

## A SEXAGENARIAN SOPHOMORE

Reflections on Learning a Craft in Middle Age

Charles D. Hepler

Spring, 2006

It's strange to feel like a sophomore in my middle 60's, but I would not have it any other way. The word *sophomore*, as you may know, is made up from two Greek roots, one meaning wise, as in *sophisticated*, and one meaning foolish, as in *moron*.

As I begin to study woodworking seriously, I don't consider myself a freshman. I have been a woodworker of sorts for about 45 years.<sup>1</sup> Yet I know so little about fine work. So, maybe I am one step beyond freshman, a sophomore. I know something about my craft, but I have gaps in my competence and still have a lot to learn.

In the early 1960's, Barb and I were leaving Massachusetts to go to South Dakota, where I would be stationed on Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. My father gave me a small starter set of hand tools and a ¼" electric drill, my only power tool. He also made a clever little stand that could convert it into a simple bench tool for grinding, etc.

While we lived in South Dakota, I made the workbench that I still use today<sup>2</sup>, and a sewing table for Barb. Every cut was made with a carpenter's hand saw, including tapered legs, drawer guides, and drawers. That sewing table was still sound and serviceable 30 years later, when we discarded it because Barb no longer needed it. (Downsizing leaves very little room for sentimentality.)

In the mid 1960's, about the time I was

starting my first job after my masters degree, my brother-in-law offered me a working set of vintage Craftsman power tools. My garage was now equipped with a table saw, jointer, drill press, lathe, and jig saw (what we call a scroll saw today). These tools are from the late 1930's and early 40's (pre-WW II). They are as old as I am. I have rehabilitated and adjusted them over the years. I still use all of them except the table saw, which I have recently replaced (in 2005) with a new 10" hybrid table saw.

My first project with my original set of power tools was a tall compound cradle for our newborn son, Drew. I suppose that I would have cut the rockers with a coping saw. The first set of rockers was too wide to fit down the hall of the house we were renting near Durham, N.C. I had to cut them down after the cradle was finished. It rocked straight, nonetheless.

Many babies have since slept in that cradle, including two of our children, all of our grandchildren, and the babies of other family members and friends. We used it as a planter during the natural interim while our kids were growing up to have babies of their own.

So that's the "sopho" part of sophomore. The "moronic" part reflects the sad truth that I could have done woodworking for forty years and yet have so much to learn and unlearn. I injured myself twice in large part because of my ignorance (and my assumption that I knew what to do). Oh, and that I can have so much difficulty with some parts of it.

My "crossroads," if you will, was a choice. On the one hand, I could pretend to

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<sup>1</sup> As of 2006, when I wrote this reflection.

<sup>2</sup> I used that bench until I moved to Colorado in 2015

have more competence than I really did, to mock new information as unnecessary, and to charge ahead. After all, I had managed for 45 years with my present skill set. On the other hand, I could humble myself, admit the *moros* part, and try to improve. I could become an apprentice to myself.

The phrase I used for my goal was *fine woodworking*. I don't really know what I meant by that. I used the term before I knew of the magazine by that name. I was trying to express an aspiration to make furniture with competence and care, which would be a pleasure to make, to look at and to use. I meant to differentiate it from my more utilitarian projects in the past.

I can now afford some good tools. Also, I have much more time to study and to do woodworking than in my working years. I was very busy during my career. I spent nearly as much time on our acreage in Iowa as I did at work in the University. I chose to spend time raising hay, vegetables and livestock (and learning to do it better). Now I spend my time working with wood, and learning to do that better.

### Getting on With It

I had learned most of what I know from reading books and then crashing forward to learn the skills I needed to put it into practice. I'm willing to make mistakes and I'm pretty good at avoiding irreversible ones. (Not that I don't sometimes miscalculate.)

That is how I approached my re-awakening as a woodworker. I got some books, explored the web, and started a project. One rule is, "try it first on scrap," so my failures go into the burn barrel.

This has worked well for me, although I wish I could hang out occasionally with a more experienced craftsman. (See Chapters 2, 3, and 11 in *Notes and Reflections*.)

My first large "fine woodworking" project was a pair of bedside tables. I got plans from the web. Having plans, a cut list and a narrative for constructing the tables was very helpful. I was able to modify the plans slightly, to get exactly what I wanted, and still feel secure that I was moving in the right direction.

The table is frame construction with plywood side and back panels, using mortise and tenon joints. My version of the table has raised panel doors. The top has edge molding and a re-curve cut in the front. The drawers have a single large dovetail in the front and box joints in the back. Educationally speaking, that was a challenging list.

It took me months to make, and in the process I learned a number of new skills, e.g., mortising with a router and raising panels with a table saw. I also had the joy of assembling a somewhat complicated piece that fit together almost perfectly.

I find the "apprentice" attitude rewarding. I do not expect myself to know everything that I need to know. I do expect myself to take time to learn. I work a while, stop, study, try something on a piece of scrap, study some more. Eventually I feel that I'm ready to make the actual part for the piece that I am making.

### Attitude Adjustments

Along with learning the craft, I am trying to adjust my attitude. I am attempting to become unhurried. My lifelong habit is what some call Type A. I tend to confuse haste with efficiency. Worse, I tend to energize myself with anxiety or annoyance. For years, these emotions have kept me going when I'd rather stop. Being retired has not made this habit easier to break. Also, I'm still busy, and I know that my days are numbered.

It has been harder to quit hurrying and

scurrying even than it was to quit smoking. I have not smoked once since I quit for the last time in 1973, but I still suffer occasional temptations to relapse, especially at glue-up time. The habit of using annoyance as a source of energy dies slowly. Now, when I get annoyed, I try to recognize that I may be tired and need a break.

While I was making my first project, it was much more about learning than about the finished tables. This was true even though the tables were promised to my daughter and I was using some old and irreplaceable mahogany that I had inherited from my father. I was as patient with myself as I had been with my students.

As time has gone on, and I have begun to think of myself as a woodworker, I find that I have become less patient, more hurried, and more results oriented. I feel the tendency to adopt a “get it done” attitude.

Enthusiasm is a good substitute for anxiety. I want to remain oriented toward the pleasant experience of craftsmanship. I must remember to take my time until the setup is right. If I do that, I will continue to learn and enjoy myself, and the finished product will be as good as it can be. But old habits die slowly. The sexagenarian sophomore is still a work in progress.