BY JEFFERSON KOLLE

Vintage Handsaws

I spent the first month of my carpentry career moving piles of building materials. During the second month, my boss showed me how to use a circular saw—a menacing, chromed 8-inch Porter-Cable sidewinder that was like holding onto a gyroscope once the blade got going. Two weeks into month two, the power went out when we were cutting rafters. I figured we'd go home early, but the boss walked me over to the back of his truck and opened his lidded toolbox (which, for some reason, he called the dog coffin).

Inside, under the half-width sliding tray, sat his quiver of handsaws, resting in kerfs cut in narrow boards attached across the bottom of the box. He pulled out the vintage saws one at a time—two had belonged to his grandfather—and pointed out the differences between them: a wide ripsaw, an 8-point and a 12-point crosscut saw, and a backsaw.

Back at the sawhorses, he showed me how to cut straight and square with the 8-point, while giving me a few pointers. No need for a death grip on the handle. Don't force the saw, use long strokes and the whole blade. Keep both eyes open; you're not taking aim, you're just cutting to a line. He told me to cut a pile of twisted unusable studs into 4-inch-long chunks, "for practice," he said. Then he drove to town to do something.

By quitting time, I had a ragged, oozing blister on the thumb web of my left hand (I'm a lefty) and I'd snagged my right index fingernail with the sharp saw teeth. But I damned well knew how to cut with a handsaw.

If you buy a brand-new handsaw from a big-box store, it's going to have a squared-corner chunky blade and splayed, vicious teeth that look like they belong on one of those deep sea fish that never see any light. The hand hole in the plastic handle will feel as comfortable and natural as wearing someone else's shoes.

Matt Cianci restores and sharpens vintage handsaws and he has nothing against new handsaws. Not at first. "Very sharp," he says. "The blades are good steel."

The blades on vintage saws were handmade and taper ground on 4-foot-diameter grinding stones. Taper grinding means the blades are thicker on the edge with the teeth and thinner toward the top of the blades. "A taper-ground blade won't bind in the kerf you've cut," Cianci says. "That means the teeth don't need as much set as those on a modern saw." Lots of set means the saw cuts a wider kerf, which is necessary so the untapered blade won't bind. But a wider kerf means the blade is more difficult to control when cutting to an exact line.

Vintage saw handles, known at totes, are things of ergonomic beauty. "They were made one at a time, usually from a hardwood like apple," Cianci says. "Individually shaped by hand. Very comfortable to hold." It's better than fit-like-a-glove and more like shaking hands with your best friend.

Modern handsaw blades are sharpened by high-speed, electric grinding machines. "Machine sharpening ruins the steel's temper," Cianci says. "Then they can't be resharpened once they get dull." Another throw-away tool. He sharpens blades by hand with files.

On his robust website, thesawwright.com, Cianci lists his sharpening services. He also gives sharpening classes and, on occasion, lists restored saws for sale. If you want to buy a vintage handsaw elsewhere, every third or fourth tag sale probably has one. Minor rust can be removed with steel wool and oil. Avoid blades with rust pits that are more than surface deep and check for a loose or cracked tote with broken horns. There's a chance that a previous owner carved his initials or stamped his name on the tote—a sure sign that someone else recognized the fineness, beauty, and precision of the tool.

Jefferson Kolle writes from Bethel, Conn.

Photo: Jefferson Kolle