Learning about Table Saws

By Ross Collins

Probably the one tool in the shop that ought to be labeled "for adults only" is the table saw. I say this not because I know it's detached more fingers and thrown wood at more heads than any other power tool, though that's true. I say it because I learned woodworking from my uncles.

Every serious woodworker eventually builds a shop around a table saw, and my uncles were no exception. Each had the cast-iron Delta standard contractor's issue that must have served every shop in America back in the '60s. Was it an intimidating machine to an 8-year-old! Not at all loud and scrappy like a Skilsaw, but not docile like a drill press either—just that cool whine of steel to remind you this particular tool means business, and that business might be for good or for evil. The table saw, like nature, has no moral scruple.

It does, however, have lots of practicality, and it seemed then that nothing my uncles made could come together without at least some help from the table saw. It looked pretty essential to the serious shop guy. A real man's tool, big and burly and hard-working.

But at age 8, big and burly was not for me. Of course I was not allowed to even get close to the table saw. In my lust for power tools (what kid really craves a handsaw?) my uncles encouraged me in lesser ways. I received a small jigsaw for Christmas, with the little vibrating blades that snapped if you pushed too hard (luckily, blades were cheap). When I finally wanted something capable of more serious cutting, the adults agreed: for someone my age, the ideal candidate was a saber saw. I still have that tool, a Craftsman that's served me well for more than 30 years.

For something beefier I had to wait, though. I thought I'd get my chance when I got really old—like junior high shop class.

In that class we used the drill press, the lathe, a variety of bench tools. Even did an occasional cross-cut on the radial arm saw. The table saw we did not touch.

But our second year's classes saw a new shop teacher arrive. Actually an old shop teacher, an ancient duffer who looked to us kids like he'd breathed a few pounds too much of sawdust in his long life. He must have been at least 40. So I screwed up my courage a little and asked him: can we learn the table saw this year?

Nope, he said. Too dangerous for kids.

But we'll be careful!

"Maybe so," he grinned. "But I thought I was careful too." He thrust his left hand right in front of my face. Three fingers were missing.

We nicknamed him "Stubs."

I bought my very first table saw, a nice 10-inch contractor's model, at age 41. When I hear that blade whine, I sometimes think of old Stubs. I guess he taught me something about table saws after all.

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