



Gentleman's Tool Chest

An avid collector builds a vintage chest for his favorite antique tools

BY RICK LONG

Like most woodworkers, hobbyist to professional, I've spent almost all of my shop time making pieces for others over the years. But a few years ago, after three decades as a woodshop teacher outside Richmond, Va., and having recently become an empty nester with newfound free time, I decided to create a piece just for me, to represent my passion for collecting antique woodworking tools.

Most of us remember an issue of *Fine Woodworking* from July/August 1988 when the back cover of the magazine featured an awe-inspiring object: H.O. Studley's tool chest. Soon afterward the Studley tool chest poster could be found adorning many shop walls, serving as inspiration to

unmatched craftsmanship. What could I do that would inspire me in a similar way?

I didn't know. Then I went up to Pennsylvania for a Brown's Tool Auction in 2012, and there it was, the answer to my quest: a vintage Hammacher Schlemmer Gentleman's Combination Bench and Tool Cabinet. Wow, it was cool. In all my travels as a tool collector I'd never seen one in person.

The Gent's chest, designed by Theodore Doegler and introduced at the turn of the 20th century, was intended for hobbyists in their city apartments or summer houses. Offered in oak or mahogany, it was built to look, when closed, like a handsome chest of drawers. But open it and you



A subtle chest stuffed with tools. Like the original it was modeled on, which was patented in the 1890s and meant for a hobbyist's apartment or summer house, Long's variation on the Hammacher Schlemmer Gentleman's Combination Bench and Tool Cabinet looks like a dresser when closed but opens to reveal a workbench with two vises and storage for hundreds of tools.

Online Extra

For more on Long's vintage tools and his tool chest, go to FineWoodworking.com/279.

Workbench with vises hiding in a tool cabinet



Sliding storage. Where the original chest had a fixed shelf beneath the workbench top, Long installed a sliding shelf for easier access.



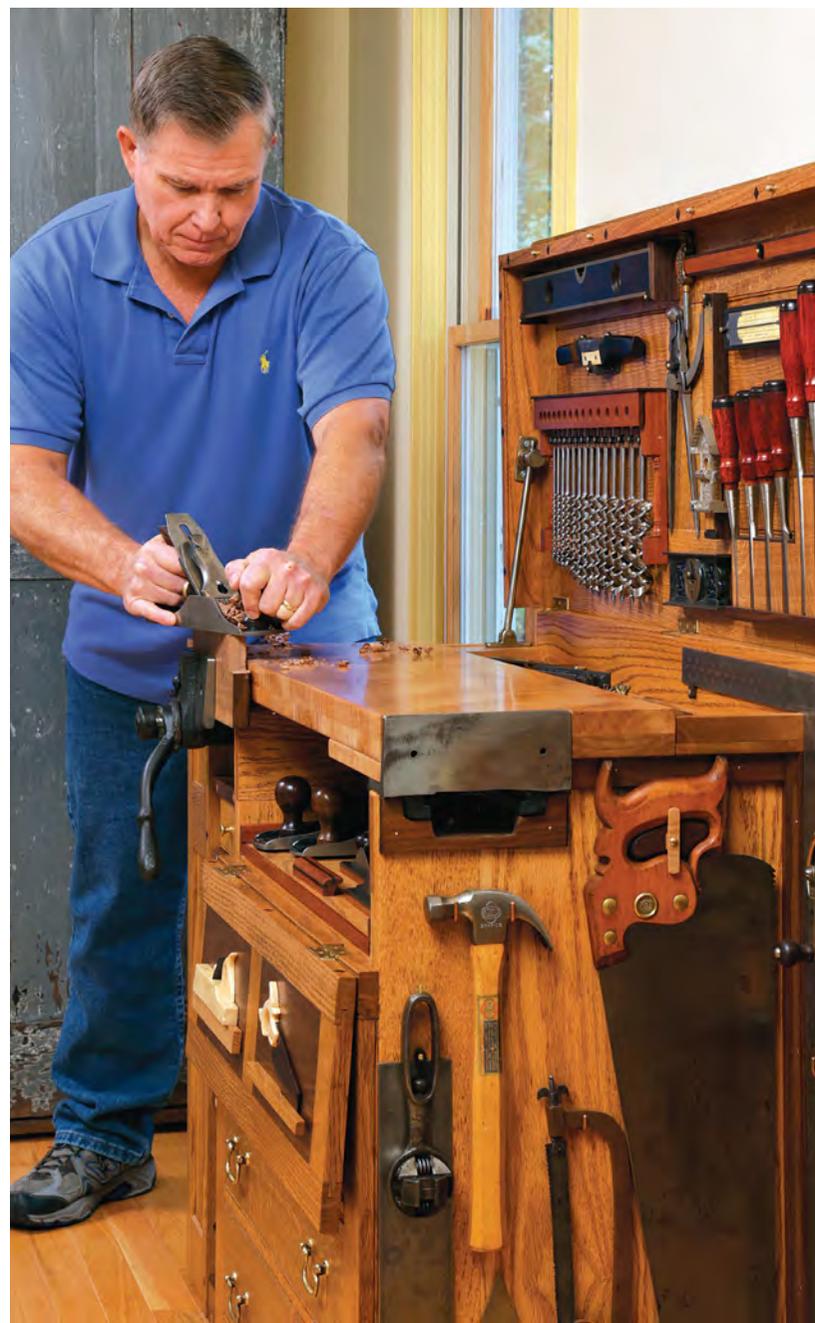
Two vises share one handle. Like the vintage version he examined, Long's chest has two Sheldon quick-release vises—but only one front jaw and handle. Inner jaws are mounted at the front and the end of the bench, and the front jaw is moved from one to the other.

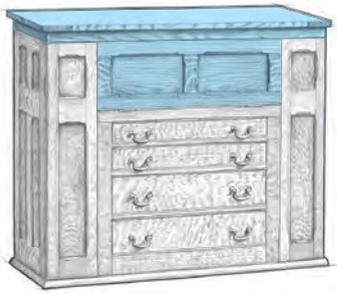
found specialized storage for hundreds of tools—along with a workbench with two vises! You could buy the chest empty or filled with tools.

Hammacher, Schlemmer & Co., founded in 1848, was a purveyor of high-quality tools and hardware in New York City. By the early 1900s, they were the largest tool and hardware merchant on the East Coast, and their catalog was the most extensive in the country. Their New York showroom was the

first to sell electric lights, telephones, horseless carriages, electric toasters, toothbrushes, and answering machines. If there was a new gadget or gizmo to be sold, Hammacher Schlemmer would be the first to offer it.

After examining the Gent's chest up close, I couldn't get it out of my mind. En route home from the auction, I decided to build a chest like it and fit it with some of my favorite antique tools.





Prime storage under the lid and below the bench

A slippery slope strewn with tools

My passion for tools started innocently enough. One Sunday in the fall of 1984, on a drive after church, my wife and I stopped at a flea market. I bought three old tools for \$10: a level, a molding plane, and a try square. Back at our apartment, I cleaned and restored them over the next few days. I got a real rush from the restoration and proudly displayed the tools in our empty second bedroom. The brassbound level jumped. The square, with three brass diamonds on its rosewood body, was art in my eyes. I sharpened the molding plane blade and used it to make my first side bead profile. I was hooked, already craving more yard sales and flea markets. Before long, it was time for a house and a garage with plenty of space for tools. Thirty-five years later, the cravings haven't subsided. I confess I am a toolaholic with more than 10,000 antique tools in my collection.

Early on, with no internet to consult, I found a book by Ronald Barlow called *The Antique Tool Collector's Guide to Value* (Windmill Pub Co., 3rd edition, 1985). I wore that copy out. I read it every night. It was my bedtime storybook after I read to the kids. I joined two large national tool collecting



On the level. Solid rosewood, brass bound, and 20 in. long, this No. 10½ Stratton Brothers level was made in Greenfield, Mass., in the last quarter of the 19th century.



An array of auger bits. Long's rack for a set of Russell Jennings double-spur auger bits borrows a turn latch trick from the Studley tool chest. Long labeled the bits by 1/16 in.



An odd old tool. The Stanley No. 1 Odd Jobs could be used as a try square, a miter square, a mortise gauge, a beam compass, and a spirit level, among other things.



Treasure chest. A drop-down door decorated with a carved handplane and backsaw opens to reveal some of Long's favorite planes. The sliding shelf holds a collection of Bedrock planes and a Stanley No. 1 bench plane on its own custom-fitted plinth.



A stack of sliding storage on the left



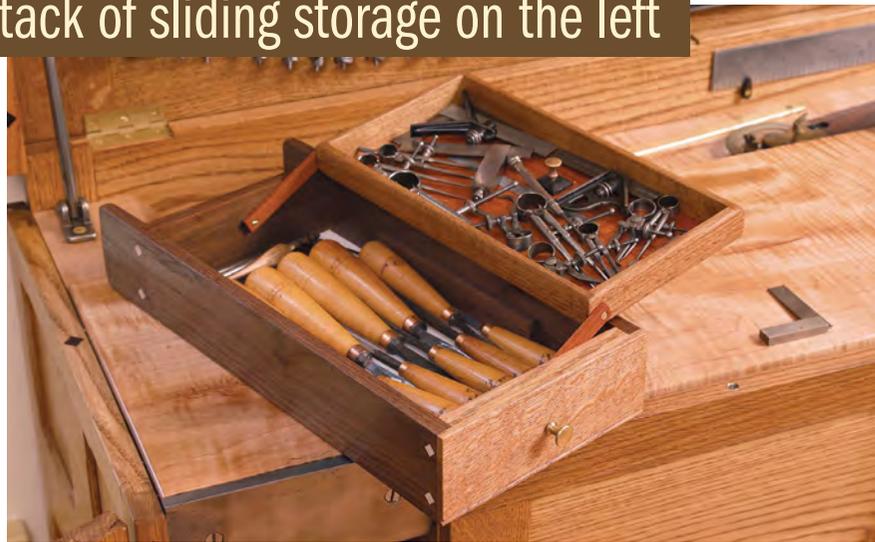
A woodworker's gems. When he made swing hinged trays for the side drawers, Long was adapting a drawer design he had admired in a jewelry box.



groups—Mid West Tool Collectors Association and Early American Industries Association. Ten years in, I began teaching evening classes on antique tools, and my students and I traded tips and learned a great deal from one another. They asked me to start a local tool group. We called ourselves the RATS—the Richmond Antique Tool Society. Today, this group of more than 100 tool fanatics is my second family.

An old chest reborn

A tool buddy of mine, John Davis, found someone with an original mahogany version of the Hammacher Schlemmer chest who allowed me to take pictures and make measurements. With those in hand I was eager to get started, but first I had to find two Sheldon vises to match the ones on



Two layers of tools. The tray in this drawer contains layout tools by Starrett, Lufkin, and Brown and Sharpe. “I find them hard to pass up!” Long says. Nesting underneath is a collection of Buck Brothers carving gouges.



Making room for a monster. To fit his heavy and bulky Stanley No. 55 Combination Plane in the chest along with a full complement of cutters, Long built a sliding shelf. He oriented the plane on its side with its round rails inserted deep into holes in a platform on the shelf.

Shallow drawers packed with flat tools



the original chests. It took two years, but finally I found them and got to work.

I decided that my version of the Gent's chest would be a near-replica of the original but with some changes to accommodate my tools and incorporate a few Studley-like touches. I selected quartersawn white oak for the carcase and curly maple for the benchtop.

The changes I made began with the lid. On the original, the sides of the lid were finger-jointed; I opted for splined



Secret sliders. The tray full of folding rules fits in the chest's top drawer. Remove the tray, and you might find the secret drawers on either end. The drawers are so shallow that no tool in them can exceed $\frac{1}{8}$ in. thick.



Mostly measurement. Among the trove of folding rules you can also pick out a pair of dancing leg calipers, a rope gauge, an ivory-handled glass cutter, and an ebony baseball bat fit for Stuart Little. The miniature bat, one of many turned in Long's shop over the years, reflects his family's passion for the sport.

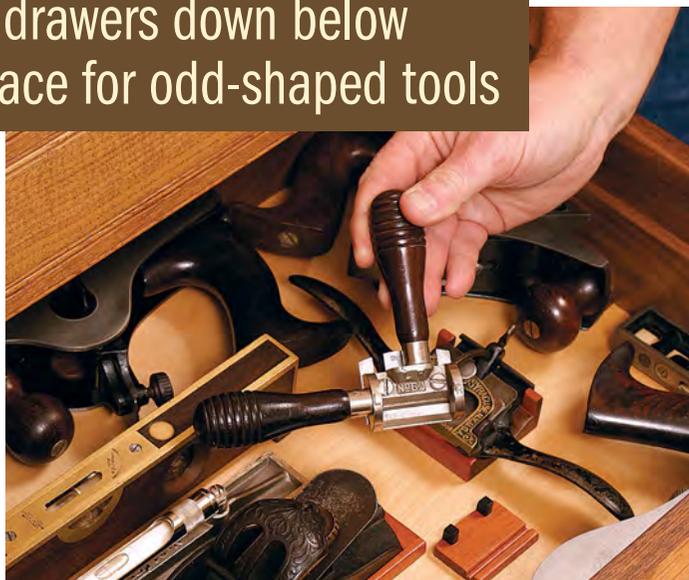


Sea of squares. Long spent a day finding the right arrangement for this tray of squares. Eight small blocks of walnut glued in place maintain the arrangement.

Deeper drawers down below offer space for odd-shaped tools



Accommodating neighbors. The long blade of a Stanley radius plane led Long to cut a mating slot through the side and bottom of the neighboring tray, which holds luthier's thumb planes and spokeshaves.



A close shave. The Stanley No. 67 Universal spokeshave has rosewood handles that are threaded on and can be moved. In this configuration the tool can be used up to corners or to shave a rabbet.



A custom crib for three baby planes. Long fitted his Stanley 100, 101, and 101½ planes in a holder with a padauk base and walnut edging. He used the curved-bottom 101½ (which he is holding) to create its own dished compartment.



Drawer full of dados. The chest's bottom drawer holds, among other tools, six Stanley No. 39 dado planes that collectors consider "dead mint"—never used, and retaining their original finish. The drawer's swing-up tray holds two on one face and two on the other.



miters. Where the original had lightweight drawers joined with half-blind finger joints, I built heftier ones with glued-in Baltic-birch bottoms and rabbeted joinery reinforced with screws that I capped with diamond-shaped plugs.

On the Hammacher Schlemmer version, the space below the benchtop is an open storage area, but I decided to install a pull-out shelf there to hold my prized Bedrock planes and a beautiful Stanley No. 1, a \$5 garage-sale find. I installed a fall front that conceals those planes and embellished it with a backsaw and a plane that I carved from basswood and ebony. In addition, I built a range of trays, some sliding, some hinged, some articulating on arms, along with secret drawers and many custom tool holders.

The basic chest took about two months to build. I would go to bed thinking about the next day's layout, cut, or joint. Of course there were some tense moments along the way, like the day my wife heard a shout and rushed into the shop expecting to see blood. Instead, the damage was to the box: I had drilled through the chest frame. I was devastated. But in the end, a small solid-wood Dutchman made an almost invisible repair. (Of course I can't help pointing it out to anyone who visits.) I stained the chest with Minwax Golden Oak and hand-rubbed the finish using Minwax Wiping Poly Satin.

With the main chest built it was time to fit the tools, and I spent three months doing it. Mr. Studley had mostly vertical storage in his cabinet. I have mostly horizontal. My biggest dilemma was which tools to select. Then where to place them? How to hang them? Do I create a theme for a section or the layers in drawers? I had a few more restless nights



thinking about these issues.

I used padauk, ebony, rosewood, walnut, maple, and Baltic-birch plywood for hangers, holders, and custom-fitted parts. If it was in the scrap pile, it got used along the way.

Once the chest was finished, I put it on a scale and found

it weighed 300 lb. empty. But with its complement of more than 400 antique tools fitted into it, the chest tipped the scale at more than 700 lb. Not to be moved on a whim!

Building the piece was a great experience. I think of the chest as a unique legacy,

kind of a portrait of myself, something that expresses my passion for collecting antique tools as well as the pleasure I take in using them. □

Rick Long is a retired woodshop teacher and a very unretired tool collector in Mechanicsville, Va.