



PHOTOGRAPHS BY RON HOCK

# Would the real Iron Man please step forward

**Ron Hock looks back on his previous career and tells Anne Briggs Bohnett how he eventually managed to cut it as a tool maker in the 21st century**

Over the past few years, I've had the incredible privilege of getting to know Ron and Linda of Hock Tools. I've long used their replacement blades in my vintage Stanley planes and thought Ron would be the perfect person to kick off my new series of candid profiles for *Furniture & Cabinetmaking*. Cue a string of emails, over which I was able to conduct a virtual 'sit-down interview' with Mr Hock. Here's what he told me...

### Going solo

"I do not consider myself an artist or a craftsman. I am a manufacturer. Oh, I guess I was a craftsperson way back when I was making knives one at a time in my little shop in the backyard. I exhibited them at crafts fairs. You may notice I said 'exhibited them' at crafts fairs instead of 'sold them' at crafts fairs, though I did sell a few..."

As you know, it has never been easy for non-represented crafters to go it on their own. But being a craftsperson in the pre-internet world was even more difficult than it is today. There were only four basic ways – not including opening your own storefront – to get the word out. First, direct mail, which meant building or buying a mailing

list and included the costs of printing and mailing. Second, buying an ad in a magazine, though this was expensive then, just as it is now. Both of the above raise the question of 'what do I show in the mailer or ad?'. Most craftspeople I know make something new and wonderful each time. Mailers and ads can only show a few pieces at a time and those pieces may or may not be available for purchase.

The third method? Much like today, there were craft fairs. As helpful as the American Craft Council Fairs were – juried and broad-based so that lots of people came to exhibits of pre-selected fine crafts – unless you hit the big time with a large reseller, they did not alleviate the other relentless and expensive marketing struggles. For me, I just burned out on the whole craft fair thing.

The fourth way to sell was gallery consignments, wherein you got to store your inventory in someone else's display case until it sold, or they gave it back because it had rusty fingerprints on it from

improper care. Consigning specialty knives held too many problems and basically an unsold knife was not sellable once returned, so I came to distrust the consignment model and still believe it to be a cruel and exploitative business model that should be illegal. A bit like hiring unpaid interns.

Then came the internet, which has become a part of our daily lives. Worldwide exposure to millions of potential customers for nearly free. Our blades found a niche on the internet and sales more than doubled right away just by having a website. And I'm going back to the mid-1990s!

Social media now keeps us connected with our clientele, existing and potential. The whole marketing business is much more fun

with the internet. Our current ability to reach out to an international market with so little effort would have seemed like a dream 'way back when'. This revolution in self-marketing is particularly apparent with the 'maker movement'. The internet allows independent crafters to sell their wares without involving galleries or crafts fairs or expensive mailing lists. An appealing website, an occasional blog post and an email newsletter keep you at the front of mind for your growing list of customers. Digital photography and desktop publishing make professional presentations possible with minimal expense, effort or learning curve. This is an unprecedented time: break the bottle over the bow and launch your craft!

*"It's a cruel and exploitative business model that should be illegal"*

### Opportunity knocks

The College of the Redwoods Fine Woodworking Program had been up and running less than a year when one of James Krenov's instructors, along with one of the students, first showed up at my shop in 1981 asking for blades for these wooden planes they were making. I was doggedly pursuing my knife-making dream and didn't want to confuse myself with something I understood so little, so I was reluctant to oblige. I was eventually talked into making a test batch. Then another. This dipping of my toe into the pond was met with considerable enthusiasm and I was lucky enough to see an opportunity in the unsatisfied demand! By the way, this was about the same time Thomas Lie-Nielsen was putting on his big-boy pants, *Fine Woodworking* – the only national woodworking magazine in the US in those days – was but a few years old and still in black and white.



Planemaker Scott Meeks exclusively uses Hock blades in his Krenov-style planes



Ron has moved from making knives one at a time...

... to being a large-scale blade manufacturer. Anne, like thousands of woodworkers, opts for a Hock blade to upgrade their favourite Bailey or Bedrock plane

### Ron Hock on O1 vs A2 steel



O1 is a simple high carbon tool steel with very little added to the iron/steel alloy other than 1.1% manganese. That pinch of Mn allows the steel to harden with an oil quench (the 'O' in O1 stands for Oil.) Oil removes the heat more slowly than water, reducing the thermal shock that occurs when orange-hot steel is plunged into water. Reducing that thermal shock minimizes the risk of cracking or distortion in the hardened piece. With an alloy as simple as O1, containing so few alloying

elements, the hardened grain structure is as fine as possible which allows honing to the sharpest possible edge.

A2 differs from O1 with the addition of 5% chromium and 1.1% molybdenum, allowing it to quench in still air ('A' for Air.) While 'stainless' amounts of chromium (12% or more) make tool steel 'gummy' and hard to sharpen, the modest amount of chromium in A2 improves its toughness and abrasion resistance, but imparts only a slight measure of corrosion resistance.

But there is a trade off. During heat treatment the chromium addition combines with some of the carbon in the alloy to form chromium carbides – tough, hard particles dispersed through the steel. These carbides are the primary contributors to A2's celebrated edge retention. However, during heat treatment, the chromium carbides can grow quite large – large enough to affect your ability to hone the edge as close to zero-radius as you may want. And these carbides are held in place with less strength than the rest of the steel matrix which can allow

them to pop out under the stress of honing or cutting leaving a small gap in the edge.

To strengthen the edge Ron recommends a larger bevel angle for A2 than we would use for O1. For a bench plane iron, try your A2 blade at about 30° or 33°. A chisel or block plane blade can be even steeper; try 35° or so and see if edge retention is improved.

For more on this subject and a whole lot more besides, check out the Hock Tools website: [www.hocktools.com](http://www.hocktools.com)



## < Change of course

I felt my boat changing course. As this new course became clearer, its name changed from SS Knifemaker to SS Toolmaker. In what now seems no time at all, I was making Krenov-style blades as well as aftermarket blades to replace the chrome-vanadium junk that so commonly accompanied planes of a certain vintage. This was no longer craft, but manufacture. Batches of a hundred or more identical things became the norm and my background in industrial engineering became a greater asset than my background in the arts. I listened to my customers and adjusted course as demand dictated. It was an uphill struggle. I'm lucky and grateful to have a wife who was willing to work to keep things afloat as our business grew.

The key to success in craft, or most anything, really, is perseverance. If you can stick with it long enough, you will succeed. Woody Allen is credited with saying '90% of success is simply showing up' – a little research will show that he actually said, '80% of life is showing up'. I like the first one better, so that's the one I prefer to quote.

That's my best piece of unsolicited advice, stick to it! Stay open to opportunities that may arise. You never know what new thing may throw you a rope to pull your craft in a new direction. You might begin as a crafter and then because of demand, sheer quantity and efficiencies in production become a manufacturer as I did. But if you love it and remain true to the issues of quality and good design, does a definition really matter?" *F&C*

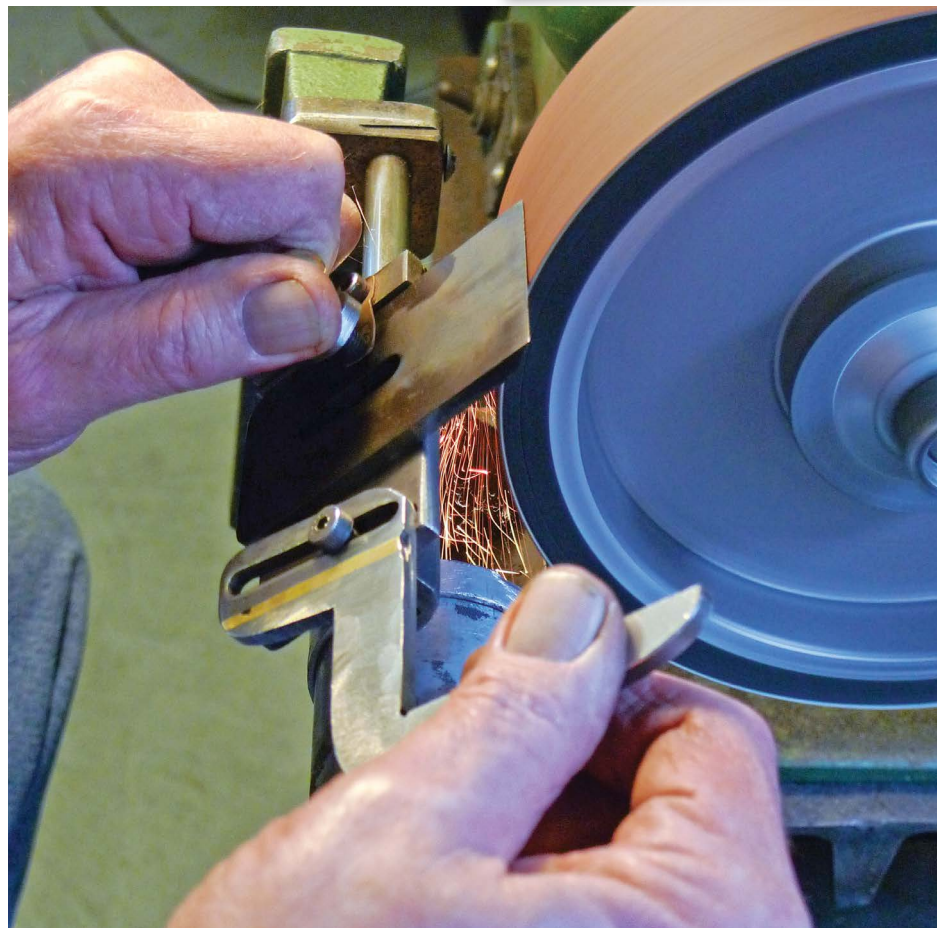


Ron, Linda and Anne at WIA14

## The Perfect Edge

This is by far the best overall text on sharpening available and it's clear that Ron has real enthusiasm for his subject. Ron covers the metallurgy of blades; how, why and when to sharpen them plus abrasives and all of the sharpening systems. Despite this wealth of information Ron also covers how to sharpen almost every cutting edge you are likely to need.

Published by: Popular Woodworking Books  
ISBN: 978-1-55870-858-7  
Price: £17.99



Though made in large batch runs Hock blades still have an air of hand crafted quality about them