

De-JaVu all over again! Scanning the old issues of Splinters has been an education for me. The same issues show up over and over through the years. This article was included in the August 1987 issue of Splinters and seemed very appropriate at this time with all the new members. Loyd

THE BEGINNER'S LAMENT by Ross Lowell (Article probably from Fine Woodworking Magazine)

We are all beginners, at one time or another, in one area or another. I'm a beginner with wood. If woodworking is anything like my profession, the initial state of enthusiastic bliss is bound to be followed by a series of setbacks, frustrations and challenges. It's the inevitable result of exchanging innocence for semi-knowledge.

Some of the difficulties are genuine dilemmas, and those of us just starting out in this craft face our fair share of them. Experienced craftsmen offer apparently contradictory advice, leaving me wondering whether to dowel or not to dowel, whether to buy a lot of hand tools or a few stationary machines or a single all-purpose contraption, whether to hollow-grind or flat grind, whether to work solid wood or plywood.

Part of the trouble is that we inundate ourselves with so much information from so many sources, hoping to find the one perfect way to do the job, that we are liable to be paralyzed with possibilities. The problem becomes less confusing and more fascinating as we gradually discover that there are a lot of good ways to skin a cabinet, that excellence has more to do with integrity, experience and talent than with any particular set of techniques. All those various approaches are tributes to human imagination and resourcefulness.

One particular conundrum that we novices face contains a bizarre irony, a form of frustration that separates the dedicated from the temporarily infatuated. It's this: Many of those ingenious jigs that fill the columns of Fine Woodworking need only one thing to construct them properly—the completed jig. Since a shooting board is required to plane precise right angles, and since the shooting board itself needs smooth, 90 angles in its construction, how do we make it without a shooting board? It's like needing the missing eyeglasses to find the eyeglasses. But, that's only half of it. The significant part of this jig dilemma was underscored by my 9 year-old son when he said, "Dad, you're spending all this time making things to make things. Suppose, afterward, you decide not to make anything?"

Perhaps it's only rationalization, but the whole getting-ready process feels like a necessary stage not unlike warm-up exercises. After all, tools are not the only things that need to be sharpened. In the case of us beginners, our skills and our design sense tend to be pretty dull. What better way to hone and polish them than to make a series of potentially useful jigs? And if the truth be known, a few freeform and jointless objects have meanwhile emerged from the piles of sawdust and shavings. It's positively amazing what can be done with a primitive drawknife, and no jigs.

There is a final dilemma. One purpose of woodworking for us amateurs is to create beautiful and occasionally even useful objects for our families and friends. Yet the process of fabrication is both time-consuming and solitary. This ultimately sociable craft seems to our families (and even sometimes to us) to be a very selfish, unsociable activity. But deep down we know that beautiful objects created with our own hands, in quiet moments, are the stuff of happiness and sanity.

In his other life, Ross Lowe//shoots movies, and invents and manufactures lighting systems for location photography.