

Antique Tools

A buyer's guide to many you can use

by Robert Sutter

The latest tool catalog has come in the mail, so you settle down with the "wishing book" in eager anticipation. But my oh my, those prices: sixteen dollars for a saw, twenty-two for a brace, sixty for a plough plane. It sure puts a damper on your ardor to fill your shop with all those wonderful-looking objects in the pages of that catalog open across your knees.

Well, how do you go about getting your heart's desire while preserving as much of your bank account as possible? One way is to budget a realistic sum of money for your basic tools and then make additions only as the need arises. Buy the best you can get in the way of edge tools and saws. If you must, you can acquire inexpensive yet less soul-satisfying hammers, pliers, screwdrivers, files, etc. at the local hardware store. Beware of special house brands and bargains, though; you only get what you pay for. Shop carefully and compare with your wishing book; you may find that a small price difference will procure a more trustworthy item than the bargain bucket at the local hardware emporium.

Another way to build your journeyman's kit is the antique tool route. There is certainly a big kick to be gotten out of finding a half dozen peachy chisels at the back of the antique shop for just two dollars apiece. That sort of bargain may be easy on the budget, but old isn't necessarily good, and if they turn out to be made of Swiss cheese, you can't exchange them. Realize that when searching for old tools you compete with the tool collector and that chances are he knows a lot more about the tricky business of buying antique tools than you do.

Recognize, too, that sellers of antiques keep informed about trends in their field. They know that competition between collectors for new acquisi-

tions raises prices, and they are aware that old tools have recently been touted as preeminently collectible. Dealers also know the worth of old tools on the current market, so don't expect to find an antique dealer who doesn't know what he has in that box of rusty old tools lying half out of sight under the dropleaf table in the back of the store. He knows, and he put that box where it is on purpose.

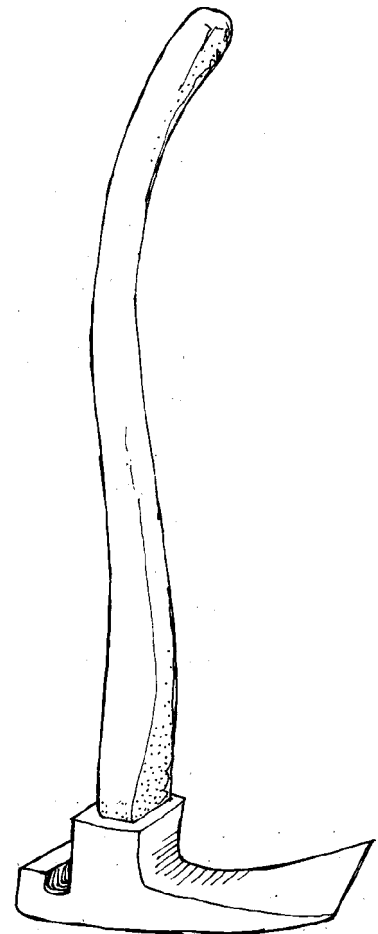
Okay, let's assume that in spite of my admonitions you decide you're going to look around for some old tools. What can you expect to find and what will the results of your search cost? I'll try to answer those questions from experience garnered in fifteen years of collecting and over thirty of buying tools for my workshop.

Braces

The first braces were naturally formed tree limbs of the proper shape. Next came factory-shaped wooden braces with brass reinforcement plates. Such items are in the seventy to one-hundred-fifty-dollar class—more if unique. Metal braces with rudimentary screw chucks were in use side by side with wooden ones. Later on in the 19th century, and early in the 20th, braces with universal shell chucks and ratchet sweeps began to be manufactured. Stanley braces from 1900 on can often be found with ten to fifteen-dollar price tags, which, if sound, will function perfectly today. Check the chuck to be sure it closes all the way and is concentric. See that the wooden parts are not split and that the metal is bright under the dirt. If so, you've got a usable tool for a reasonable price.

A word about rusty tools here. A little rust easily scraped away to expose bright metal is okay and can be cleaned up. Discoloration due to use and han-

dling likewise. But eschew the item encrusted with rust. It won't clean satisfactorily no matter the effort, and the metal will bear pit marks and deep-seated rust pockets for evermore. While



ADZE



merely unsightly in some cases, such pits and pockets on edge tools affect the edge-holding ability of the tool.

Saws

You may find some good, usable old saws, but I doubt it. Old, all-steel saws are often temptingly priced since they are not very popular with collectors, who prefer frame and turning saws. In years gone by, a craftsman bought a saw and used it until it was worn out from repeated sharpening and setting. He replaced broken handles and rivets as they were needed for the steel saw handles. When the saw was past using, it was discarded—for you to pick up. Therefore resist the temptation to buy an old saw even though it costs but three or four dollars. Purchase the highest grade new one you can and take care of it. It will serve you well just as the four-dollar relic served its owner when it was shiny and fresh from the store.

Adzes

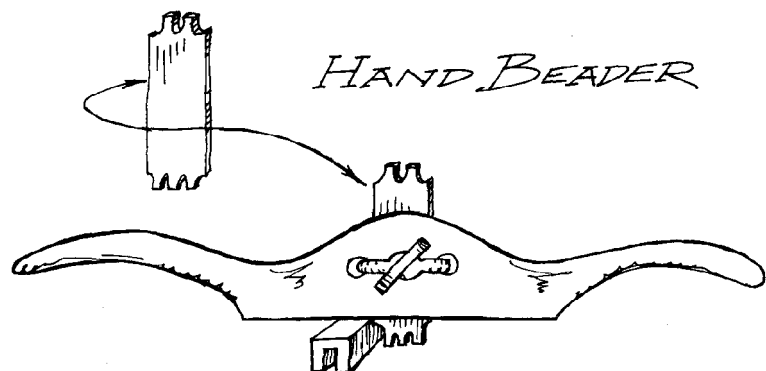
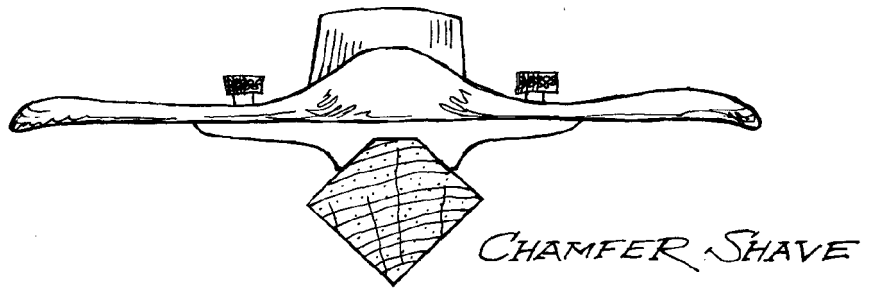
The adze is one of the oldest tools in the woodworker's kit. Paleolithic specimens are to be seen in museums, but today the adze turns up more often in crossword puzzles than in real life. For the unfamiliar it is a sort of mashie-niblick axe with an oddly curved handle. An adze is a smoothing and shaping tool used for finishing large areas of wood such as floors and beams as well as for all sorts of chores in shipyards. The adze is no longer a common item on the shelf of hardware stores in

this country, even though still available in most of Europe. Should you decide you can't live without one, you will have to purchase it as an antique. The Collins Axe Company made adzes out of good steel with proper balance until a few years ago. They were japanned black and sold without handles, as were all adzes, since the handle is a matter of individual design. You can often find a good, quite new Collins adze head lying about for perhaps eight to fifteen dollars. Those that have handles and are older will be more expensive. By the way, adze heads are never permanently fixed to their han-

dles, for the only way to sharpen them is to remove the handle. To use an adze requires a very sharp skill on your part. Have someone who knows show you how to use it, and then practice on scrap timber before working on anything important. Watch out for your toes as the tool is swung towards them.

Drawknives, etc.

Another archaic but useful tool is the drawknife. Anyone who has visited one of the restoration villages has undoubtedly seen a drawknife in use or at rest on a shaving bench. For quick shaping of round and curved work, this tool is hard to beat. Since the depth of cut is dependent on how the tool is held relative to the work, some practice is required to cut a long, uniform shaving. There is also an element of risk in pulling a large, sharp knife towards your stomach. Safer and more easily controlled is the spokeshave which operates on the same general principle as the drawknife but has the mechanics of a plane to control the cut. Spokeshaves come in brass, iron or wood bodies with straight, convex, concave, or rounded soles. Sometimes two differently shaped soles, each with its own blade, were mounted side by side in a single handle. New spokeshaves are easily obtained from purveyors of fine tools through their catalogs or as antiques.



Prices run from six or seven dollars for a modern spokeshave to twenty dollars for 19th century iron ones. Wooden shaves were commonly made out of beech or box woods, but occasionally you will see ebony or cherry or other fine cabinet woods used. Beware of wooden spokeshaves as the throat wears easily and makes them difficult to set. Because of this deficiency, many wooden specimens have brass or even ivory set into the throat to provide a hard, less easily worn surface. Towards the end of the 19th century, Stanley and others produced a chamfering spokeshave which is most useful and worth some hunting about for.

Another branch of this large and useful family of tools is the scratch stock or universal hand header. It is really a scraper of sorts with handles like a spokeshave. The hand header has a thin steel blade with a shaped edge held almost vertically to the plane of the work piece. When pulled, the blade scrapes a bead or other shape out of the wood. A scratch stock will cut moulded edges on curves, and works well regardless of grain direction or complexity. Since it scrapes, there is practically no tendency to tear the wood. Unfortunately, this tool can now be found only as an antique.

Chisels

There are more varieties of chisels than there are herring dishes in Finland. In one catalog I counted twenty flat carving chisels and one hundred and thirty gouge shapes, fishtails, allonge fishtails, spoon, and backbent chisels. In addition there were bevel-

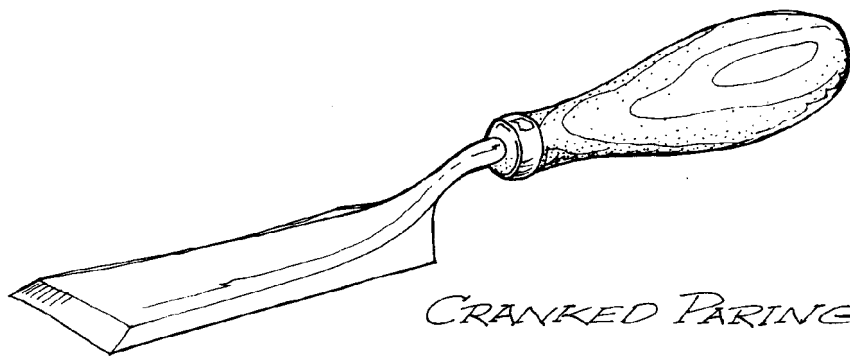
edge paring chisels in several grades, long and strong hooped chisels, in-cannel gouges and mortise chisels. Prices ranged from under four dollars to over ten. Antique chisels are available in all the variety of the newer ones plus others long out of production such as slicks, framing, and corner chisels. Except for slicks and corner chisels, not many collectors are interested, so prices vary from under a dollar to ten or twelve dollars, with exceptions running up in the twenty-five to fifty-dollar range.

Framing, corner, and hooped chisels are for pounding on as are mortise chisels. Paring chisels, in-cannel gouges, and slicks are for pushing. The latter will take a razor edge while the former (somewhat softer to withstand the stresses of being pounded) take a little coarser edge. Chisel making is an

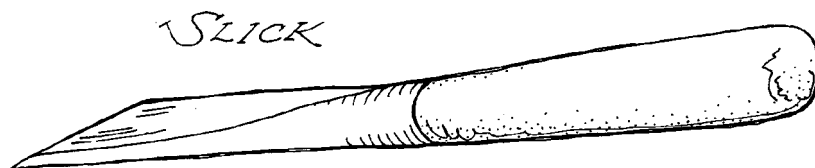
art. Good steel, well forged and properly heat-treated to be hard at the edge and tough in the body and tang is what you will be seeking, often in vain, in modern tools.

Chisels are really the only case in tool acquiring where I would suggest antique over new because the older handmade tools are more likely to have the qualities required. Of course, shapes and sizes must be found one by one, and often just what you need is unavailable, but seek out the old steel and you'll likely have a winner. Many older chisels have inlaid edges, a piece of very hard, brittle steel for the edge welded onto a softer, tougher steel shank. Buy old chisels with as much intact blade and inlay as possible. Picturesque, well-worn, short-bladed tools are useless because they are probably ground back past the hardened portion at the business end of the blade. Tools by Buck Brothers, Barton, Isaac Greaves, Wm. Butcher, Underbill Edge Tool Co., and many Sheffield, England, companies are pretty sure to be of high quality. Don't let the words "cast steel" confuse you. The blades weren't cast, for cast steel in the 19th-century context refers only to a type of tool steel of high quality.

For those woodworkers who are always looking for the best tool to do the best job, there is an aesthetic quality to tools used by generations of craftsmen before our time which is as satisfying as the keen edge or comfortable fit of a new tool. Perhaps it is justification enough for the search. I often think so.

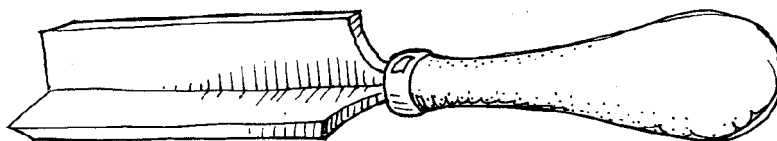


CRANKED PARING



SLICK

CORNER



HOOPED

