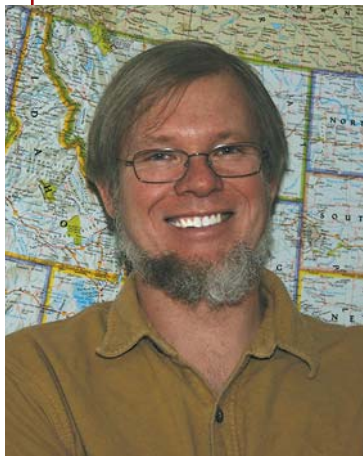


EDITOR'S LETTER

Those Were the Days



Andy Engel

A few weeks ago, I got an e-mail from someone who wanted to know what tools they needed to start a deck business. My answer may have dated me. As regular readers know, through the '80s and half of the '90s I used to don Carhartts, strap on tools, and build decks, houses, and whatever else anyone was willing to pay me to nail together. Back then, I toted all I needed in the back of a Toyota pickup — a few hand tools, a shovel, a circular saw, a regular old 10-inch

miter saw, a compressor, and a nail gun. In the early years, I used a hammer instead of a nail gun.

Today, it seems most deck builders, and carpenters in general, haul around enough inventory to open a tool store. Half the tools out there didn't even exist 20 years ago — impact drivers, 12-inch slide compound miter saws, miter-saw stands, laser levels, screw guns with extended handles, and a bunch of prying and propping tools we never knew we needed back in the day when lumber was straight.

Lest you think I'm being critical, you should know that there are four circular saws, three chopboxes, and I'm not sure how many nail guns sitting in my shop. Do you count the ones that don't work? I need these tools for the decks I don't build anymore.

Here's the thing — the decks you build today are better than the ones I built 20 years ago. They're probably better than the ones you built 20 years

ago, too. Partly it's the tools, partly it's the materials (except for the lumber — but maybe I just think that it was better back then), but largely it's the knowledge.

Twenty years ago, half the carpenters I knew had no idea you were even supposed to flash a deck ledger, never mind how to do it. Copper-based preservatives won't corrode mill-finish aluminum flashing, right? (Wrong.) And that ledger was as likely to be fixed to the house with a pound of 16d commons as it was to be lagged.

Newel posts were boxed in with blocking and nailed. A lot of deck railings were built with no newels at all — just 2x2 balusters spaced 6 inches apart (that was code back then), nailed to the outer joists. Support posts weren't anchored to footings, electro-galvanized nails were common, and at lunchtime our hands were covered with residual arsenic from the preservatives.

Remember the e-mail that started this nostalgic rant? I answered it with a pretty basic tool list. But I suggested that he'll probably want more tools than that before long, because that's just part of how decks get built today. As Mr. Givler, my high school history teacher used to say, "The good old days never were." ❖

A handwritten signature of Andy Engel in black ink.

Andy Engel
Editor