

Simple tools

Aug 27, 2020

Ever seen a Halligan tool? If not we'll wait while you look it up. (Think, think, think...)

Back again? Yes, I know some call it a Halligan bar or even just a forced entry tool. Doesn't matter. What does matter is that a fire fighter named Halligan saw a need for a tool that could easily be carried and deployed by one man to forcibly open doors and windows so firefighters to get inside to, you know, fight fires. He invented the tool seventy-odd years ago and today, at least one example is carried on just about every fire truck in the country, if not the world.

It's not magical. At one end an adze and pick meet at a right angle and the other end sports a two-tined pry bar, these two ends joined by a convenient length of really sturdy steel. It's neither more nor less than a simple tool that works well for the job it's intended to do.

In bringing fine pieces of woodworking to their final smoothness, I use a doodad called a card scraper (also: cabinet scraper, hand scraper, burr scraper...). It's an unremarkable rectangle of thin steel the edge of which I file straight and true and then run over a burnisher (another unremarkable chunk of steel) to create a slight burr along the edge. When held at a slight angle and bellied a bit, a card scraper drawn across the surface of a board produces a pile of fine fuzz and leaves behind an incredibly blemish-free surface. And unlike sandpaper, it does not send billowing clouds of dust into the air. The thing is, a five dollar scraper does work a five hundred dollar power planer can't do. (To be fair, the reverse is also true.) A scraper does one job, well. Don't know who invented it but I thank them every time I have to tame the face of a board covered with tear outs due to nasty, interlocking grain.

Bet you didn't know the little thingy at the end of a shoelace is called an aglet. Or, perhaps you did. Again, a bone simple device that solves a common problem. It prevents the cut ends of the laces from unravelling. Does one job, well.

After I post this, I'm going to be working out in my shop building a jig for cutting the angled mortises of splined miters on the corners of a box I'm making. I found a good design on the Internet that I can make using one piece of scrap plywood and some glue and it will be ready to use this weekend. It's a simple tool, but don't let that fool you. Someone went to the effort to put serious thought into how to make this thingee (someone named Jay Bates of Jay's Custom Creations, doncha know) and now, instead of spending an hour puzzling it out I can just slap the darn thing together. And it will allow me to cut a tricky set of mortises quickly and cleanly whilst keeping all my phalanges firmly attached to the corresponding metacarpals. Jay has done a really nice job of an elegant design for a simple tool that does one job, well.

I don't know if there's a moral to this story. Except, maybe in a time when so much seems to be going wrong, it can be soul affirming to think of something going right. We don't have to solve all the world's problems tonight. But each day, within our own sphere of influence, perhaps we can improve one thing. All we need do is make use of simple tools.

Like mebbe a black ink pen and a ballot. You think?