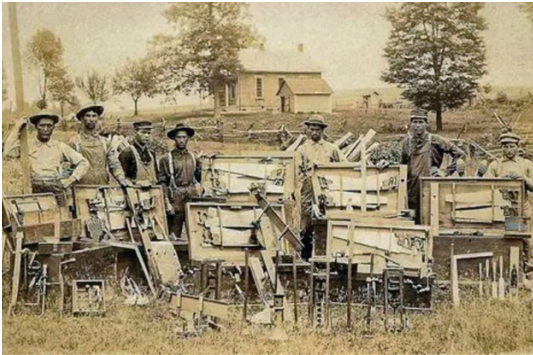


BY MARK LUZIO



Will The Circle Be Unbroken?

Editor's note: Sadly, renowned stair builder Jed Dixon died on November 29, 2024. A few days after his passing, cabinetmaker Mark Luzio (who first introduced us to Jed in 1995, jump-starting Jed's long tenure as a contributor to JLC and JLC Live) sent us this essay, which we offer to the JLC community as a fitting tribute to a dear friend and mentor.

In 1907, Ada Habershon published the gospel hymn *Will the Circle Be Unbroken*. The first commercial recording of it was made years later, in 1935, by the Carter Family. Then, in 1972, the young musicians in the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band released an album with this song as the title track, collaborating with older legendary country/bluegrass players to perform traditional songs. The album was very popular and introduced young people to these great players from the recent past. The song laments the loss of a mother and implies that if we are good and righteous, we may be rewarded by meeting her again. Over time, that 1972 recording and many subsequent performances helped layer on an additional meaning to the song—the passing on of skills, musicianship, or craftsmanship to the next generation.

Appropriately, for the band's farewell concert in November 2024, it played *Will the Circle Be Unbroken* at the Ryman Auditorium in Nashville, considered the home of country and bluegrass music. For many years, that building had lain dormant and unused. In the 1980s, it was slated to be demolished but was saved, and the entire interior was rebuilt as a modern concert hall by 1994. During the renovation, the carpenters were asked to cut out a large circle from the original wood floor and inlay this “Dutchman” in the new stage floor as a tribute to the many performers who came before.

This song came to mind as I was studying a photo (above left), circa 1886, of seven carpenters with their tool chests. These chests were designed to be transported to jobsites by wagon. At left is a small wooden box, and in it is a Stanley 45 molding plane that was first sold in 1884. The crosscut and miter-box saws were important tools and are front and center. The tools that look like small drill presses were for cutting

mortises in large timbers; the carpenters sat on them and rotated the crank arms to bore holes in the timbers and then squared up the mortises with the large chisels on the far right. The large planes were their only way to create long, straight edges on floorboards, corner boards, and all types of interior trim. The overall feeling of the photograph is the pride that the carpenters show for their “tools of the trade.”

This old photo in turn struck me as remarkably like another photo (above right), taken outside a custom wood shop in Boston. The date is 1976–90 years after the earlier picture. The eight men and one woman pose with their tool chests—all suitcase-style chests common in the Depression era. You could still buy these, often with a few surviving tools inside, at flea markets and junk shops in the 1970s. The practice then was to make your own copy of this style of chest and fill it with new and antique tools of the trade.

I was 23 in 1978, working in New York City and carrying my own suitcase toolbox on the subway. I met the man in the center holding the shop dog, Sam, about eight years later when I moved my wood shop up north. His name was Jed Dixon, and he eventually became a presenter at JLC Live and wrote numerous articles for *JLC* and *ThisIsCarpentry.com*. Jed built some of the finest and most difficult curved stairs in Boston. I worked with Jed on some of his stairs and, for 40 years, his input and knowledge helped me with some of the most complex curved paneling jobs that I took on in my shop. I spent hours at his dining room table reworking my shop drawings. Jed never wavered when it came to sharing his knowledge, drawing myself and countless others into the circle of building knowledge.

In this age of stackable plastic toolboxes, I doubt many new carpenters build their own toolboxes. But I'd like to think there are a few who might be inclined to craft their own suitcase-style tool chests and collect a set of old and new quality hand tools. Think of it as a rite of passage, a commitment to your trade, and an acknowledgment of an unbroken circle of building knowledge that brought us where we are today.

Photos: left, courtesy Jim Bode; right, Steve Horn