

WORKING WITH TOOLS

BY HARRY J. HOBBS

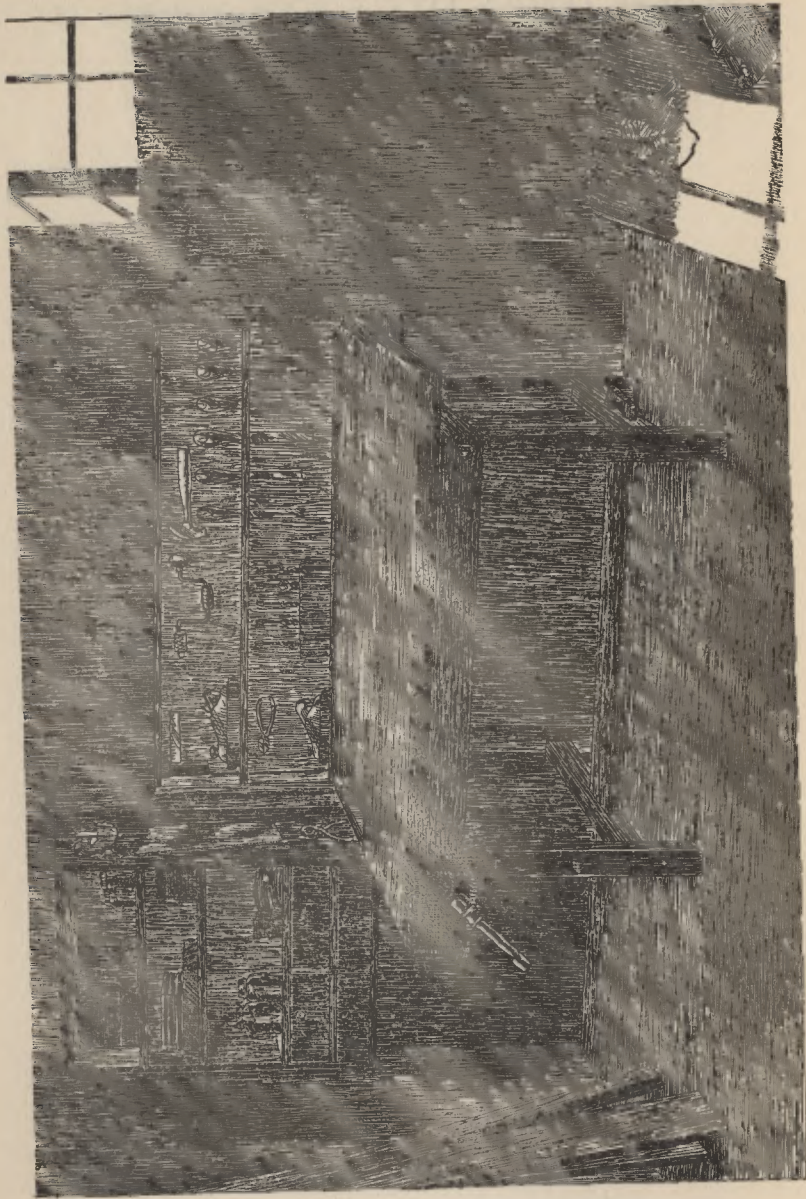
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HARRY J. HOBBS



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I
FUN IN A WORKSHOP

Tucked away in a closet of one of the swankiest of New York's apartment hotels there happens to be a woodworker's bench, a power lathe and an amazing assortment of hand tools ready, at a moment's notice, to make the sawdust fly!

Any night between the hours of eight and eleven o'clock apartment neighbors above, below and adjoining the workshop apartment are likely to hold up their game of bridge to identify the blows of a hammer or the groan of a saw.

If you were to trace down this nightly clamor to discover what and who is behind it you would find yourself standing in a richly furnished living room gazing into a small adjoining room that was meant for a closet but that is at present filled to capacity with a workbench, a motorized lathe, shelves laden with scrap lumber and in the center of the shop a man, middle-aged, the vice president of a staggeringly large corporation during the day, but at this moment a typical home craftsman working in his shirt sleeves over the bench.

This individual, whose name I am not privileged to disclose, became a craftsman only a few years ago when one of his young sons teased him into building a model sailboat. For that job he had to acquire a few tools, and by the time he had finished he had awakened an intense desire to build something else, anything else just to be building. That is about the way most craftsmen are made. They start out to make some special project and end up with a workshop and a barrel of fun.

If an apartment house closet measuring less than six feet wide by six feet deep can accommodate all of the essential

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tools and equipment necessary to an amateur craftsman's workshop there is little truth to the objection, "But I haven't the space required by a workshop." As a matter of fact it is possible to establish a workshop in a limited way even though your only workbench is the kitchen table. Space certainly is a valuable asset to any craftsman's work, but it is not a requisite.

This clothes' closet workshop is neither the smallest nor the strangest of my acquaintance. I have seen home workshops surviving, even flourishing, in a chest of drawers. One shop in particular housed all of its tools in the two lower drawers of a colonial chest. The tools consisted mainly of a set of hand carving chisels, a plane, hand saw, wooden mallet, two files, some sandpaper and glue, and a set of four small "C" clamps. The only workbench accessible to the owner of the tools was the kitchen table. Any evening when the creative spirit urged him to ply chisel to wood he simply transported the two chest drawers to the kitchen.

The smallest shop, or rather I should say the smallest tool equipment, to have achieved the greatest reward to my knowledge consists of a pair of embroidery scissors borrowed from the family sewing box. Supplementing this ingenious tool, were a razor blade with a handle attached, and a file. In justice to those earnest craftsmen who have spent thousands, (that's right, *thousands*) of dollars on elaborate workshop tools of every description, we can hardly call the scissors-razor blade-file triumvirate a workshop. It is merely tool equipment. Yet the fingers behind these instruments fabricated a model ship of such expert workmanship that the model won first place in a national model-building contest in which craftsman of all ages competed. The award for this piece of work came in the form of a free cruise for himself and wife aboard one of the finest liners afloat.

Swinging to the other extreme we find home workshops

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that look like a merger between a carpenter shop and a machine shop. In more than one backyard we can find buildings erected solely for the use of a hobby workshop. Maxfield Parrish, the well-known painter, has established a workshop on the lower floor of a two-story structure. The upper floor is used as his studio. When the light or the mood is not right for painting, he comes downstairs to try his hand at the lathe.

But workshops of these enormous proportions are not for the beginner to envy. They are something we are curious to see but will likely never have the desire to own nor the luxury to afford. Our workshop may very sensibly be restricted to only those tools for which we have a definite and constant use. It is a much better display of wisdom and talents to allow your resourcefulness to take the place of highly specialized tools. And unless you want to spend a bushel of money think twice before you buy a new piece of equipment. Be certain that you have a genuine need for it and that no tool you have already purchased can be maneuvered to pinch-hit for the new one.

Strange as it may seem, even the gay nineties knew the benefits of a workshop. Among the home craftsmen of that era was none other than the eminent Oliver Wendell Holmes, doctor and poet. To his young friend Edward Bok (author of *The Americanization of Edward Bok*) he said: "Do you know that I am a full-fledged carpenter? No? Well, I am. You know I am a doctor," he explained, "and this shop is my medicine. I believe that every man must have a hobby that is as different from his regular work as it is possible to be. It is not good for a man to work all the time at one thing. We doctors call it a safety-valve, and it is. I would much rather you would forget all that I have written than that you should forget what I tell you about a safety-valve."

Since the time of Oliver Wendell Holmes, craftsmanship

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has exerted a contagious influence upon celebrities. With headliners from the leading professions stealing away from the limelight to spend a few hours in a workshop, you will never want for better company. A partial roll call would include such names as John Barrymore, Walter Huston, Tony Wons, Seth Parker, Glenn "Pop" Warner and Vincent Astor.

Deems Taylor, a foremost American composer—*The King's Henchman*, *Peter Ibbetsen*, etc.—is one of the most avid of craftsmen. In defense of his shop, if it needs defense, he says, "Most of us are so clever at one or two things that we have let ourselves be pretty helpless at everything else. If you can cook a meal, sew on a button, and use a saw and hammer, you can face almost any situation. If you can't do these things, you may be a railroad president, but you are not a completely self-reliant human being."

II

MAKING ROOM FOR THE WORKSHOP

If the basement can accommodate the new workshop, look no further, but select as dry a corner as possible, away from the laundry tubs, to prevent your lumber from warping and your tools from rusting. And don't move in next door to the furnace. Too much heat is bad for you and worse for the lumber. Plan the location now for the shop you hope to have some day. Later on you may want to partition the space by erecting studs between the floor and the ceiling beams to serve as a framework for wallboard. Then you will have the luxury of added wall space for hanging tool cabinets and you can lock the workshop.

The attic is a good second choice. Although it has an advantage in being drier than the basement, ordinarily some special provision will have to be made for heat in the winter. Then, too, there's some objection to carrying a ten-foot plank through the house and up the stairs to your shop, but there is an easy way around this objection—simply make it a practice to cut unwieldy lumber into shorter lengths in the garage before transporting the stock to the attic. When the garage itself is sufficiently large for workbench and tool cabinets it can be converted into as practical a home workshop as basement or attic.

One craftsman of my acquaintance has converted an old stable into a workshop and installed a small stove for winter comfort. In the summer time he erects a small bench on a pair of saw horses outside the shop under a spreading chestnut. Another craftsman of curiously inventive mind recently confided in me that he plans to buy a discarded streetcar for \$25.00 and have it moved for \$25.00 additional to his back yard. This old relic is to become his workshop.

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Wherever you set up your workshop you will have to begin by cleaning house. Clear everything out of the allotted space and, if possible, whitewash the walls and ceiling. While it will not always be practical to cover the ceiling, particularly if the shop is in a basement having an intricately beamed ceiling, the walls can ordinarily be covered without much difficulty. The advantage gained in added candle power in your electric lighting system is several times worth the trouble. Whitewash is purchasable in powder form at about forty cents a bag at hardware stores. It requires only mixing with water and adding a little rock salt. It should be applied freely with a wide brush.

Since most of your time in a home workshop will be spent after dark, you need good light. Don't try to get by with a 50-watt light bulb hanging from the middle of the ceiling without a reflector. You should have a 120-watt bulb and a reflector, costing as little as twenty-five cents, so arranged that the unit can be moved easily to throw its light directly on any part of the workbench. Equipped with a rubber cable that can be doubled and taped to form a loop, the light can be suspended on a length of wire strung across the workshop ceiling and can then be moved along the wire to any desired spot. If the looped section of cable is wound with electrician's tape and checked occasionally, the electric wire need never become bare from excessive use.

It is likely that the workshop floor, also, will require some preparation. If the floor is concrete it can be treated in several different ways, the easiest of which is fortunately the cheapest. After washing it clean with soap and water, spread on a solution of silicate of soda ("water glass" such as the housewife uses for preserving eggs) and when dry cover the entire floor with liquid floor wax. Occasionally thereafter shake powdered floor wax over the sections subjected to heaviest wear. This surface will prevent cement dust from rising. Two coats of a special paint prepared for

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cement will do just as well, but the cost is much higher. Likewise, linoleum could be laid over the floor if a felt lining and a mastic cement are used, but linoleum is even a greater luxury than paint.

Before any coating is applied to a concrete floor, all cracks should be filled with a mixture of one part cement to three parts of sand with a small amount of lime added—about one-tenth as much lime as cement.

If the floor of the workshop is made of wood, again paint or linoleum could be used, but the more practical treatment consists of nothing more than a thick coat of liquid floor wax which is afterwards built up with powdered wax. This surface keeps down the dust, can be cleaned easily and will prove to be long-wearing.