PEOPLE PROFILE:
More Blood & Gore;
An Interview about Collecting Old Hand Tools with Patrick Leach

When you think about a fellow working during the mid-1800’s, the only thing he actually had total control over was his work, what he imagined in his mind and then produced with his hands. Thus, some craftsman-made tools are absolute works of art and uniquely reflect the maker’s talent and vision.

– Patrick Leach

We can all blame Patrick Leach! Yes, he is the fearless maven who coined the moniker “Galoot,” which is now the woodworker term for the surprisingly dedicated and populous neanderthals who look at electrical outlets as a last and unwelcome resort.

What's more, Patrick Leach puts his entire being where his mouth is on The Superior Works website, where you can sign up for Patrick's latest list of available old tool offerings.

In all, The Superior Works provides even the least expert on woodworking handtools a clear picture of the Galoot ethos and an insider view of how and why the collecting and using of old hand tools instructs the present day bench with the heart and craft of the past.

The site is so like Patrick himself, a non-commercialized businessman who believes in the venerated traditions of hand and custom made and the innate values these traditions convey – quality, longevity, respect and self-worth.

Plus, Patrick talks about old tools with great candor, a delightful wit and a self-deprecating humor, not to mention a communicable passion.

This is all to the good because browsing The Superior Works website is a deep and wide browse, the place where Patrick Leach offers his readers the history and taxonomy of vintage hand tools, the core and pulse of which is a thing called Patrick’s Blood and Gore. Once there, you may find yourself happily lost for days in an old tool thrall.

Before you do that, though – or if you just cannot help yourself, and once you've been restored to your former capacity – please read this interview; a talkative thing by any standard and an excellent look at the truest of Galoots, one Patrick Leach.

– Linda at Hock Tools
Linda: How did you begin and then develop The Superior Works?

Patrick: I served time in the 1990's in the corporate big house as a software dork. Part of my recreation was participating in computer discussion groups dedicated to woodworking. One group was within Digital Equipment Corporation (RIP) and the other, rec.woodworking, a Usenet group which I named rec.norm due to it being slanted to electrical, blood thirsty machinery.

Both Usenet and rec.norm pre-dated the world wide web and were heavily populated by propeller heads in the computer field. The free for all mosh pit that captured most of my time was the then non-moderated rec.norm.

For those with a sense of humor and who dare to learn what's become of rec.norm, check out this website by clicking on the logo here. It's the rec.norm anti-faq.

While most of the banter focused on which electric gizmo thought best to thickness a board, cut a dado, bore a hole, I sat there thinking, “why isn't there any talk of doing things the old way and with old tools; the way I would do it?”

After mustering the courage to post my opinions, I sensed that my way of working irritated some of the more prolific members. Often, discussions would erupt into online donnybrooks, with the obligatory insults, boasts, taunts, and bile. I rather enjoy such heated discourse, and many times I deliberately added fuel to the fire by being an annoying contrarian just to watch the ensuing verbal conflagration.

It soon became apparent that there was a small group who shared similar views and we coalesced into a discipleship to preach the tool truth and annoy the power tool majority. Every now and then, one of the majority would have a weak moment and ask for more information about a certain hand tool and how one could locate the tool. Having been around antiques and tools my entire life, I'd offer to locate the tool and provide road service on its use.

“Word spread how, for example a simple $25 wooden dado plane performed as promised. Here's a photo of a wooden dado plane, what kinda sorta turned me into the tool monster that I am today.”
Before long, people asked questions about various old tools, most commonly an ancestor's Stanley plane. I answered, often in far more detail than a person needed to know. A week would go by, and the same question would be asked again; then again and then again.

Patrick received again and again questions about inheritances such as depicted in the poster of this Stanley #45

Growing tired of typing the same stuff over, I tapped into my tool-obsessed mind and wrote a blow-by-blow description of each and every vintage Stanley plane aimed at the carpentry and cabinetmaking trades.

And thus was born:

The Superior Works: Patrick's Blood and Gore
Beginning of the Saga

While this effort was useful for a week or two, it soon became lost in later postings, and was difficult to access easily. Fortunately in 1995, during the infancy of the world wide web, Jay Sutherland saw the value in the stuff I posted and html-ized my work into a web page. A visionary, Jay made it easy for folks to reference the blood and gore of Stanley's output. Jay also made my paying job difficult to handle; a marked increase in requests for tools proved a blessing in disguise as this increase coincided with my growing dissatisfaction being a software weenie.

So, it was out with the new and in with the old. One of many antique tools posters illustrating Patrick's Blood & Gore on the Superior Works website.

The idea of slinging tools instead of code crept into my head. One thing leads to another. I burned all bridges mid-October 1996 and have never looked back. Even as a wee lad of five I dug up fossils along the side of the road and sold them. It's really where I should have been all along.

Linda: What are the reasons people collect tools, old or new?

Patrick: Some folks will go to their grave swearing they aren't a collector even though they have one of each Stanley plane or Lee Valley tool. Other folks, who freely admit to collecting, have the bug to such a degree that Hoarders, Buried Alive could dedicate an entire season to them. Most collectors fall in the middle of the spectrum and have reached a manageable volume of stuff, or have a particular specialization that limits the amount they can own. Whatever the reason, it probably originates in the brain adjacent to the region that makes people bungee jump, eat lutefisk, or watch Jersey Shore.
Linda: *What would you say are the best reasons to collect and what in your eyes and mind makes a tool worth collecting?*

Patrick: Collecting tools seems like a rather sane thing to do, and many come at it like I did - buying them to use, only later to discover you have more than you'll ever need. Collecting tools is probably one of the easiest things to do as they are so plentiful - every house has a collection of tools in a drawer, put there for the odd household jobs.

Without trying to sound sexist, most guys have a gene or two that commands some amount of fascination with tools. Look at a Sears Catalog - all those Craftsman sockets so nicely sorted in a carrying case. Or Snap-On tools neatly arrayed in a rolling tool cabinet. Or a gunmetal 1872 Millers patent that anyone with an eye for design can appreciate. Each of those are attractive to our mechanical nature, often resulting in a trance-like state of mind and compelling us to buy, use, and hoard tools.

If you pay $1, $10, $100, $1,000, or $10,000 for a tool you'll never use, you're a collector. You just haven't admitted it yet. No worries, though, you're in as good company as the barflies sitting day after day in a dark gin joint at 6pm who won't admit to anything either.

“My name is Patrick, and I'm a collector.....”

Linda: *Do collectors use their tools? If so, what does it typically take to rehab a tool for service today and why would anyone rehab a tool when there are good and serviceable tools on the market today?*

Patrick: I think it's rare that someone collects tools without a smidgen of interest in using tools; i.e., I think it's safe to say that nearly all tool collectors have used tools to some degree before deciding to collect them.

Putting an old tool back to work isn't a big chore, as long as it doesn't resemble road kill or was left outside to simmer in a drywall compound pail for several years. Most tools need minimal work to get up and running again. It all depends who owned the tool prior to you and whether it was taken care of properly. I like to let old tools be exactly that, an old tool.

I like the character that develops over time, and there's a satisfaction knowing that you're picking it up to use after the last guy to own it put it down. Removing rust, wiping off the built up grime, removing jammed shavings, stuff like that, is normally all an old tool needs to be put back to use.

Others enjoy the challenge of a total tool resurrection to bring it back from the dead. I try to avoid such tools, but occasionally offer them for those who like to perform the miracle that Jesus forgot to do at the Wedding at Cana.

And then there are the fastidious types, who will completely overhaul a tool, from removing the japanning, re-machining it, re-plating and
re-bluing parts, only to have it looking like a brand new Edsel. I don't quite get this. If you want a new looking tool, buy a new tool.

A collectible tool's in real danger in the hands of this type. They can, and often do, destroy its value by giving it the tool extreme makeover.

I've seen 18th century planes by rare makers with 250 year old patina and the wear marks from the fingers of the last guy to use it long ago stripped down to bare wood and coated in some hideous modern finish. How do I know this? A fellow that was collecting one of each plane maker's output bought many fine, extremely rare planes from me that were in the exact state when last used 250 years ago. When he sold his collection, they were the same planes I sold him but ravaged, stripped of their history. That history is destroyed and it's gone forever. I was shocked he would disrespect those tools this way.

Linda: I notice that woodworking tools are often beautiful objects in and of themselves. Antique-tools have what I'd say is an intimate expression in the design, which is sometimes downright ornate and appears to me embellishment beyond function. What is the history of that level of metal and woodworking in a handtool?

Patrick: Prior to their mass production, tools were made by their owners or tradesmen who supplied tools to local markets. They were often made when a particular job required such or when an order was placed by a retailer. Makers often served numerous professional roles, toolmaking done when demand presented itself.

Thus, tool manufacture was regional and reflected local tradition and design. This is evident for example in the planes made in Wrentham, Massachusetts during the mid 1700's or the tools made in Lancashire, England.

This cornice plane was made in Wrentham, MA by America's first documented plane maker, Made by Hosea Edson 1753 – 1829.

A certain localized tool patois or idiomatic slang, if you will, resisted outside influences. An apprentice made tools just like his master, and his master before him. Some countries approached tool design at opposite ends of the design spectrum. For instance, German and Austrian tools are rather bulky and ugly.

These cultures saw adornment in their tools as unnecessary and chose instead to put their energies into what they built. On the other hand, there's the French. It's always the French, isn't it?

The French went way beyond function and decorated many of their tools to a degree like no other culture. Some of the most beautiful tools ever made are French.
Decoration for decoration's sake rules the French mind, and it's no surprise that *modus operandi* would find it applied to tools as well. It's almost like it had to be this way. Can you imagine Versailles being built with anything that resembled a Stanley #5? No, you can't.

That Stanley #5 that you know so well. (BTW, did you know that one of the most popular replacement blades at Hock Tools fits the Stanley #5? C'est vrai!) OVER-THE-TOP PLUGH PLANES, THE TOOL THAT RECEIVED THE MOST DECORATION. A MILLER'S 1872 PATENT, FOREGROUND. STANLEY MILLER'S PATENT #42, BACK.

American inventors and manufacturers tarted up these planes to a degree never seen before or since. Decorative castings, exotic shapes, paint and finish options, different metals and materials, engravings, etc. all found application on plow planes.

Certainly no adornment made any tool perform better, but it made the tool and its owner look better. Ultimately it was the demand for more tools, made at lower cost, that spelled the end for decorative tools. A perfect example of this is the Stanley #45 combination plane - when first offered it had decorative floral castings with a sleek look. That morphed into less detailed floral castings, along with the plane becoming bulkier. Its final productions dropped all the floral decorations to make it just another functional tool.

In America, the Industrial Revolution saw a similar revolution in tools, and the processes to make them. This occurred during the age of excess, the Victorian era. Design was often thought to parallel function. With so many manufacturers eager to take on any job, their products needed distinction in the marketplace. How an item looked provided that distinction. No other tool received more attention than the plough plane, a tool that cuts a simple groove.

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A French plane, the Ignace Chardoillet, 1844 patent, later referenced in some American patents.

Ca. 1900 #45. “A combination plane is one that can be fitted with different irons, or cutters, as Stanley called them, and be adjusted for a particular cut. The basic #45 can groove, rabbet, dado, match (tongue and groove), bead (edge and center), slit, and cut sash.”

↓
A later #45, ca. 1935. “Starting ca. 1910, all floral motifs were removed from the castings and replaced with a stippled pattern. From here on, the plane remained pretty much unchanged, except for variations in the trademarks and some subtle casting changes.”

The tradesman who made his own tools also took an either-or-approach; either the tool was made only to be functional, looks be damned, or the tool was made to be functional and with his personal style/taste manifested in its design.

Tradesmen made tools: scrolly-wolly router on left; Masonic decoration on a block plane's lever cap on right.

The best tradesmen took pride in their work and ownership, so naturally produced tools that reflected this. When you think about a fellow working during the mid-1800's, the only thing he actually had total control over was his work, what he imagined in his mind and then produced with his hands. Thus, some craftsman-made tools are absolute works of art and uniquely reflect the maker's talent and vision.

Linda: I understand that these tools have built just about everything we see in our public, domestic and work lives; they had and have a lot of work to do, many discreet functions. But, the sheer number and incarnations of tools for woodworking is phenomenal! Not that I'm complaining, mind you, but how many different planes does one need, for goodness sake?

Patrick: There are so many tools because manufacturing processes have made it possible to crank them out in volumes never seen before. Manufacturers wouldn't be making so many of them if the demand wasn't there.

Obviously, the demand is there, or was there, for so many tools to be around, and that's not accounting for the googolplex number that were melted down to make Sherman tanks during World War II or the millions of cords' worth of wooden planes burned in wood stoves.

When you consider that America was virgin fertile ground, and like no other country before, with seemingly infinite resources, it had to be settled/developed with countless tools. Tools were among the most valuable possessions when this country was first visited by Europeans. Housing, furniture, firewood, farming, etc. all required tools.

Linda: I understand that these tools have built just about everything we see in our public, domestic
With wave after wave of immigrants arriving on its shores, America's demand for tools only skyrocketed. Our capitalist society made sure that tools were available for the cheapest cost to anyone and everyone who wanted them. If the American market had its fill of them, then off they'd go to Canada, the UK, Australia, France, Germany, South America, anywhere they could be sold. Mass production of tools was vital to make America become the world's greatest economy in recorded history.

Linda: In 1998 you told reporter Stephanie Shapiro, “The old-tool market is soaring...It's crazy...It's absolutely nuts!...Ten years ago the common planes that Stanley made, you couldn't give those things away at tool events. Everybody wanted the rare stuff...Now, guys go crazy over the most basic of tools.” Did you have anything to do with shaping this marketplace? How would you now describe the old-tool market?

Patrick: I didn't have the first web page for old tools, but I was the first guy slinging old tools on the Internet via e-mail and on Usenet, doing this several years before the web gained traction. The stuff I was selling was not generally thought to be collectible. It was all user stuff, the stuff that most tradesman had 100+ years ago: bench planes, block planes, specialty planes (rabbet, grooving, dado, etc.), chisels, layout tools, saws, blah, blah, blah..... I was sourcing this stuff at local tool auctions, where it could be bought by the pound. Many of my tool pals looked at me like I had leprosy, wondering why I was buying stuff they would throw away. I'd tell them that I was just starting out in tools, didn't know what I was doing, and that someday, if I worked hard, I could be like them. You know, the usual self-effacing, I'm clueless performance. Eventually, they caught on to what I was about.
When my clueless routine was outed, I soon had more competition selling and buying the stuff. It doesn't take a genius to figure out that there are one hundred guys wanting a $100 tool; and then there is the one guy wanting a $10,000 tool.

Today's tool market has changed considerably. Prior to the current economic depression, stupid money was being paid for all sorts of tools, some of them rather blah but some extremely rare and selling at considerably lower prices. Tough times have adjusted prices to what they were years ago. Super rare stuff is still bringing good money.

The middle market is suffering, and Stanley planes that used to sell for several thousand dollars are now having a tough time breaking the thousand dollar barrier.

Oddly, the user tool market, the clean and quality stuff, is still doing well. Some of that is selling for more than it ever did. This is especially true of handsaws. I'm gobsmacked at the prices being paid for many saws.

Linda: How do you compare makers of today's handtool with makers of old, say before WWII?

Patrick: The manufacturers of today are making tools to better tolerances than those before them.

I can understand why some choose perfection - it's the nature of humanity to strive for perfection in all things, but that's just not my gig. I scratch my head in bewilderment over such precision in woodworking tools when the medium being worked is imperfect. Wood is so dynamic and subject to the whims of nature - a perfectly flat plane will make a perfectly flat board on a Saturday while the relative humidity is 40%, then come back on Monday when the humidity has gone to 60% and that flat board is now out of truth.

I kinda see this approach to woodwork akin to how many angels can dance on the edge of a plane iron.

Woodworking tools don't need to be perfect, don't need to be machined down to the angstrom level, and don't need to be viewed as surgical instruments. Prior to this modern obsession of perfection, some of the best objects wrought by human hands were made with imperfect tools, tools that would make woodworkers today recoil in horror over their 'faults'.
An 18th century wooden jointer was mountainous over its sole when compared to the modern jointers of today, yet the Goddard-Townsend school of cabinetmakers made furniture that is unrivaled.

And, that timeless design is still being copied today by cabinetmakers who think they must use perfectly flat planes and precision tools.

My brain hurts thinking about this. We'll never know if John or Thomas Seymour would choose a modern perfectly-flat plane over their own tried and true 'lumpy' jointer. I suspect not.

Boston neo-classical carved mahogany trestle based card table with brass mounts, circa 1825. Photo courtesy of Aileen Minor.

Linda: What is your all-time favorite old tool and why?

Patrick: I can't think of a favorite tool. There's a lot that I like, and would be the last to sell, if, say, I had to have a leg amputated and needed the money to pay for that.

Linda: What do you like most about what you do?

Patrick: My freedom and peace of mind. There's no amount of money that can buy that. I work harder now than I ever did in the past, but I love it.

Because of old tools I've been places I never imagined - a fly-infested finca in Lobosillo, Spain, where a lizard ran up my leg; eating sausage made from donkey and drinking bootleg poire in St. Nectaire, France; gorging smoked salmon while guzzling single malts on a remote beach on Islay; digging a Spiers smoothing plane out of an ancient cabinet shop in Ireland; being rescued by midwives after becoming lost after a late night out on the streets of Edinburgh; mistakenly walking into a French whorehouse in Nantes and asking the madam how much she was going to pay me for some, er, good times; and selling tools in Decatur, Illinois three times too many.

And because of old tools, I've been able to transform my hobby into a job I love. I owe all my success to my customers - all of you have made me a very happy, er, neanderthal.

Thank you, Patrick Leach.

– Linda Rosengarten