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When is a door a bench? When Brett Bigham makes furniture. He loves to rescue old architectural castoffs, Goodwill furniture, estate sale finds—bits and pieces of yesteryear's treasures—and make furniture out of them.

Don't be surprised to find an old stairway spindle forming legs to a table. An old desktop made into a bench seat. An ancient headboard becomes the bench's back. Old stuff the rest of us toss out gets transformed into something totally new in his hands.

Bigham, 36, also teaches special ed classes for Portland Public Schools. He specializes in behaviorally troubled youth and has the bite marks on his arm to prove it. Making his home in Southeast Portland with his two dogs, he is single but "always looking."

Four years ago, Bigham started making birdhouses out of bits of wood left over from his ex's building projects. He enjoyed making them and putting them in his yard. Soon, he noticed the neighbors were stealing them, so he made more.

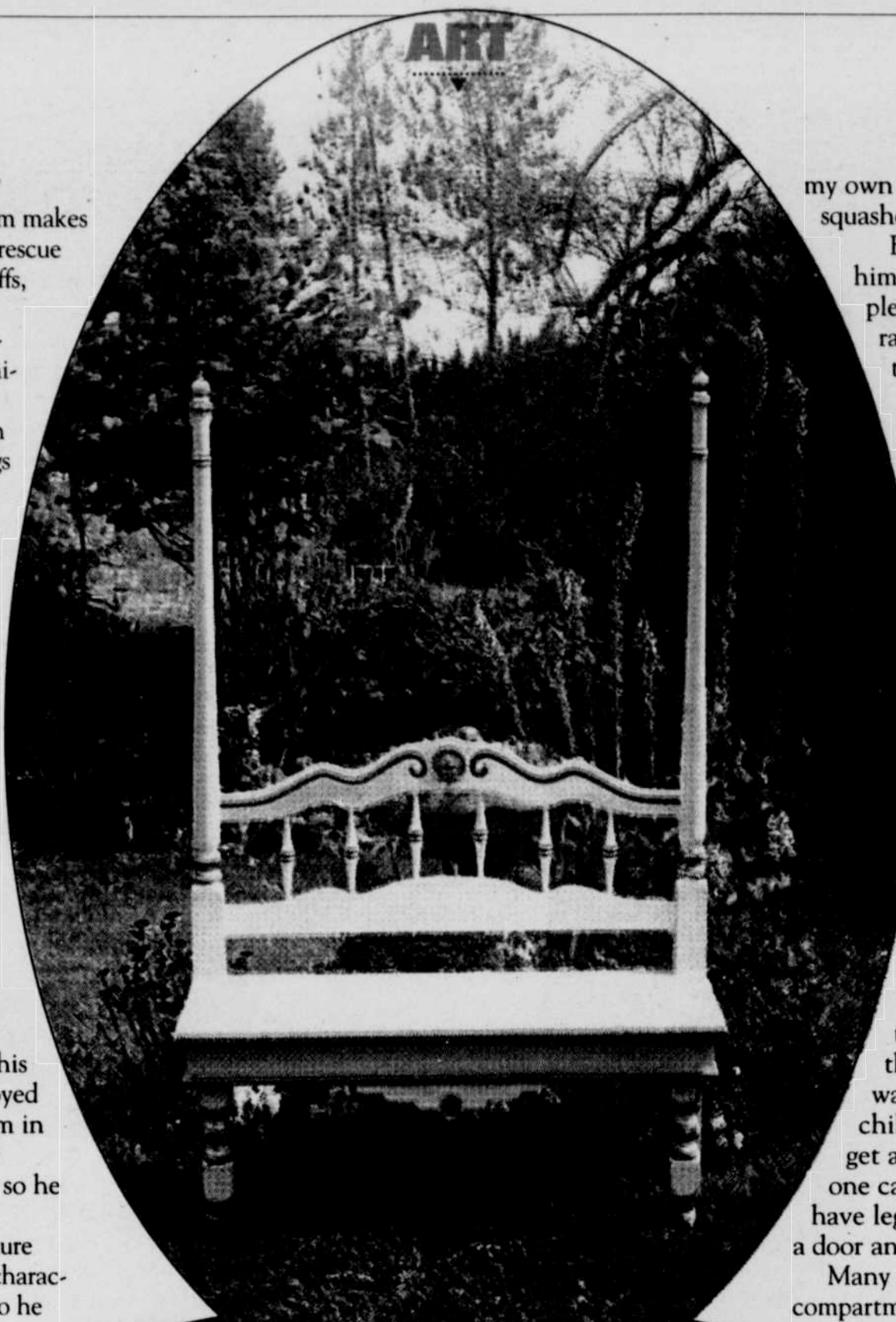
Then, he graduated to furniture pieces, each unique and full of character. Friends wanted those, too, so he made still more.

When his friend Lisa Schroeder started her restaurant, Mother's Bistro and Bar, in downtown Portland, she commissioned him to furnish the place. He built tables, benches, shelves and booths, and when that project was done, he kept right on building.

Bigham donated one of his pieces, a coffee table with a carved top, to the Cascade AIDS Project and was delighted to find that it was auctioned off for \$900. What began as a hobby is now a business—and business is good.



Brett Bigham and his handiwork at Mother's



Building a new business

Purloined birdhouses lead Portland man into a whole new field

By Heron

Bigham's furniture recalls older architectural styles, and each piece looks heavy and sturdy with rigid right angles. Panels and trims add visual weight and interest.

Although each member or bit of trim might have come from a different species of wood or be a different style of carving, the whole works to make a new and unique design.

The antique effect is furthered by Bigham's finishes. Painting in muted secondary and tertiary hues or off-whites, he then distresses the surfaces to give the effect of aging.

Some of his pieces also are gilded. The finishes help blend the old and new woods into a cohesive design.

I found Bigham's pieces to have more style than comfort, but any of them would look right at home in older houses or add interest to contemporary decor. He calls his business Black Dog Furniture Design.

"To me, building a piece of furniture is a puzzle," he says. "Part of the fun is finding the pieces to make what's in my head."

Bigham doesn't like to build to fit too many specifications. "When I can't do

my own designs, I feel like I'm being squashed."

Bigham laughed when I asked him how he felt about straight people assuming he is an interior decorator because he is a gay man. He tells a story about one of his early benches and how he had painted it solid green. As he was delivering the finished product, which was tied on top of his car, he was horrified when it began to rain.

"Paint started streaming over my windshield," Bigham says. "By the time I got there, the finish was ruined."

When he showed it to the new owner, she oohed and aahed over the clever "distressed" look before he could explain! So instead, he varnished the piece to protect the wood and called it done.

Bigham travels to Bali to buy carved wood for his furniture, and he's happy to tell you the story behind his pieces the way a parent might talk about his children. Wind him up, and you'll get a whole story about how each one came to be. A bench might have legs from a trash bin, a seat from a door and trim from a foreign land.

Many of Bigham's pieces have hidden compartments not even the new owner is aware of. He hides little notes in these compartments congratulating the finder and asking them to write in their name and the date of discovery.

So, what kind of furniture does Bigham have in his own home?

"I have no furniture," he says.

His work sells fast, and he's kept busy making furniture for other people. He knows what he wants for his home, though.

"I have all the pieces," he says. "But they're all in my head." 

You can find BLACK DOG FURNITURE DESIGN creations at Greg's, 3707 S.E. Hawthorne Blvd., and 3 Monkeys, 803 N.W. 23rd Ave.

HERON is a Portland free-lance writer and artist.



One of Bigham's shabbily chic tables