

## In my imagination, all of my tools are sharp



### A TOUR OF A TOOL JUNKIE'S SHOP AND PSYCHE

BY ANDY ROONEY

If I had known when buying them which tools I would use regularly and which tools I would almost never use, I might have saved enough money to take over Bill Gates's share of Microsoft. I would also have enough room left in my shop for tools I do use, space now taken up by the tools I do not use.

It is certain that the tools I own exceed the total value of anything I have ever made with them, but the satisfaction they have given me simply by their presence is priceless.

My family has a summer place 150 miles north of New York City where most of my woodworking takes place during the three months plus seven weekends a year that we live there. My shop is 25 ft. by 25 ft., not huge but adequate if it were

being used by a careful space-planner, which, as you might suspect, is not me.

When strangers come into my shop, they often look at a tool and ask, "What do you do with that?" They don't understand that having the tool, like having good wood, is an end in itself. If I owned a Rembrandt, no one would ask, "What do you do with it?" I like looking at a tool, feeling it, and even using it once in a while. I dream idly of the wonderful pieces I could make with its help. I don't usually make them; I just dream.

#### In desperation, I have misused tools

In my shop, surrounded by my toys, I'll often sit in the bucket seat of a comfortable stool I made and thumb through an article in *Fine Woodworking*. I am transported out of my routine life into a wonderful world where I am Tage Frid and George Nakashima rolled into one. In my imagination, my tools are all sharp, perfectly tuned, and obedient servants in the capable hands of their master, me.

The facts of the matter are different, of course. My tools are all first quality, with the exception of a stand-up drill press that is an adequate Korean knockoff. But each has a personality of

CELEBRATING  
40  
YEARS

#### EDITOR'S NOTE

To help celebrate *FWW*'s 40th anniversary, we've been reaching into our archives all year to reprint classic articles. This one from *FWW* #146, our 25th

Anniversary Issue, comes from the pen of the late Andy Rooney, CBS news correspondent and inveterate tool collector.

its own that is not always compatible with mine. My chisels are not all sharp because, in desperation, I have misused them on a job they were not designed to do. The teeth on some saws need resetting. Many small tools have been put down hastily, not where they belong but where they were used, and are as hard to find when I need them again as a library book returned to the wrong shelf in the wrong aisle.

### **One tool scares me**

In the middle of the shop is a good 5-hp tablesaw. With the exception of the tablesaw and the 6-in. jointer, all other pieces of heavy machinery are on locking wheels so they can be rolled out of the way. Or into the way. In one corner, and least used but a grand tool, is a heavy-duty resaw bandsaw. It is difficult to adjust, and it is almost impossible to shove wood through it and get a board of uniform thickness. Revved up with its 16-ft. blade humming, the saw is a monster. I'm scared stiff of the tool, but I enjoy using it. A woodworker can't have a more satisfying time than slicing crude logs into beautiful boards. I've used it most successfully on short trunks of apple trees—apple being one of the world's most beautiful, least-used woods. It's best to know someone with an orchard.

There's also a small bandsaw, which I worry about because I have frequently

### **WHEN I YEARN FOR EASY SATISFACTION AND FEEL I SHOULDN'T EAT, I BUY A TOOL.**

used it and then forgotten to reduce the tension on the blade, as the advisory under DANGER! admonishes me to do. I wonder what leaving the tension on, against the warning, has done.

My 15¾-in. thickness planer is one of my most satisfactory tools. Last year I removed the original blades and installed razor-sharp carbide replacements. The first time I used it was on some 12-in.-wide by 14-ft.-long old pine boards that I had salvaged from a tumbledown barn. I had gone over the boards with a magnet to locate and remove any nails. I did an almost perfect job. Almost! I got all but one. The one nail nicked my new blades the first time I used them. For weeks I lived with a little ridge in every board I put through it, until a woodworker more knowledgeable than I suggested that I simply loosen one blade and tap it slightly from one end to move it a fraction so that the nicks in the blades were no longer in line. Presto! No more ridge.

The last of my major power tools is a combination disk and belt sander. If I were a teacher, I'd give it a barely passing grade. I don't have a dust-collection system, so when I'm going to use it, I roll it over to the open door and hope most of the wood dust ends up outside. The 36-in. belt is difficult

to replace, and the glue, no matter how amply applied to the metal disk, does not always hold the round piece of sandpaper to it when it spins. No one likes flying sandpaper.

One wall of my shop is taken up by shelves divided into open boxes 18 in. square. These shelves are for storing power or hand tools, wood finish, turpentine, and the sorts of things that accumulate in a shop, such as cords that have become separated from the machines they came with, lengths of rope, books of directions (in English, French, Spanish, and Japanese), rags, sandpaper used and new, and a wide variety of useless gadgets that seemed like a clever idea when I bought them.

When I yearn for easy satisfaction and feel I shouldn't eat, I buy a tool. So I have a lot of them. If you can name it, I probably have it. My bins runneth over. They hold several ¼-in. and ⅜-in. drills. There are circular saws, dagger-blade saws, oscillating sanders, vibrating sanders, heart-shaped inside-corner sanders, power screwdrivers. Everything I have, I have two of—and for two reasons. One, I like both plug-in and



**Phases of furniture making.** Rooney has built many of the pieces used daily in his homes. He now works almost exclusively with native American hardwoods.

cordless tools; and two, when I saw the second one, I was in need of the satisfaction that comes with buying a new tool.

I have tools I haven't used in 17 years but can't bring myself to throw out because I remember how much they cost, and tools that are in constant use when I have a project going.

### **Some tools are friends, and some I can't get close to**

Most of my small hand tools hang on, above, near, or under my workbench. These are my closest friends among tools. There are planes for which I feel an outpouring of affection when I grasp them in my hand. I have four good Japanese draw saws. I even have a screwdriver with which I have a special relationship. I harbor this notion that it has never failed any job, even an unscrewdriverly one, that I have asked it to do and, as a result, in the past few years I have not been asking it to do anything it could possibly fail at. I don't want to ruin its record.



# looking back continued

Over the years, I have found it more difficult to get attached to some tools. While there are hammers I like and squares and levels I prefer, I have never used a pair of pliers that I'm completely happy with. Those two holes at the hinge designed to allow the jaws to open wider are an incomplete invention. I own as many as seven pairs of pliers, each designed to be right for a job, but mine are all a little wrong for any job.

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If I were asked for advice on buying tools for a beginning woodworker, it would be easy. "If you decide to buy a tool for a job that you do all the time and it is made by three different companies offering it at \$129, \$139, and \$174, buy the one that costs \$174. If you don't have the money, don't buy the tool. Wait until you have \$174—by which time it will probably cost \$183—but wait anyway." One of the most unfair things about both life and woodworking is that the most expensive is usually best.

There also are tools with which I have what feels like a personal relationship. When I use them, I recall some previous job I did with them. I think that when I die they ought to die with me, because no one will ever know what we had going between us. I'd hate to have them fall into the hands of a callous stranger who picked them up at a yard sale and didn't know what I know about them. When I see good, old tools lying in a box in the corner of an antique shop, I weep a dry, silent tear: There but for the grace of a few more years go mine.

## If only I had two lives to live

In our home in Connecticut, I am more apt to be at my typewriter in the part of the basement laughingly called my office than in the "shop," which also houses the washer, the dryer, the furnace, and 18 legal-sized boxes of papers. Over the years one of my chores has been closing up my shop upstate and deciding which tools to bring home to that small, basement workshop. Every year I've brought fewer and fewer, partly because I duplicated more of them and partly because I was doing more writing and less woodworking.

The tools I transferred were mostly small, cherished hand tools that were too expensive to duplicate. I bring a small box of good chisels wrapped in cloth, several small Japanese saws, two of my favorite handplanes and, of course, that great screwdriver. I bring the handplanes because I love the lore of planes, even though I am an inept user of the simplest of them. When I read of truing a twisted plank with a plane, I am in awe of anyone who can do it. Several of my handplanes are collector's-item quality and, while I can collect them, I'm not good at using them. I often reach for my power planer, a tool



**Country workshop.** The author's summer workshop in rural upstate New York is 25 ft. by 25 ft. and holds his broad collection of wood and tools.

with which it is easily possible to do major damage quickly.

While most of my knowledge of woodworking has been acquired by trial and error, with an emphasis on error, I take advice. Last summer our son Brian and I were making an outdoor octagonal table of teak with a pedestal base. We figured out what we needed and set out to cut eight boards 34 in. long, each with both ends mitered at an angle of 22.5° so that they'd fit together to make a perfect octagon.

We had cut five pieces when my friend, the nicked planer-blade expert, showed up for a casual visit. He looked at our project and gave us advice that saved wood, time, and anguish.

"Don't cut them all at 22.5," he said. "Cut seven of them, then put those together and cut the last piece to fit." It was great advice because the angle at which we had to cut the eighth piece to fit was not exactly 22.5°.

Over the years I've gone through half a dozen phases of furniture making. The decision about what to make usually comes from looking over my stacks of wood. I am reluctant to cut almost any good wood because of my well-founded fear of bungling it. But if I see a pile of tiger or bird's-eye maple that would make a chest of drawers, I'll pull them out and study them. I determine what cuts I could make that would be least wasteful.

For years I used mahogany and a few exotic species like rosewood, but lately I've worked almost exclusively with native American woods such as cherry, maple, walnut, and oak. I ignore flaws like knots or checks. They are part of the character of a board, and I incorporate them in my furniture. I use a nice supply of genuine ebony for the Nakashima dovetails to curb further checking in boards that are split at their ends.

I am a writer who loves to write, but if I had two lives to live, I'd be a woodworker in the other. □

