

BY MARC FORGET



Treasures Found

Taking apart an old home, I always feel like I'm connecting with the trades who came before me. Past practices and skills are frozen in time, and I imagine what the carpenters were like—not just how they created the house I am in. I think, too, of the work I have done and wonder whether it will lead the next carpenter to ask the same questions.

Sometimes during a renovation, I find artifacts hiding in walls or floors. What we would recycle today or haul away in trash bags was often buried in the yard or stuffed into gaps of the house; these items give another glimpse into what went on at the time of its construction. The empty whiskey bottle my partner found in a joist cavity reminded me of the older gentlemen I first worked with: Sitting at break, they would relate that, in their time, alcohol was cheaper than aspirin or ibuprofen. In a house built after the Second World War, I found a photo of a man in uniform slipped behind old baseboard I was removing; was it the original homeowner? I never found out but left the photo behind the new baseboard months later. That same post-war bungalow gave up stacks of magazines and newspapers that had been used to layer the ceiling as an air barrier of sorts. Most were too fragile to keep, but the ads and articles from 1946 and '47 made for some good lunchtime conversations.

Often, I find tools on these jobs. An old chisel that was driven into the side of a stud and then covered is now a friend's pouch chisel. A framing square that was oddly wedged into a rafter surprised me while I was cutting into sheathing boards. I could never figure out how that happened, but most of the time, the reason is obvious: A worker laid a tool down or dropped it into a framing cavity and

never recovered it—some things never change. One day, my framing hammer will be found in the blown insulation of that attic.

I haven't ever found anything that would be considered valuable. I did find a stack of money once, slipped into a traveler's check pouch that made its way under an old oil tank. The bills were from the early 1950s from French Indochina, Hong Kong, Australia, and the like, tracing a tour from Iran through southeast Asia. In all the colors of the rainbow, some bills came from countries that have since changed names and sovereignty. But simply being old doesn't make something worth much, I found out. Worn from use and age (time under the oil tank didn't help either), they went to a collector in exchange for a few modern bills long spent. The stories and questions that they brought up offered much more value.

I have kept a few found items over the years. Among those is a group of ink wells (1) that I found during an excavation for an addition. I've been told that when the ink was used up, they were just thrown away—like pens today—and a new bottle purchased. Medicine and all manner of tonics were sold in glass bottles of various colors and shapes; some of the ones I have list ingredients that would make the FDA cringe (2). I also have some bottles and cans that may have been workers' or homeowners' (3). The beer in the Labatt 50 bottle should probably not be consumed now.

These items—and others lost or discarded during the construction of what were once new homes—now live on shelves in my bar, with renewed purpose as enticement to conversation.

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Photos by Marc Forget