

My Father's Tools

written by Guest Contributor | June 21, 2018



My dad was a contractor, a plumber. When I was growing up in the nineteen-fifties and sixties, he had a huge garage in the back yard. No car was ever parked in there; it was his workshop. He'd built a workbench along the back wall that was covered with tools, parts, and junk. There was one area of clear space where you could actually work. Roughly in the center, he had mounted a heavy machine. There was a wire wheel on one side of it, and a grinding stone on the other. The wheels revolved at very high rpms when this beast was plugged in. The workbench was oil stained and grime encrusted. Its edges had been cut into in some places where an errant saw had rammed home too vigorously. All of his children were forbidden to enter that building, but I was obsessed with it. No matter what I did, I was always in trouble for something; as a pre-teen I became indifferent to the rules.

There were pails of what he called "mungo" stored all over the floor. Piles of old copper tubing, rusted tools and useless fittings that he carted home after doing a job. When sold by weight for recycling to "The Junkie" this metal brought in a significant amount of cash. My father would sort and redeem his scavenger's hoard in the worst weather of winter when there was no paying work for him to do, or when it was just too cold and wet for him to feel like going out and doing it. He was his own boss, so he could make these decisions.

I remember him sitting at home during nor'easters, blizzards, and in sub-zero weather. He'd sit at the dining room table, to read the paper and slurp coffee with great satisfaction. He would gaze out the dining-room window, and enjoy the hell out of the fact that he was indoors. Stretching, growling, farting. He'd repeatedly remark on the weather, and would say, "Ahh, they can all go to hell today." On foul-weather days when he was home, we kids were instructed not to answer the telephone. Sometimes if it was driving mom crazy, she would answer and say he was out. Obviously, he wouldn't or couldn't say "to hell with them" to his customers faces. They would spend the day in frustration, calling and calling, and I think he enjoyed that; the sense of power it gave him not to respond sometimes. The power of "No."

The summer I turned twelve, I bought a used "boy's" ten-speed English Racer

with my saved babysitting money. I spurned the magenta girl's three-speed I was given as a combined Christmas-and-birthday gift; a beautiful bike, but it was nearly pink! Way too girly for me.

The ten-speed I purchased was old and beat up, so I wanted to re-paint it. But truly, I was at least as interested in being able to disassemble and reassemble my machine as I was in riding it. Much in the same way teen-aged guys would buy "twenty-dollar-wonders"—junk cars—then spend the next three seasons hanging under the hood, and laying underneath it on a creeper trying to "get it on the road."

A friend named Billy would occasionally drop by and answer a few mechanical questions. He had a totally Frankenstein bike; one that had been cobbled together from the good bits left over from many dead bikes. I believe the more numerous parts-sources he could cite increased the pleasure he took in his bike. It was very cool and as ugly as sin.

In addition to all the mungo stored in the garage, my father had pails filled with old tools. Wrenches and hammers, cold chisels and bladeless hacksaws, a keyhole saw with a bent blade—so many different kinds of tools that had gone rusty from disuse or abuse. Rusted solid, no-longer-adjustable crescent wrenches, and many sets of open-end and box-end wrenches. Some of these were from the days before standardized bolt sizing, and were made to fix specific machines. They would fit nothing else. There were rusty rasps with beautiful wood handles, rattail files, ball-peen, and claw-head hammers with and without handles. I found dull hatchets and knives and invented stories for each. I squirreled through these collections to find tools to fit all the nuts and bolts holding my English Racer together. I soaked them in old coffee cans with penetrating oil, and then put them to use.

That same year, I won Second Prize in the Sixth-Grade Science Fair. I won for an ant farm that I made with dad's tools. It was An Official Project For School. That was the key, which finally unlocked my access to dad's garage.

I acquired the plans for the project by walking over the bridge at the south end of our island to the neighboring community in Rockaway. A visit to an actual library meant a five-mile round-trip to a tiny and dark two-aisle, storefront public library. The collection had one picture book about ant colonies and the life cycle of ants. My interest in bugs in general, and brown ants in particular, went back to my earliest days.

Mom loved to tell this story about me: when I was a three-year-old, she put me out to play in the backyard. When she looked out the window to check on me, she saw me lying on the ground, immobile. She came rushing out with her head full of horrible thoughts about my having been hurt in a fall and knocked unconscious. But as she drew near, she could see that I was fine. I was happily lying there in the sun with my arm over a path that some ants were traveling, so they would walk up and over my hand along their way. These people really should have let me have a puppy or a kitten. In fact, maybe this is why I was finally allowed to get that little turtle from Woolworth's.

To begin building my contraption, I used a chisel to gouge out two deep

parallel grooves in a piece of pine found in the waste lumber pile. Then I located two panes of glass that were the same size from an area of the garage where dad stored many panes of window glass. (He had six children around playing ball and throwing things.) I forced the panes down into the grooves and figured out a way to affix two vertical end boards—similarly grooved. For the top, I fashioned a removable cap of grooved one-by-four. After much trial and error, the pieces all fit together just the way I planned. To seal the glass in the grooves, I used my big brother's toxic airplane model glue.

As the book instructed, I filled this little beauty with dirt from our back yard. Then I drizzled a trail of honey and sugar from the nearest ant colony in the yard up over the edge and into the center of my ant farm. In just a few days the ants had begun to tunnel into the center of my experiment! Much to my amazement, they dug right along the glass making their busy little brown lives completely visible to any higher life forms that were interested in watching.

Unfortunately for all life forms concerned, when I secured the top board, enclosing and isolating the colony, all the ants died from the reeking fumes of the toxic glue I had used. My mistake was a real setback and a disappointment for me, but it was fatal for them. I explained my problem to Mr. Coleberg, the old man who owned our local hardware store, and he sold me a small can of non-toxic glazier's putty.

I had to begin all over, working feverishly now, as time was running short. At this point, in my haste, I broke a pane of glass and sliced open my palm, smearing blood all over the place. I hid the wound, as mom would have welcomed any excuse to put a stop to my "tinkering." It would also be proof that the garage was indeed dangerous, and no place for a "young lady" to be spending her days.

I completed building the ant colony in the nick of time, and again the ants were very cooperative. Unaware of what had happened to their brethren, they marched up and over the edges to begin digging many tunnels in which to store their eggs and the sugar I was so generously supplying. I didn't put the cap on until the last day, just in case. But they survived for quite a while. Even though I won Second Prize in the Science Fair, mom wasn't happy that I wanted to keep insects in my bedroom. It was a point of contention the entire time I had them. I wondered why they all died suddenly. Perhaps they had a little DDT snack supplied by mom. I'll never know for sure.

In addition to ants and bicycle mechanics, I also loved to refinish old furniture. Dad brought home a discarded three-drawer dresser with a hutch-top that was painted in a hideous run-encrusted white, over layers of pink gloppy paint. Working out in the back yard, I stripped it with paint remover and then hand-sanded it down to the original grain. This was a lovely blonde wood, and was a beautiful piece when it was finished with many coats of varnish. I used it in my childhood bedroom, and after I married, it came with me and I kept our table linens in it.

There was a nineteen-forties-era cowboy guitar a friend gave me that summer when I said I wanted to learn how to play. The first thing I did though was

to remove its dusty white paint and stenciled details, then I stained and varnished the thing. I had the sandpaper out before buying new strings or playing a note.

My interest in the garage and the tools increased like an obsession. When I went out of the house, Mom thought I was playing up the block with friends, but I was back there in the garage with the lights off, messing around with the tools. Over months of not being found out I became emboldened. I played the little transistor radio that was tied to a giant nail in the wall over the bench. After a while, I switched the dial to my rock-n-roll station.

One day I plugged in The Beast, the bench grinder/wire wheel and it whirred to life with an enormous whining noise. That powerful motor made an incredibly loud roar. It was like standing next to a jet engine. I was sure mom would hear it, and I'd be caught. But she didn't. I guess she thought it was one of the neighbors, and never realized it was coming from the garage just twenty feet behind her kitchen.

Thus my hobby as a machinist was born. I started grinding the rust off all "my" tools. Anything I had ever used in there became "mine." This included anything I thought looked cool or that I might someday have a use for; I pressed them into the spinning wires and polished off the rust.

After a week in school, when I stealthily returned to my project on Saturday, my tools were beginning to rust again. They were old—from before the time when stainless steel tools were mass-produced. I had an oil soaked rag that I rubbed them with, and that worked pretty well to keep the moisture off the steel. But anything that wasn't in constant use began to rust. I suppose that when stainless tools became affordable, dad bought some sets of those, and abandoned all of the older ones to the junk pile.

My hands were a wreck. From using the grinder improperly, I'd gouged most of my knuckles, and torn off half a pinky fingernail. I went through band-aids so fast I was accused of wallpapering the walls with them. I kept that pinky encased in a band-aid sheath for at least a month.

One cold and rainy November afternoon I was standing at the workbench cleaning up a set of open-end wrenches. I was so intent on my work that I was shocked and startled to look up and see my father standing next to me with his hands on his hips and a puzzled look on his face. I can't fathom what he might have thought about his daughter, the machinist. I was horrified to be caught in his domain, using his stuff—breaking a lifetime of rules all at once. I thought I was going to catch the beating of my life.

He reached up to turn on the fluorescent lights, and I ducked and flinched at his sudden movement. I forgot to breathe. Couldn't have made an excuse if he had asked for one. Fortunately he didn't. He yanked the tool out of my hand and then grabbed both my hands and roughly wrapped them back around the tool in the "proper" grip, and then he forced them back at the spinning wire wheel to show me the correct way to do it. He said, "You do it THIS way or you'll lose all your goddamed knuckles." Then he turned and stalked off. I just stood there gaping at his retreating back.

That's how I gained access to my father's tools. He didn't chase me out of the garage. We didn't discuss it. But I had his tacit approval. He'd seen the bike parts strewn around on enough days to understand I was doing some kind of work, an intention he could understand. Building things. Cleaning tools. I was turning something that was ostensibly junk back into a functioning item; this was the overarching purpose of that shop. I wasn't playing; I was working. Oh man! It felt like I'd been given the key to the city. Now, I could work in there with the lights on and the door open to get some ventilation.

Mom certainly didn't like it. She would rather have had me working exclusively in her domain. I did what was required for her, and no more: I hung baskets of laundry to dry and pulled it all back off the lines to sort, fold and deliver. I was obedient when told to set or clear the table, and it was always my job to wash the dishes, scrub pots, and clean the kitchen after dinner.

My father wasn't the kind of "dad" I would ever have asked to help me repair a bike or build an ant farm. I mostly stayed as far away from him as I could. He worked long hours doing physically hard labor, and he always came home exhausted and explosive. We had no relationship other than the one proximity forced upon us. But I did want something from him. I wanted his tools.



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