in the customary position under the front kitchen window, which provided good light and a view of approaching visitors (see fig. 4).

Fig. 5. Jig, template of pattern used to mark out repeatedly the shapes of back legs and back rests for 'carpenters' chairs'. From a workshop in Skibbereen.

PADDY CROWLEY'S DRESSERS

In the farmhouse to which Paddy Crowley moved when he got married there is a particularly fine dresser, painted pale blue and salmon pink and decorated along the top as well as up either side of the display shelves (see fig. 6). Dressers in this region are now usually painted in two contrasting plain colours or more recently simply one colour (fig. 7). Throughout the various surveys several distinctly different methods of producing decoration on dressers were observed. The different techniques involved were likely to have been influenced by the variety of tools in each carpenter's kit. For several reasons it became established that this particular dresser was made by Paddy Crowley; not only was it in his kitchen where he made a special removable clevy, but also close examination showed that it was likely to have been made in the late nineteenth century. His relatives, still living there, agreed that it was highly likely to be his work.

Another clue that the dresser was made by Paddy Crowley, was that amongst all the various dressers examined within the locality, this one seemed to have had more time spent proportionately on decoration than any others. A carpenter who builds a dresser in his own kitchen is far more likely to spend extra time making it particularly pretty, than if he is being paid by someone else on a tight budget. Once built it would stand as an example of his work of which he could be proud, as well as generating more work as a result. Paddy Crowley's distinctive technique

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Fig. 6. Built-in pine dresser made by Paddy Crowley for the kitchen where he lived, painted pale blue and salmon pink.

of decorating the facia board below the cornice consists of taking one board and cutting a series of variously-shaped 'scoops' along the lowest edge (probably by using a spokeshave), then nailing onto that edge a thin length of moulding of a similar thickness. The result, once painted, at first glance gives the impression that the cut-out pattern might have been worked with a bow saw or a coping saw from a single board, as on other dressers. If he had owned one of these special types of saws, it is unlikely that he would have gone to the extra trouble of assembling the facia board in two parts. A bow saw is not strictly speaking an essential part of a carpenter's tool kit; it is useful for cutting complicated curves in the centre of a board, but unless one is specializing in decorative work, one could do without it. Paddy Crowley evidently did very well without it; we know that he had a spokeshave in his kit because of the way he made chairs. He did a fair amount of house carpentry as well: staircases, doors and windows, as well as building carts and wheels and probably coffins too, none of which called for 'fancy' tools like the bow-saw.

Another of Paddy Crowley's dressers,

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Fig. 7. White painted pine dresser also made by Paddy Crowley, late nineteenth century, and with slightly less complex spokeshaved decoration surrounding the display shelves than on his own kitchen dresser (see previous fig. 6).

nearer the village of Union Hall, displays the same method of decoration using the cut-out edge and applied moulding, but this time he has gone to less trouble to vary the curves and uses an equidistant row of simple scoops (see fig. 7). Comparison of the two dressers highlights some notable details; they both have an identical profile of pattern on the shoulders (the part of the dresser where the vertical sides narrow to form the panels, the same distance between and interrelationship of upper shelves, and identical scratch moulding along the top of the cornices) (compare figs 6 and 7). Both of them were originally built into the fabric of 'the Room' wall, i.e. their backing boards used to be part of the parlour wall.

The row of coloured glass fishing floats along the top of Paddy Crowley's own dresser seems to be part of a coastal tradition (see fig. 6). The woman who now owns this special dresser says 'they have always been there but they're a terrible sweat to keep clean'. This display tradition also

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occurred in coastal areas of the west of Ireland.[17] Glass fishing floats were used extensively by local fishermen until the last quarter-century when they began to replace them with the most robust aluminium and plastic equivalents.

It is interesting to note that two or three other dressers in this same vicinity were found which exhibited the same technique for facia board decoration; these ones were considerably older than the two just described and may either have been role models for Paddy Crowley's method or perhaps were made by an older craftsman whose work he observed. The older ones are of a style characteristic of the early nineteenth century in the Carberies, distinctive because of their raised front cupboards which leave a space about a foot or more high beneath. It seems that Paddy Crowley (born in 1857) adopted the latest rather than the older design of dresser for his clients.

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11 Discussions with Pat Cleary, N.T., Skibbereen, 8 Jan. 1988. CK Notebook No. 3, p. 20.

12 Register of baptisms, Parish of Castlehaven and Myross (1842-1890) p. 63.

13 Discussions with the O'Sullivan family, 13 Sept. 1987. CK Notebook No. 1, p. 114.

14 George Sturt, *The wheelwright's shop* (Cambridge U.P., 1923) pp. 79-82. On the use of the spokeshave to chamfer edges on carts, Sturt remarks that 'Usefulness, not beauty was wanted'. This is in the context of a farmer ordering a cart and requesting that no chamfering should be carried out, misunderstanding its vital lightening qualities. Sturt goes on to add: 'Truly he was justified had this been so. Any farmer might well deprecate such extravagance on his tackle'. I tend to think that the beauty of chamfering *was* appreciated, or it would not crop up so frequently on door and furniture panels. 'Butterflying' is a common form of decoration around panels in this field study area due to the nineteenth-century proliferation of local wheelwrights who also built furniture: '. . .wheelwrights, delighting in their craft, would spend costly minutes "butterflying" here and there. A "butterfly" was a shallow design, nicked out at the middle of a timber edge. . .Quite useless, it refreshed the workman's temper. . .It was decoration...'.

15 They are an identical pattern and show the same construction characteristics to chairs belonging to a neighbour, who said hers had certainly been made by Paddy Crowley.

16 John O'Sullivan (carpenter, retired) of North Street, Skibbereen, still has all the traditional hand and machine tools used by him and by previous generations of his family for furniture making.

17 With two exceptions: the first is of a dresser set up as part of a 'reconstruction' in the newly formed Knock Folk Museum display, Co. Mayo. Knock is about 23 miles inland. The other dresser with glass fishing floats along the top was at Glencolumbkille Folk Museum, Co. Donegal.

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