

One Woodworker's Beginnings

By Charles Prowell

For a time it was my father's routine to spend a portion of his Saturdays in my grandfather's furniture shop and I often tagged along. At the time, some thirty years ago, I couldn't possibly have known how important those Saturdays would seem to me now, those idle hours with my two favorite people, passed with objectives no more pressing than simply feeling the heat from the coal-burning stove while outside, bitter cold eddies of winter wind piled snow against the windows.

The radio would be on with Dick Butkus and the Fighting Illini tearing up the Big Ten, and my father listening. I would be on a couch beside the stove at the far end of the shop. Sprawled across the worn cushions I would search through a stack of *True* magazines for the story I had left unfinished the week before, harrowing tales of ten-foot grizzlies and hunters with nerves of steel.

My grandfather relished the company; it was a one-man shop and he needed, if only for a few hours a week, a living, breathing audience. He would begin by addressing my father, explanations on the joinery of whatever piece happened to be sitting half-assembled in the center of the room and my father would, at first, respond with genuine interest. But in time his interest would wane and his responses lessened to the occasional nod and finally he would turn to the radio with his full attention on the game.

Thus, half his gallery eliminated, my grandfather would eventually turn to me and begin talking joinery as if it were personified. "She'll want to fit together like a kitten's mitten, boy," he would say, holding out a tenon with more cuts and configurations than the missing piece of a jigsaw puzzle. I would close the magazine and settle deeper into the couch. My attention was all his now; he was far more interesting than grizzly fighters.

"You know I could drive a Cadillac if I wanted to," he would go on, stoking the fire, "but by choice I drive a Ford. Same with these," and he would motion to the desk in progress. "You could throw in all kinds of frills, like the Japanese and French, pretty little wedges, some inlay, expose your splines, what have you, but it's not going to do you any good. A diamond necklace isn't going to make Mrs. Drew any prettier." (The widow Drew lived in the house next door.) "You want to see diamond necklaces?" I nodded, smiling. "... well then, go to Palm Springs. Diamond necklaces, Cadillac convertibles and gaudy furniture with ivory inlays and exposed joints. In Palm Springs they wear their money pinned to their lapels and drive around in convertibles like exposed skeletons. An exposed joint is a skeleton. Would you want to look at a skeleton in your living room for the rest of your life?"

My grandfather was an admirer of Gustav Stickly, a turn of the century woodworker and self-proclaimed

architect whose *Craftsman* magazine championed a grass roots approach to design; he bucked the trends of European and American designers who were becoming more production-minded, more ornament-minded, with the advent of large power tools that could suddenly punch out mortises and turn spindles in a fraction of the time required to perform those functions by hand. At a time when furniture was becoming more ornate, Stickly championed the return to a more utilitarian, almost Shaker-like style that found an audience, gained momentum, and was picked up by an American craftsman movement that lives to this day.

My grandfather was one of these followers, as was my father and even to some extent myself. Simplicity has always been the common denominator, simplicity and balance. Regardless of the complicated tenonry, or exposed joints with fitted wedges, the piece should work on first glance; its separated parts should never upstage the whole. The refinements, adornments, the technical wizardry, are all there as the supporting cast, meant to blend together on this crucial first look like the secondary strokes of a painting, or the prose of a novel. They're to be appreciated, even perused and scrutinized, but only as an afterthought, for the sum of the most extravagant details can never carry a piece, can never right an imbalanced design. Somewhere, amidst all the silly talk, this was the point my grandfather attempted to make.

There's no old, overstuffed couch in my shop, no stacks of magazines, no pot-bellied stove. What I do have, however, is a small polaroid pinned above the radio, partially faded now and usually coated with dust. It's a photograph of my father and grandfather leaning against the workbench. Now and again I glance over to it and wonder what their reactions would be to my own migration to California, home to Palm Springs and innovative designs. From their still-life perspective they can view the entire shop, including my four-year-old son Sam, who on this particular Saturday morning has his tools spread over the floor behind me. He's got my father's cloth nail apron on, which fits like a skirt, and with my grandfather's ball peen hammer is busy tacking six-penny finish nails to a length of redwood. They're arranged in a circle, toe-nailed to slant away from a small screw he's tapped into the center. It's a design of some kind, his design, like any of a dozen others he insists on my saving. But it suddenly occurs to me that it's more, that it's an expectable progression, a generational continuum that may lead full circle, with young Sam's maturity, to the very frivolous detailing his unknown grandfather and great-grandfather repeatedly rejected. I pulled the photograph down and repinned it to face the wall. What they don't know won't hurt them.