



Fine Woodworking, the Dovetail and Me



Twenty-five years of pins and “tales”

BY CHARLIE DURFEE

In the pantheon of wood joints, there is the mortise and tenon, and there is the dovetail. Both are exalted—both equally essential to good work. But the mortise and tenon, while probably used more often, somehow remains the lesser god to the hallowed

dovetail. What inspires such interest in a peculiar row of trapezoidal shapes along the edges of casework and drawers?

The image seems embedded in our psyches, transcending the simple act of joining wood together. In my early woodworking career, apprenticing

under boatbuilding guru Lance Lee, I often heard him use “dovetail” to describe two ideas locked together. More recently I plucked a variation of the word from my subconscious when I needed an Internet password.

This magazine has embraced the row of pins and tails from

the beginning, using it as a logo. The only change has been from having the pins sitting on the line to having them hang below. And 146 issues, countless articles and literally hundreds of index entries later, the dovetail remains an icon of the craft.

Even the uninitiated recog-

Then came The Saw

nize dovetails as a sign of quality, often without knowing what they are called. Being an occasional exhibitor at craft shows, I have witnessed this scene dozens of times: A couple strolls into my booth, and one person says, “Oh, look at this,” while running a hand over a piece of smooth cherry.

The other says, “And look at these!” then turns to me and asks, “What do you call these?”

“Dovetails,” I say, and the light of recognition goes on, with my work being granted the highest level of craftsmanship.

Scene II, also repeated many times over: Another person, generally a young to middle-aged male, strides purposefully into the booth. He pulls out a drawer and looks at the side of it. If he sees dovetail joinery, especially if hand-cut, as mine always are, he nods approvingly. If he stays around to chat, I find out that he is another woodworker, checking out the show.

For those faced with fashioning it, the dovetail joint can inspire both confidence and alarm. Many reach for the router and finger jig. I know a veteran in the trade, who can produce pure magic with finishes—stains, French polish, color-matching and all—but will go to great lengths to avoid cutting pins and tails. On the other hand, I have seen many beginners turn out neat and clean work with marking gauge, saw and chisel, on their first try, as well as any pro.

My own experience with dovetails came with a strong taste for tradition and joinery. I had absorbed sketches of the joint in books by Charles Hayward, Aldren Watson and Eric Sloan long before owning a chisel and marking gauge. I en-

joyed the honest and open approach of joining wood afforded by dovetails, either plain or fancy. Soon I was trying them on projects of my own. Indeed, I often made sure that the design incorporated the joint.

First came the sliding variety on a stool, plank legs inserted into a plank seat. It was a humble affair, but the telltale flare of the joint showed on the edges, with pride! Then came a practice set of through-dovetails in 5/4 pine, which I still have. Finally, I had a commission for a set of four pine bookcases. Ignoring economics, I hand-dovetailed all of the case corners, at great time and expense. But it was a way to learn, and I had to have them.

Along the way, I modified and fine-tuned my techniques. Not being one of the lucky ones who had friends, family or mentors to guide them, I needed to teach myself from what I could find written. Most of the references to making dovetails in the earlier books, such as Ernest Joyce’s *Encyclopedia of Furniture Making* (Sterling, 1987) are only sketchy on the process. Typically, there was much about marking out the joint but little about the actual technique of cutting and fitting it.

The early issues of FWW

I learned much of the mechanics of cutting dovetails by actually cutting them, applying tips gleaned from the early issues of *Fine Woodworking*. In fact, my own anniversary as a woodworker coincides with the magazine’s. Looking back, I can see where many of my ideas and techniques came from.

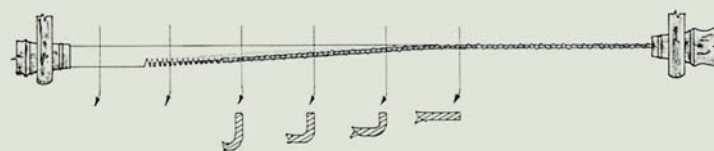
Fine Woodworking got right down to the business on the how-to of cutting dovetails. Ear-



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Frank Klausz caused a stir when he unveiled this Hungarian-made bowsaw. By means of a long bend in the blade, this custom saw cuts down the cheek of a pin or tail and across the bottom without stopping.

How it cuts. The front of the blade cuts vertically. Then, as the middle of the blade is engaged, the saw begins to turn the corner and cut the bottom of the socket. The bottom cut is finished using the horizontal back end of the blade.



A view of the blade from below, with various cross sections taken, shows the gradual transition from vertical to horizontal.

ly articles, notably those of Alphonse Mattia, Tage Frid and Ian Kirby, contain important details that I absorbed. Experienced teachers all, and working on this side of the Atlantic, they had a feel for what one needed to know to make a successful joint. I was off and running.

In the second issue, Mattia described the process in detail, being at last a source of information that could be referred to while having it open on the bench. I follow many of his techniques to this day, notably

chopping out the waste halfway in from each face, leaving a slightly back-cut V in the end-grain sockets. Other articles in subsequent issues advocated different techniques. Kirby, for example, cuts out the waste with a coping saw (*FWW* #27). However, I have found that no more efficient, especially on wide sets of joints, and difficult to cut close enough to the scribe line to make a difference.

Speaking of sawing out the waste: I remember eating lunch on a stool in my shop, while

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Kirby got right into the nitty-gritty, including correct body posture

while using saw and chisel. While I haven't adopted all of his details, Kirby's discussions made me continue to think about these topics, and I have a sharper technique as a result. And some of his details I have adopted, such as using a long, thin knife to mark from tails to pins, and beginning saw cuts at the back corner, coming across the top, and down the front.

I also just now noticed a trick in one of Kirby's old articles—using a steel hammer while assembling to listen for tails that are too tight. Although I would worry about marring the wood (I generally use hand pressure and a rubber mallet), it is enticing enough to put this in the “give-it-a-try” file.

The early issues also began the “pins first or tails first” dis-

cussion. In the second issue, Mattia and Frid advocated pins first, for a variety of reasons. Kirby does tails first, for equally good reasons. The debate continues (*FWW* #116). I've tried both methods. For the ease of marking the pins from the tails, as well as getting the angled tail cuts out of the way from the get-go, I am a tails-first person. Besides, with half-blinds, tails-first is usually a must.

Thus, by the first few dozen issues, my style was pretty much worked out as it exists today. Of course, there were refinements yet to come (and still coming). Along with the many issues of *Fine Woodworking*, I also gleaned some good ideas from James Krenov's first two books and from Book 1 of *Tagge Frid Teaches Woodworking* (The



In the early issues, Ian Kirby broke down the mechanics of cutting dovetails. His thorough discussions even covered correct body positions for paring and chopping.

consuming a newly arrived issue of *Fine Woodworking* (#18), and reading of Frank Klausz's jaw-dropping dovetail technique. First of all, layout was done by eye, with no laborious measuring and dividing of spaces. Then came The Saw. Klausz used a custom bowsaw to cut down the cheeks of a pin or tail, then, by means of a 90° twist in the second half of the blade, was able to turn the corner and cut across the bottom! It

was “Six pins, five tails, in about three minutes,” to quote the article. Never mind that Klausz said it left a crude cut and was used only for utility work (he chopped out the waste conventionally for fine work)—everyone wanted one of those saws.

Details for making dovetails came in spades, or should I say chisels, in Kirby's articles (*FWW* #21 and #27). He got right into the nitty-gritty, including, for example, correct body posture

Pins first or tails first

The age-old argument continued into the 1990s, with two contributing editors facing off. Tagge Frid (top) prefers pins first because “it's easier to hold the pin board in place to mark the tails” than vice-versa. Christian Becksvoort favors tails first because it allows him to use a knife to mark the pins.



**ISSUE #116
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**Pins first:
Tagge Frid**



**Tails first:
Christian
Becksvoort**

Don't take dovetailing too seriously

Taunton Press, 1979), which covered joinery.

Hand-cut vs. machine-cut

I am a hand-cut dovetail person. If you're looking for a discussion here of Keller vs. Leigh, or bandsaw vs. tablesaw, you will be disappointed. I have fooled around with most of these and even once spent three days constructing a router jig, because it looked easy and I thought I could save money. The jig turned out to be a clumsy affair. I used it for one job, and it has been gathering dust ever since. I would hate to calculate the payback for that one.

Granted, on anything more than a couple of drawers, the power tools are faster and can be very accurate. But they are just that, accurate machines, and in a world where an individual craftsman has to put his mark on the work and try to separate it from the rest, hand-cut dovetails offer a way to stand out. Besides, the process is easier on the nerves and lungs, and they look great.

The wild and the wacky

The search for dovetailing techniques also leads us down some unique byways. Down the awe-inspiring road, one finds such variations as "lovetails," where the pins are cut in the shape of hearts (FWW #83); Bermudan "cogged" dovetails, in which the outer face is cut into a decorative pattern (FWW #35); and half-blind mitered dovetails (FWW #104), where the joint is mitered, and the dovetails show only on one face. Down the difficult but practical fork are angled dovetails (FWW #80); dovetails on a dome-lidded

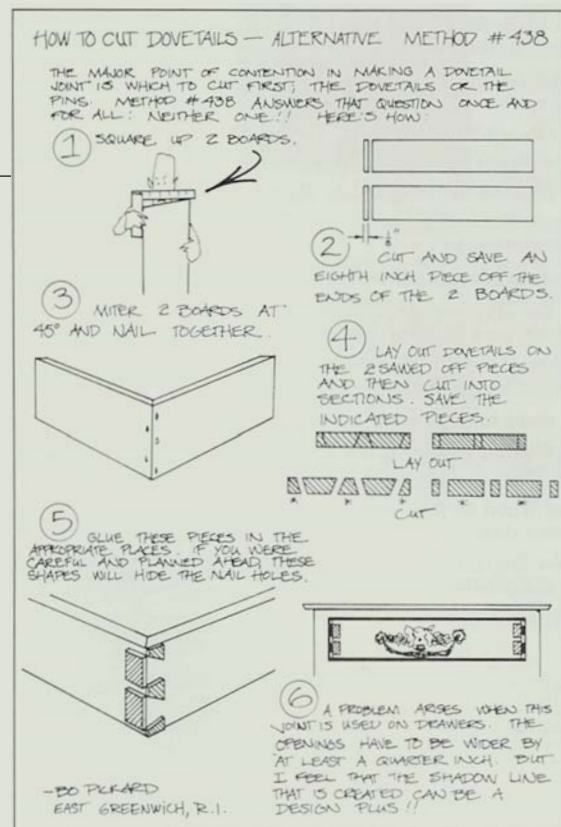
chest (FWW #56); and the full-blind variety (FWW #5).

One of my favorite ideas belongs on the throw-up-the-hands-and-to-heck-with-it-all road. A reader suggested slicing thin end pieces off two boards before mitering them together—with nails, no less (FWW #41). The slices are then cut into end-grain pin and tail shapes and glued to the mitered pieces in the familiar pattern. And if the work is on a drawer, don't forget to leave some space for the protruding pins! Moral: Don't take dovetailing, or woodworking for that matter, too seriously.

While I have cut countless sets of pins and tails, I very clearly remember one set from hell. When I was still doing boat joinery, I built a skylight of 10/4 mahogany with dovetailed corners, to be installed in a large schooner. During assembly, on a hot and sticky day, the joints stuck half-open and wouldn't slide together. I had to bust them apart with a sledgehammer. After remaking one broken piece, cleaning up the mess and paring back the joints a bit, the second attempt at assembly worked. It was delivered and installed. The boat was launched, sailed south, and on the return trip in the spring, sank in a storm. So my dovetailed skylight now rests two miles under Atlantic waters. There is a lesson in this story, but I'm not sure just what ... maybe forcing dovetails into existence is a wasted effort.

I do know, however, that dovetailing can lead to lofty heights. And may it always. □

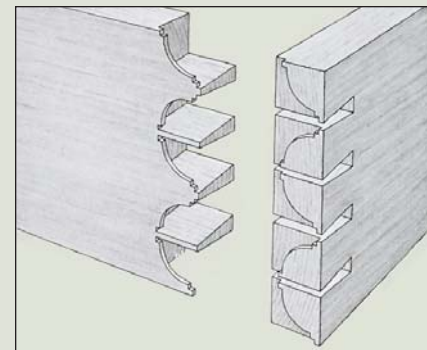
Charlie Durfee is a furniture maker in Woolwich, Maine.



This contributor to the Letters page went to great lengths to avoid cutting the real thing. He advocated pin and tail tabs glued to the corner of a drawer and left proud, no less.

ISSUE #35 AUGUST 1982

One of the most elaborate styles hailed from Bermuda, where cabinetmakers follow a tradition of ornamental joinery. "Cogged" dovetails are a half-blind version in which the outer face is cut into a decorative pattern.



ISSUE #83 AUGUST 1990

Tired of dovetails? Try "lovetails." This affectionate variation was employed on a mahogany cradle in a 1990 project article.

