



Issue 39, September 2023

Hi Steve r,

Welcome to the September issue of *Notes from the Shop*, a newsletter kinda sorta about woodworking. If you're new here, thank you for signing up, and if you enjoy it, let me know—all you have to do is hit reply. My AI robots will read your note. Lol jk...I actually read everything with old-school, human eyes. 🙄

I just got back from a podcasting conference in Denver and came away inspired, overwhelmed, and feeling more in-touch with real humans.

All of the other conferences I attend are either woodworking/maker-related (*Workbenchcon*, *Open Sauce*) or YouTube-related (*Vidcon*, *VidSummit*). I already know many of the attendees (some for well over a decade on YouTube), so those events are mainly excuses to get together and hang out.

Podcast Movement was out of my conference comfort zone. I went without knowing a single person and nobody there would know me. (A few fans of *WWMM* were there—it was surprising and lovely to meet you!)

About an hour after I arrived, I attended the first evening's welcome

party and immediately began meeting people. Everyone was just so welcoming and friendly. My life is basically online so I very much enjoy the opportunities to strike up conversations with strangers and make real human connections.

Sure, this was a business networking event (and I did plenty of that), but while those connections are important, they are also somewhat transactional. It's the special friends I made that I wasn't anticipating. People who I spent hours with talking about movies, dinosaurs, and cheese.

If you get a chance to attend a local woodworking event, or even something larger such as *Workbenchcon*, this is your nudge to do so, especially if you don't know anyone attending. Plus, if I'm there, you basically know me already, so you'd better say hello! I love chatting.

I know a lot of people these days (especially woodworkers) who like to define themselves as introverts, but online relationships never compare to our fellow humans IRL. And when you attend events like these, you already have at least one thing in common with everyone, so step out of your comfort zone and strike up a conversation with a stranger. It all starts with a simple hello!



A few weeks ago, I made a cherry and maple keepsake box. It's designed to look like a book, but I hesitate to call it a "book box" because that feels like a container for library donations. At any rate, it was a fantastic little project that required a lot of attention to detail. The hinge is made of two tiny dowel pins which require drilling holes in very precise spots. I had to make a special setup on my table saw in order to resaw the book's thin "covers", and the "spine" demanded careful shaping. It was one of those rare times when a project pretty much comes together smoothly, despite all the fussy parts.



Then there was the folding tray table I made last week which was much more typical, not one of those smooth-sailing projects. Like the book box, there are only a few pieces involved, and it requires drilling holes in very precise locations. Do that, and the project practically builds itself.

Instead, I glued the wrong two connector dowels into the wrong two legs. It only took a couple of minutes before I caught my mistake and quickly tried to remove the dowels before the glue set. Well, the dowels fit too tightly to begin with so I couldn't easily remove them. I had the very clever idea to extract them with a few strategic mallet blows. That worked! Unfortunately, it took two large chunks of the leg with it.



This was one of those moments in woodworking where you pause to question your life choices. I had already spent considerable effort milling all four legs from a 2x6 board, shaping their ends, chamfering their edges and boring all the connector holes so that they lined up. In this case, making a single replacement leg wouldn't be the best course of action. For the table to fit together and operate smoothly, all the legs should be made together so they all match. I didn't want to start from the beginning.

Instead, I decided to glue the blown-out shards of wood back in place, like two puzzle pieces. That worked quite well and I was able to strengthen that spot even more by gluing in the correct dowels at the same time. Let's hear it once again for the mind-boggling strength of polyvinyl acetate wood glue.



Then I proceeded to split the end of the other leg by pounding in a dowel. 🤦

This was a simpler repair, only requiring squishing some glue in the crack and clamping. But here's the thing. Both of those were easily avoidable mistakes. The problem was that the dowels were too tight to begin with. Had I simply drilled a burner hole in a scrap of wood, I could have tested them and sanded them down to fit without any pounding. Basically, I didn't do the thing I preach: run tests throughout the project.

So I can't say, "lesson learned" because I already knew the lesson. Nor was it a Bob Ross happy accident. There is no inspirational "embracing our mistakes" platitude I can impart. It was simply a dumb, frustrating moment. But honestly, that's the type of goof we make most often.

People often leave comments that they appreciate when I leave my mistakes in my videos. Yes, there is value for viewers to see how I solve specific problems when they arise, but fundamentally I leave these moments in my videos because making mistakes is a natural, common element of woodworking. At least it's helpful to think of it that way.



In broad terms, every woodworking project can be broken down into four components:

1. Milling: For most of us who don't chop down our own trees, this is the initial preparation of lumber to get boards we can build with. It might entail jointing to square up wacky edges, resawing or planing to get wood to the thickness we need, breaking down a sheet of plywood, or simply assessing store-bought boards to find the best faces and deciding which ones will be used for which parts of the project.

2. Cutting and shaping: This is the bulk of what we do and what probably comes to mind when anyone thinks about woodworking: cutting boards to their exact sizes and shapes. Saws, routers, chisels... you know, all that stuff influencers tell you that you need to spend more money on lol.

3. Assembly: Naturally everything we cut and shape needs to be put

together into something that looks like something. This involves fitting joints together, gluing, clamping, etc.

4. Finishing: The final stage of any project usually involves some method of protecting the wood with oil, varnish, lacquer, or even paint. Smoothing is a big part of the finishing process, whether it's sanding, planing, or scraping.

These stages are usually intermingled during a project build, with #2 and #3 maintaining the coziest relationship. As you gain experience, you'll start to naturally think through every project in these terms, and plan how a series of tasks will all fit together. In these strict terms, every project is predictable and repeatable.

Yet this model doesn't include a fifth element!

5. Human imperfection: We have the capacity to err. This isn't as enjoyable as 1–4, and it's nothing we can plan into our workflow, but nonetheless, it's there. When I say that mistakes are part of woodworking, I don't mean it flippantly; I mean it's an actual component of almost every project we make.

Mistakes aren't included in any woodworking plan, nor can anyone teach how to recover from every mistake because there are an infinite number of ways our monkey brains can manage to screw things up. A lifetime of experience will help predict certain common pitfalls, yet we will still make those blunders. It may be minor or huge, but every project will have problems to overcome. So what are we supposed to do?

It starts by thinking of human error like we do milling, cutting, assembly, and finishing. It's part of the process. Just like spreading glue or sanding.

While mistakes can be frustrating, they remind us that we aren't robots. We never really know exactly what our finished pieces will look like when we begin a project because we are unpredictable and there are too many variables involved in making anything by hand. Greet your

mishaps, both minor and major, with determination and intelligence. Don't get emotional and lose sight of the experience. Setbacks only change the course, not the vision.

—Steve

Ready to set up shop?

As the weather begins to cool off, there is no better time to set up a fully functioning woodworking shop. Whether you have a shop and just need to declutter and improve the workflow, or you think you don't have a large enough space, I've got you covered.



The Weekend Workshop is my online course designed to turn any space into a woodworking sanctuary. I'll show you how to build 14 shop projects to optimize your space. (Basically, everything you see in my shop!)

Plus, I'll show you how to improve your lighting, air quality, workflow and much more. This is a comprehensive, step-by-step approach to creating your dream shop, even if you have to share the space with—

gasp—a car!

Thousands of readers of this newsletter are Weekend Workshop members and cranking out amazing projects. Check it out at www.theweekendworkshop.com.

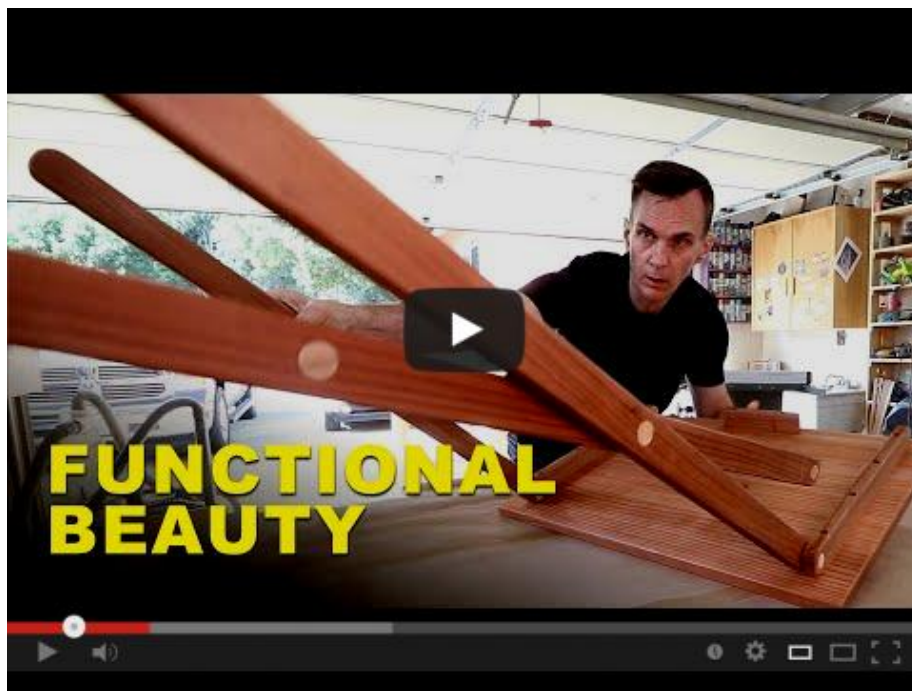
Monthly Projects

Here's how to make the **Book Box** I mentioned above. The cool thing is, you don't need to buy any new lumber for this; just use some hardwood you have lying around!



If you remember the **Folding Tray Table** I made during the lockdown woodworking series this will be familiar, but I'm here to revisit it!

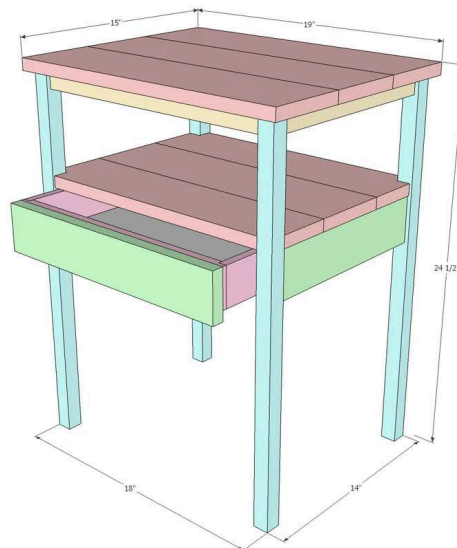
This table may look intricate, but I'll prove that it's an achievable challenge—a mix of drama and craftsmanship.



Plans Update

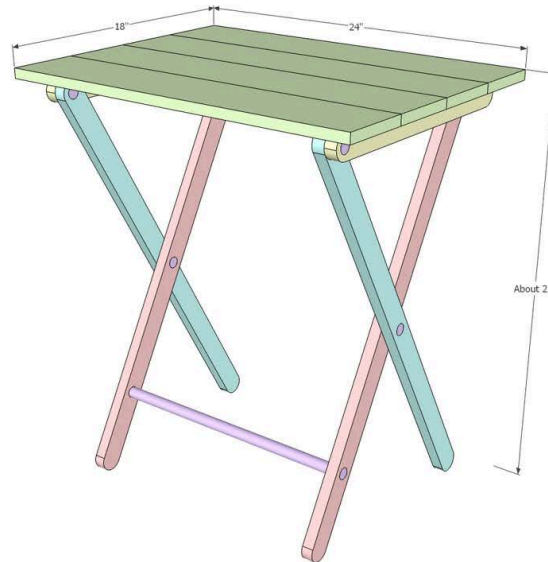
I've been getting a lot of questions about my catalog of plans. I recently shut down the old WWMM website which started as a blog 15 years ago and has gone through many iterations.

At this point, the only reason to go to the site was to download plans and those had become difficult to find since they were intermingled with articles, videos and whatnot. So I am now in the process of moving plans to the new site, [ShopWWMM](https://www.shopwwmm.com), where it is much easier to browse and find what you're looking for.



In addition to slowly migrating well over 100 sets of plans, I'm also using this as an opportunity to update older plans and make them more detailed and easier to follow. My Sketchup designs from 2012 leave much to be desired. All these old, but updated plans will be available on a pay-what-you-want system. If you want to pay nothing, that's an option.

My newer projects are much more detailed and are unlike plans you can get anywhere else. My goal is to make them as enjoyable and as accessible as my YouTube videos. They each include a personal note (similar to this newsletter) preparing you for the project, pointing out any pitfalls, and even discussing design considerations. And remember, all plans are paired with how-to videos.



So bear with me as this grows. I really want my courses, my YouTube channel, this newsletter, and my plans to all have the same vibe.

Creative Culture Podcast

In August, I had the pleasure of talking to two creative women who approach everything they do with intention, positivity, and purpose. Both of these interviews will inspire you to take action in your own pursuits.



[Ali Spagnola](#) stays creative by actively hunting for ideas rather than waiting for a strike of inspiration.

Whether it's a Chia toilet or a felt piano, Ali chooses projects that not only resonate with her but also defy artistic norms. She's an artist, comedian, maker, musician, and fitness nut.

[Marissa Hill](#) is the producer and host of *Shade TV*, a YouTube channel devoted to fashion, sneakers and hype culture. She herself is a sneakerhead and fashion model who is continually seen at movie premieres, pop culture events and festivals. In this episode, we talked about her role in hype culture, what kind of sneakers to wear, and a little about her volleyball career.



Listen to Creative Culture on all podcast platforms or the [Creative Culture website!](#)

Reader Mail

In last month's issue about old-timey woodworking books and plans, I made this provocative comment: *'Some projects I can't imagine anyone ever actually built (a flat-bottomed plywood boat seems sketchy in all kinds of ways).'* Here's one reader's thoughts on that:

"Oh, yes they did! My dad led the way for the flat bottom canoe, and the rest of the family all helped. Sealing and painting took quite some time and effort, but the result was great. I already had swimming and

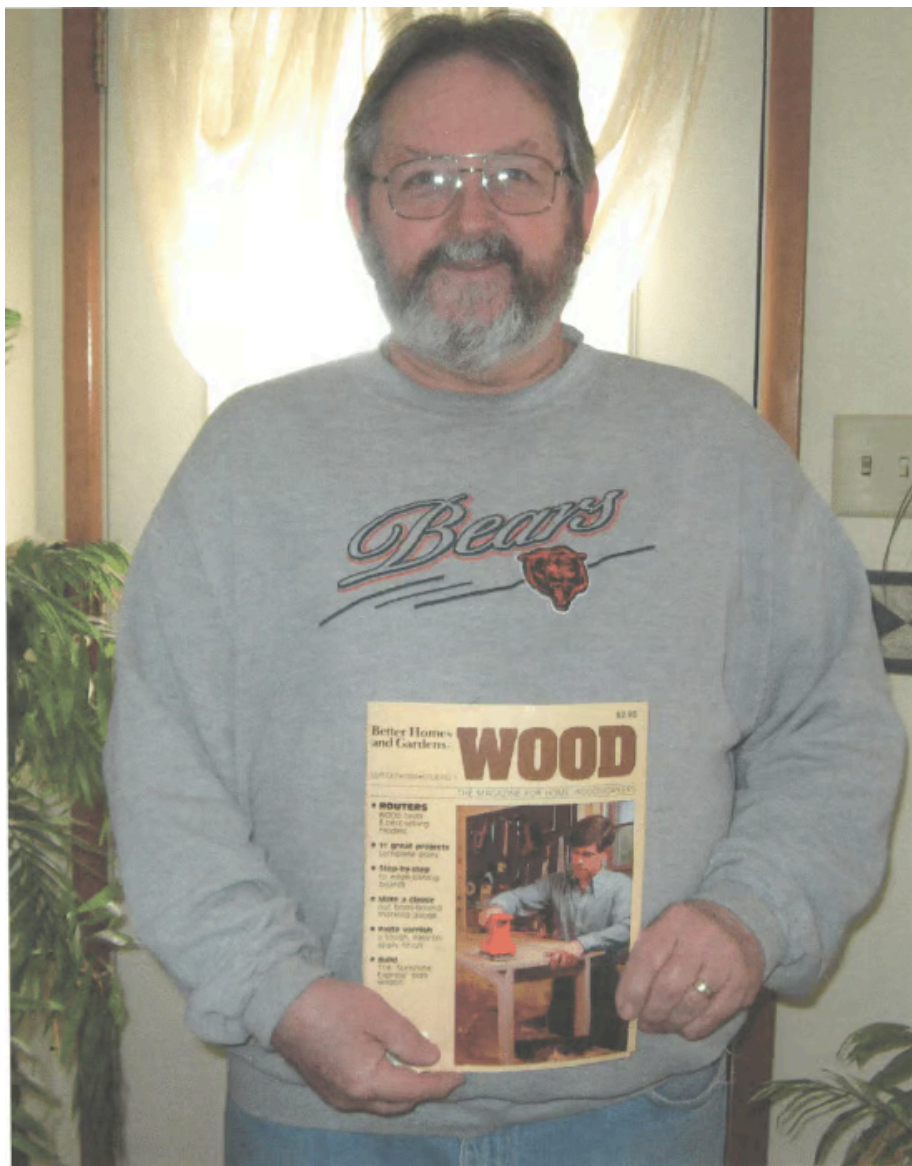
canoeing merit badges by this time. OK, so we never attempted the open ocean, but took it to the lake, and to the Schuylkill River (Pennsylvania, near Philadelphia).

Thanks for your memories and tips”—Tucker

But it was still a little sketchy, right? 😊—Steve

“Wood magazine wanted a picture of a person who had their first issue and I had collected all since its start. Three-quarters of my life woodworking—I forget what year this was now, as an 83-year-old woodworker I sometimes forget dates ha.

Thanks Steve for the great wisdom you pass along in each email, keep it up! Our younger generation needs that wisdom and knowledge.”



—Larry

Wow, it's hard to believe that Wood Mag has been around since 1984. And why were woodworkers in magazines back then dressed for casual Friday?—Steve

"Always enjoy your writings, readings, etc., Steve.

I feel I'm part of the woodworking gang—one for all—all for one! I'm still learning. A side effect of your courses is that now I am a little bit arrogant: I think I can build anything! I build stuff from pictures—my confidence is beaucoup!

Thank YOU"—Fred W.

Welcome to the club! Did you get the secret handshake?—Steve

Thoughts on this month's newsletter? Drop me a line by replying to this email!

Reader Projects

Ever see any of the storage systems or cabinets in my shop and want to make them? No problem! They are all included in [The Weekend Workshop](#), my online course that will show you how to turn any space, no matter the size, into a fully functional wood shop. This handy sanding station made by course member, Fred K., is a great example of what you can make!



If you're feeling artistic, give Intarsia a shot! Check out this amazing samurai made by Humphrey.



Luka's boyfriend knows that lumber is the way to a woodworker's heart.

Great looking results!



Have you made something you want over a quarter million people to see in next month's newsletter? Just hit reply and send me a pic!

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