

## The Perfect Woodshop

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Articles and books about how to set up a workshop are very popular. Sure, most of them offer good suggestions, but they usually feature some workshop pornography. If you feel that this term is too strong and moralistic, consider the gleaming, freshly varnished, flawless workbenches; big, spotless windows with light streaming through them, or worse, skylights. Not a spot of dried glue or spilled paint anywhere. Five thousand dollars worth of handplanes arrayed like a drill team on a perfectly proportioned wall display. Floor space that you could rent out for a wedding reception.

These beautiful shops are intended to appeal to a woodworker's prurient lust for the perfect shop. They are the woodworker's equivalent of a carefully made up and painstaking posed nude centerfold, or X-rated movie. They might be fun to "visit," so to speak, but would you *really* want to live with her/him? Would you really like to work in the perfect shop?

This reminds me of our days in a farmhouse on a small acreage in Iowa. The connection may not be obvious at the moment, but bear with me. Barb and I knew we wanted to live there the minute that we drove onto the place. Buying it was a stretch financially, and we were soon house poor. It was a big farmhouse, with outbuildings and some acres of surrounding land. We had figured most of the cost of getting the house into good condition into the original financing, but the land needed to be fenced off and the out-buildings needed work.

Luckily, the previous owners had never thrown anything away, so we found useable, old fenceposts, rusty but sound woven wire and gate hardware, and so on. At first, anything I made of wood was made with

recycled lumber from other buildings that were beyond saving. (Later, I used green oak from a local sawmill.) I bought a utilitarian, old Ford pickup truck and an old Case three-point tractor. We bartered with a neighbor to get our first hay crop in the ground. We carried water to the sheep, turkeys, etc. in buckets, and thawed it out in the house in the winter-time. You get the idea.

I often fantasized about what I would do to fix up the place if I had more money to spend. In reality, we were able to fix the place up slowly over the years, one step at a time.

Now our family has matured and moved on. We all remember those days fondly. But the events I recall with the most pleasure are not the major improvements like our new well and water distribution system, even though they were an enormous help. We just paid to have that done by a professional.

My favorite memories all involve making do with less than I wanted. If I had been able to afford a gleaming new truck, a better tractor, a contractor to repair the old buildings, and so forth, it would have been great fun for a little while, but it soon would have become boring. Maybe we would have started on prettification for its own sake.

The real, lasting joy of living there was meeting challenges, reaching our goals with hard work and cleverness instead of paying money to solve each problem. The "perfect farmstead" would have prevented that. It also would have compressed the hoping and planning for each improvement, and the satisfaction of achieving something that we had looked forward to for a long time.

Today, I bring the wisdom gained from those experiences to my wood shop. I sometimes get tired of working in a two car

garage, and rolling all my tools away every night so that we can fit our car into half of it. I sometimes bump up against the limitations of my old (pre-1941) power tools.

I have a bit more money today than I did back then, and the sums needed to make the “perfect shop” are more nearly in my reach. But I don’t want to remove the challenges, the need for hard work and clever solutions, and the satisfaction of reaching a long-awaited goal. So, I’m very slow to

acquire “improvements.” I may gaze longingly at the workshop porn in the magazines. It’s fun to fantasize. But I know that I would soon become bored if I lived there.

Note: my circumstances have changed since I wrote this in 2008. Now I work in a one-car garage with fewer tools. My attitude has not changed, however.