

REPAIRING A SPLIT TABLE TOP

We inherited some old furniture from Barb's mother. One piece is a small (22 d x 19 w x 24h) drop-leaf end table with two drawers. It is mahogany, obviously hand made, and of indeterminate age. The mahogany is brown and has some figure. The drawers are joined with hand-cut dovetails. The drawer bottoms are not plywood, and heavily checked. I suspect that they are shakes, split off a wide pine log/board rather than re-sawn. So I assume that it's old. On the other hand, the top was attached with machine-made steel screws; If they are original it must have been made after the late 19th century.

Two years ago, we decided to clean it up and give it to Melanie. I did not intend to refinish the top, just touch it up a bit, but the top was convex and I inadvertently rubbed through the finish. So, I gently removed most of the old finish with alcohol and re-finished it with shellac. After the top was hard I rubbed it with rottenstone. Beautiful.

Then, after I had carried it into the house, I noticed that my belt buckle had marred the top. Well, every mistake is a new design opportunity, or so they say. I finished up with French polishing, which filled the marks made by my belt buckle. Beautiful.

Along with the bow, I had noticed that the top included a narrow board that obviously did not match the original wood. Evidently, the top had bowed before, possibly split, and had been repaired with this 1-1/2" strip. Also, the top was screwed to the case, and the screw holes were loose, enlarged (I now recognize, too late) by wood movement. Also, I noticed that the underside of the top had not been finished. I did not appreciate the significance of either observation. I was trying to change the table as little as possible. Refinishing the top was a significant intervention, of course, but since I used shellac I thought I could leave well enough alone.

I shipped it off to Melanie in Virginia. A few months later, she informed me that the top had split into two pieces along the glue joint. She brought it back.

I lightly jointed the edges and re-glued the butt joint. I did not want to refinish the top and so I was as careful as I could possibly be to line up the two pieces. One piece was 1/32'd (or less) proud of the other. Close but not good enough. I considered trying to level the top with a few more coats of shellac on the low side but in the end I planed it all flat and refinished it, again. No more patina, and now raw pores to fill.. Also, I did not get the color match that I wanted, despite repeated toning with tinted shellac. I finally decided that it was close enough. No French polish this time, although I may give it a few more coats some day.

Wiser now, I re-attached the top with sliding clips to allow the wood to expand and contract and I put 3-4 coats of shellac on the underside. My being overly conservative resulted in more alterations of this table, not fewer. I should have corrected two serious problems (the bowed top and the way it was attached) before I refinished it the first time. The second lesson was of course the significance of a big belt buckle driven by a big belly, and how to carry a table.