

## A Place for Hopes and Dreams

*From the Scottsville Monthly Newspaper, by Ruth Klippstein*

Arthur Lane and Marie Combs Lane, area natives and Scottsville High School graduates, returned to Scottsville to retire in 1999. Now they share their history with us, spreading out books on their dining room table, with photographs, magazines, and other materials achieving the dynamic rise of the Lane Family, whose many members and activities range through our local history and beyond, telling one the remarkable stories of the South.

For many, the name Lane and the term cedar chest are synonymous. No mistake: The Lane Company was once the largest producer of such chests and tried hard to make them a necessary piece of furniture for us all. Here is the text from a 1920s "Saturday Evening Post: advertisement: "And now...to kindle romance in maiden breasts... to simplify June gift giving (commencements, engagements, weddings, birthdays, confirmations) ...to bring home to women everywhere the priceless benefits of a big, beautiful, fragrant, moth-killing cedar chest..."

Another ad from the same period shows three chests, "built to sell from \$40 to \$50," offered during Girl Graduate Week for \$25 to \$35. One is the "beautiful Dowling Dowry Chest-steeped in the romance of the past. Here is the hope chest, and hers is how our story unfolds."

Two members of the Lane family – John Haden Lane – Arthur Lane's great grandfather, and his brother William George Lane, lived in Fluvanna and joined the Confederate Army together. According to the pact they made, when William was killed at Gettysburg, John Haden returned to marry the widow and adopt his nephews. The new couple had four more children and lived at Broken Island, now across from Lake Monticello.



Arthur and Marie Combs Lane



Lane Cedar Chest Ad from Saturday Evening Post – November 10, 1923

John Haden Lane was not interested in farming, however; a 1924 article in "Virginia," by the American Historical Society, calls him a "teacher, soldier, scholar and author...especially interested in the literary pursuits." He bought land in Porter's Precinct, now on Porter's Road, soon after the Civil War, calling his place Esmont Farm. John Haden established a small furniture shop.

Not having much experience with the work, Lane started small. He purchased his lumber from neighbor Tom Henry Childress, chiefly walnut and cedar. One of the first articles manufactured was a small stool. Marie proudly displays a very early Lane stool, its rich old wood in several tones of reddish cedar, the top-remaining as they inherited it-with fraying woven brown strings. Sturdy and functional, it only hints at the chests, chairs, and furniture to come.

Henry Lane's wife, Arthur Lane's grandmother, lived at Esmont Farm for 60 years. This is where author Jan Karon now resides. His grandmother, a "very aristocratic" person, was in charge of the farm; she was a strong-minded manager, Arthur remembers, as he laughs away the word "bossy." Marie says she still recalls the old woman sitting on her porch, doing "a lot of embroidery and crocheting."



Laura and Henry Lane

The Lanes have the walnut bed made in 1890 for his great grandparents, probably from Childress trees, graced with one of his grandmother's crocheted covers (right). The dark wood headboard rises quite high, with elegant and restrained hand carving. Lane tells how long bolts secure the bottom of the bed, which is solid. The bed's dimensions are between those of a current double bed and a queen size; the Lanes had to have a mattress custom-made to fit.



1890 Lane Walnut Bed Adorned with Grand's Crochet Cover

The Lane brothers built a brick office building in Esmont, now the post office. Business was growing, as well as the family. In 1888, Henry Lee Lane, Arthur's grandfather, a self-taught engineer, went into the railroad business with his brother John. He was underage at the time and John acted as his guardian in legal affairs until he reached 21.

Their first contract was building a rail line between Bristol and Big Stone Gap for the Southern Atlantic an Ohio, later the Southern Railway. The other brothers joined the firm, and after a period of poor financial management – bidding too low for contracts to make a profit – the young company was working successfully for the Chesapeake and Ohio as well as the Baltimore and Ohio in North Carolina, Maryland, West Virginia, and Virginia.

To handle this scope of business, they incorporated as Lane Brothers Company in 1901, which went on, all through the eastern half of the United States and part of Canada, to build railroads, canals, municipal works, and the first dam, in Georgia, to raise water 100 feet above its original surface.

In 1901 Henry Lee Lane became general manager of the Alberene stone Company. During this busy period, he built a railway connection between the stone company's plants in Alberene and Schuyler, "thus placing the town, together with Esmont, on the railroad way," according to the American Historical Society.

The Lane Brothers Company's success encouraged Henry Lee and his siblings to purchase 2000 acres of land at the junction of two railroads, one line of which they were building south of Lynchburg. In 1906, engineers laid out their planned town; a reservoir and sewer were constructed, as well as sidewalks and a bridge over the Staunton River, a big hotel, and carefully organized "zones" of residential and business districts. No speculation in land was allowed. By 1908 the town of Altavista was a fact. Henry Lee became president of the first bank, and also founded a newspaper and the Lane Memorial Church. He lived in the Commonwealth Hotel he built.

The "Daily Progress" reported December 11, 1908, the front-page news of the relocation of the Lane Brothers Company from Esmont to Altavista. "The County of Albemarle, the Southside especially, is about to sustain a great loss and we realize the fact with much regret, says the "Scottsville Enterprise." In a very short while – probably a week or two – Lane Bros. Co., one of the largest and best known railroad contracting concerns in the South, will move its headquarters from Esmont to Altavista, Va., a town which this concern has practically built themselves...This immense concern is composed of men of the highest business qualifications, natives of Albemarle County and men who have always had the interest of the county and the community in which they lived at heart. They have done much towards the advancement of Southside Albemarle and we repeat, the loss of the county and community will be great."

In 1912, after this move, John E. Lane purchased a bankrupt packing box plant. He suggested, as "A History of the Lane Company," by Helen Hughes Lane, 1963, states, "to his son, Edward Hudson Lane, who was nearly twenty-one years of age at the time, that he go to Altavista where the little plant was located and start making cedar chests. I'd never heard of a cedar chest! Ed Lane recalls today, 'but that's how it all started.'"

Edward had attended Fork Union Military Academy and two years at VPI, where he took some classes in woodworking and machine shop. He supervised his family's sawmill and, in his father's, frequent absences on business ran the electric plant for his family's Guthrie Hall estate. With this experience and consultation from his VPI woodworking instructor, he committed \$50,000 of his father's money – "right smart amount"- to new machinery for his enterprise.

The company, The Standard Red Cedar Chest Company, produced 10 to 15 chests a day, then 15 to 25. "We were all young then," one of the first employees said to Helen Lane. "Our methods were pretty primitive at first. The chests were solid cedar. We nailed them together. There was no veneer nor high finish...It was different in those days, all right."

Marketing was new to Edward Lane, but as he learned to "sell with an idea," the company, by 1930, was making – and selling – 250 chests a day. They were by then the world's largest producer of cedar chests and began making other furniture as well. The chests were sold to college and business men for storage; as "hall and bedroom chests" to

housewives for their furs and fine clothing; to use as a window seat or at the end of the bed. In 1922 the name was changed to the Lane Company and advertised nationally.

One promotional campaign developed in the late 1920s and inaugurated in 1930 was the Girl Graduate Plan. Miniature cedar chests, the size of a jewelry box, were sold inexpensively to furniture companies to give away to girls graduating from high school. A special sale of full-sized cedar chests would be offered concurrently, with the hopes of catching the attention of half of graduating girls who married within 18 months of leaving high school at that time. In the early 1960s, the Lane Company estimated that "between one-half and two-thirds of all girls graduating from high school in the United States are presented...with one of these Lane miniature cedar chests."



Lane Miniature Cedar

In Charlottesville and surrounding area, graduating girls would get a card in the mail from M.C. Thomas furniture store. The girls would then go to the store to receive their little chest. **(Some memories left out here)**

Marie Lane has several Lane cedar chests. One was given to her when she was 18; it has the "self-rising accessory tray" and is filled with carefully-folded belongings. She and Arthur also have an old Lane walnut chair; "my mother loved these items," Lane says, and ruefully adds that he wishes he'd "paid a whole lot more attention" to her stories, as well as those of his grandmother.



Marie Lane Cedar Chest



Marie Lane Cedar Chest



Lane Walnut Chair



Lane Footstool made in Esmont

"Fate sends you on different routes," Marie muses about her re-meeting Arthur Lane when they both worked in Charlottesville. Arthur received a DPA, doctorate in public administration, and taught at Radford, as well as worked in public administration in several cities. Like his Esmont ancestor, he's loved academics. The Lanes have lived and worked in a variety of places and while it was "exciting to move around," Marie says, they are glad to be back home in Scottsville.

The Lane Company is "just a name now," Lane comments, after a hostile take-over moved the furniture business to Arkansas. But all those treasured Lane cedar chests remain, solid and still-fragrant reminders of all our hopes and past.

**More on the Lane Miniature Cedar Chests taken from <https://www.causeafrockus.com>**

Miniature Lane cedar boxes are iconic American symbols of “days-gone-by”, “remember when” and “back-in-the-day.” Lane, mostly known for cedar hope chests, manufactured and distributed an estimated 27 million miniature boxes from 1925 to 2004 and their innovative Girl Graduate Plan was one of the most successful marketing programs of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Lane Furniture’s Girl Graduate Plan presented the little boxes to young ladies as high school graduation gifts through their national network of dealers.

To this day, women all across the country treasure their little boxes as reminders of their high school graduation and that special time in their lives.

**Note:** The furniture store distributing the miniature chests received them with their name, city or town branded under the lid.



Miniature Lane Cedar Chest  
Inside Branding



Arthur (Jack), Laura, and Carrie  
Butler Lane with Arthur Jr.