TOOLS THAT SAVE THE DAY
October, 2017

I've been spending much of my time getting through that stage of furniture-making education characterized by making every mistake in the book at least once. I think it's one of those pay-your-dues exercises. You know, measure once - cut once, then start over with a new blank. Measure twice, cut once – oops, took the wrong measurement from the drawing. Get the right measurement, measure twice, cut – whaddaya mean that's pine, not poplar? OK, let's be honest. I've been spending ALL of my time in this stage. I've adopted a new slogan, "If we learn from our mistakes, I must be brilliant!"

Plywood (Baltic Birch) is supposed to take a lot of the fuss out of woodworking by being so flat and stable, and I was only making a couple of cabinet cases that would become built-ins inside a former closet, but… Using a stacked dado in my table saw, I dadoed slots for shelves in what would be the case sides. I then used the dado blade to trim the edge thickness of the shelves to match the dado width and put a small shoulder on the shelves to hide the joint. They fit together perfectly, except if the case side is 28" deep, and the shelf is 20x28, it would have been a better idea if I had put the shoulder on the 28" edge of the shelf to match the case side, not the 20" front and rear.

After I fixed that and went to dry assembly, I found that the shelves caused the sides to bulge. I checked the dadoes and, sure enough, the depth varied up and down along the length of the dado by as much as 1/8". The plywood pieces were so big (28x51) that they were hard enough to manage on the table saw. And the plywood had just enough warp to lift slightly off the saw table during dadoing. I apparently hadn't put enough downward pressure on the pieces to hold them tight to the table. So, what's the chance of resetting the table saw to fit the dado blade into the same cut almost 45" from the saw fence PERFECTLY so as not to widen the dado now that I have case dado and shelf thickness perfectly matched? The answer is easy – not a chance in He**!

I pulled out the 1907 Stanley 71 router plane that I had bought at a flea market years ago on a whim and had not used since, spent about 30 minutes trying to get a reasonably sharp edge on the one old ½" wide blade that came with it, and then ground that blade to 15/32" width, the width of my dadoes. That worked like a charm, making all of the dados exactly the same depth over their entire lengths. I was so impressed by that little plane that I went right to the computer and ordered a set of replacement blades of varying widths from Lee Valley, thus nearly doubling the price of the plane. I've always liked a router plane since the first time I used one. It's one of those specialty tools that has a very limited scope of uses, but for those uses no other tool can match it.

Of course, the price of this plane is irrelevant for this tool has a unique and infamous place in Michael family lore. I was looking at it in a hardware store in the Berkshires years ago, debating with myself about buying it. My wife, who is very supportive of my woodworking in spite of having seen very few (OK, none) of the furniture items on the honey-do list come to fruition, said, encouragingly, "Buy it if you need it." And I replied (without thinking, of course), "It's not that I need it. It's that I don't have one." Ever want to cut out your own tongue with a butter knife? I will NEVER live that one down. And now when she comes home from a flea market or thrift shop loaded with "stuff" for her craft room, I just have to bite my cheeks and keep my mouth shut.

I need to focus more on my primary hobby - shopping for and buying tools. It's only when I try to use them that bad things happen.

The Perpetual Novice