Classic shop tools
Carving out a message from the past

ANTIOQUES AND COLLECTIBLES ARE PERHAPS THE MOST TANGIBLE BONDS WE HAVE TO THE PAST—WHETHER THAT PAST IS A PERSONAL ONE INVOLVING OUR ANCESTORS OR A PEEK INTO A FASCINATING YESTERYEAR POPULATED BY PEOPLE AND PLACES WE NEVER KNEW.

For those who have a weakness for antiques and old stuff in general, these objects of our “affliction” are often finished luxury items—an 18th-century French armoire, a late 19th-century English pre-Raphaelite painting, an old railroad service pocket watch with a cracked face passed down from father to daughter.

But as I rummage around Winterthur Museum’s Dominy Shops with Charles Hummel, the 86-year-old curator emeritus, I’m drawn not to finished products but to the tools used to create those products—things like parlor chairs and stately grandfather clocks. Many men today (and not a few women) love making or fixing things, so shop tools from another time are of particular interest. Sometimes it’s because they’re different and serve no modern purpose. Often, though, it’s because they’re so similar in design to what we use today.

As anyone who’s visited Winterthur knows, Henry Francis du Pont was a collector’s collector, often buying complete rooms of furnishings and transferring them to his château in Brandywine Country. In the mid-1940s, he was attracted to the Dominy Shops, woodworking and clock-making businesses that was once home to three generations of Dominy family craftsmen working in the now well-known
Hamptons on Eastern Long Island. With the shops came more than 800 tools the family used between 1765 and 1868. "Look at this bench," says Hummel. "See how low it is? People think that was because men were shorter then, but that's not the reason."

It's because there was no electricity. The lower bench made it easier to lean into a wooden drill or get a good swing in with a hammer when striking a chisel or an awl.

The Dominy Woodworking Shop was reconstructed at Winterthur from architectural drawings of the original, which stood as part of the Dominy house from 1715 to 1946. Direct descendants preserved the tools, equipment and manuscript material at the original site. It's the only complete record of craftsmen working in colonial America and the New Republic.

The dozens of planers needed to smooth wooden surfaces are themselves made of wood, except for the blade. Mallets also have wooden heads, instead of the rubberized or Delrin plastic ones of today. A wood drill, or brace, is also recognizable by its bit, although few shop owners today have used one with a rotating metal handle. All the implements are here, though in more rustic form: chisels, awls, gimlets, rasps, adzes, hammers, hand saws, miterboxes, gauges and marking tools.

When I see a froe, an L-shaped tool used in splitting wood, I ask Hummel whether the Domyins usually began their work with tree trunks instead of boards. "One craftsman never likes to do something that has its own craftsman," he says with a laugh, noting that sawmills were ubiquitous in an era when everything from a fence post to a sailing ship was built of wood—and when wood was used for fuel. Besides, he notes, most American forests around villages had already been denuded by the time the Domyins were in operation.

"Steel was more precious than iron," Hummel notes, and blacksmiths would often fuse steel cutting surfaces onto shafts of iron. Metal was also often reused—why else would a steel rapier blade with fancy engravings (perhaps broken in battle) be repurposed into a Dominy chisel?

A few days after my visit with Hummel, I drive to Hill's Auction in Landenberg for a different type of rummaging at their every-other-week auction. I'm more in a looking mode than a bidding one, wanting to explore Hill's farm sheds and tractor barns, where items are laid in lots on benches and tables. I'm curious to see how many tools similar to those in the Dominy Shop have been gleaned from the region's farmhouses and wood sheds.
DELTAW ARE THEATRE COMPANY PRESENTS

WINE FEAST & AUCTION
DELWA RE THEATRE COMPANY

FRIDAY, NOVEMBER 2, 2018
6:00 - 9:30PM
HELD AT THE CHASE CENTER ON THE RIVERFRONT

LIFE IS A CABERNET!
Sip and savor some of the finest wine, craft beer, light bites, and musical delights while celebrating Delaware Theatre Company’s 40th Anniversary season. Get your tickets today!

WINE & BEER • FOOD • LIVE & SILENT AUCTION • MUSIC

TICKETS ON SALE NOW!
TICKETS AVAILABLE $75-$250 • ALL PROCEEDS BENEFIT DTC
302.594.1100 / DELAWARETHEATRE.ORG

ANTIOQUES

It’s a chilly day, but dozens of browsers have shown up, many of them sipping coffee from Hill’s refreshments counter. The furniture auction will be held in a different building tomorrow, so most of the counters are filled with brick-a-brac, books, vinyl record albums, used clothing, and modern household devices hoping for an owner who will give them a second or third life.

In one building, the only items of interest to me are a few hammers and mallets, including a wooden one with a grid on one end and a cone head on the other. Another room adds nothing to my search. A third building once used to store farm equipment out of the cold promises to be more fruitful—at first. There are some old tool kits, but they’re mostly filled with automotive or plumbing tools, and they aren’t all that old anyway. The saws and other hand tools also look more used than old.

Just as I’m about to give up the search and exit, I step aside to let someone come in through the door and almost stumble over a cardboard box at the foot of a small staircase. I take a look. Inside are seven wood planers that appear quite old and well used. They’re of different sizes for different tasks; a few I haven’t seen before—thin boards with very small blades and thumb-like handles.

Later, online, after I struggle through the ever-present Google ads for tools on Amazon and eBay, I finally discover that these curious instruments are called “tenon shoulder planes,” whose delicate job it was to fine tune a tenon so it would fit precisely into a mortise to form a tight joint.

But in that earlier moment by the door on a cold day in Landenberg, I wondered about the man who once proudly used these tools—whether he’s still alive, though I know he likely isn’t. Did he have a shop locally? Did he manage to retire before competing businesses and waning consumer demand retired him? And how did his tools get here on auction day?

I remembered then something Hummel had said a few days earlier: “Craftsmen were among the most-educated men of their day. They had to be able to read, write and do math.”

The tools might have changed, but from my experience with the fine craftsmen I’ve met working in the Brandywine Valley region today, that description certainly still holds true—as it did for this unknown craftsman whose tools I now hold in my hands.