

# Building Planes One at a Time

Wayne Anderson's planes are inspiring workhorses.

Most woodworkers appreciate things that are well-made, fashioned by hand and extraordinarily useful. So it's little wonder that Wayne Anderson stays quite busy.

From a small basement workshop in Elk River, Minn., Anderson makes custom infill planes one at a time to sell to woodworkers and collectors. Unlike many manufactured tools, Anderson's planes marry solid plane mechanics with fluid curves that would be difficult – if not impossible – to create using machines. One recent chariot plane from his workshop resembles a scarab beetle. The front grip of the small plane at right is filed into the shape of a curved acanthus leaf.

And though some of these tools look delicate, they have the souls of small tanks. The sides and soles of the planes are joined with hand-filed double-dovetails. The wooden infills are secured with brass or steel pins that are peened in place. The soles are hand-lapped dead flat. The mouths of the tools are extremely fine.

The result of this alchemy are tools that are extraordinarily beautiful to the eye and spookily responsive in your hands.

During the last year I've examined more than a dozen of Anderson's planes and used four of them in my shop for a wide variety of tasks. They all work as well as any hand plane – vintage or new – I've ever owned.

Despite the fact that many of his tools lack a mechanical adjuster, I find it unnecessary – in some ways, the lack of an adjuster can be quite liberating. Because every part fits so perfectly, the tools respond predictably and precisely every time I pick them up.

## SUPPLIES

### Anderson Planes

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Photo by Al Parrish

Two planes from Wayne Anderson: A full-size smoothing plane with ebony infill (top) and a small plane inspired by some of the earliest metal-bodied planes from Europe.

Setting the irons is an easy task with a hammer. Anderson's planes generally have a generous surface for bedding the A2 irons. When you drop a freshly sharpened iron on the bed it practically sticks there because the parts fit so well. A couple hammer taps and a turn of the lever cap screw are all it takes to get the plane working beautifully.

I'm not alone in my assessment. Ralph Brendler, one of the ringleaders of the Internet-based e-mail list called "oldtools," owns a few of Anderson's planes that he uses regularly.

"If I had my druthers, every plane in my cabinet would be from Wayne," Brendler says. "The miter plane he built me so far exceeded my expectations. I was just stunned when I opened the box. ... My jaw hit the floor."

## Engineering & Artistry

For Anderson, his plane-making business is the logical culmination of his artistic tendencies as a boy and his career path as an adult. He worked as a machinist, then in a metal fabrication shop and now is a mechanical designer.

This training makes Anderson equally adept with both a file and the high-powered computer he uses at his day job for a defense contractor, where he is currently working on designs for a weapons system for the Army.

Add to that a passion for collecting vintage tools and it's little wonder that Anderson stays busy on nights and weekends building tools. Or that he has recently shifted into high gear by going part-time at his day job so he can focus even more on building planes for clients,

almost all of whom are repeat customers. One enthusiast owns 14 of Anderson's planes.

"I find myself in the enviable position of having loyal customers and an understanding employer who allows me to do this thing that I love so much," Anderson says.

Anderson's path to becoming a professional plane maker began several years ago when he and a friend would haunt the local woodworking supply stores. One day Anderson was in a used tool store where they had a copy of the now-famous poster of the H.O. Studley tool chest—a small wall-hung tool chest that holds more than 300 artfully fit hand tools.

"I found myself riveted to that image," he says. "Something clicked. And I decided to amass a small collection of vintage tools."

So Anderson began buying old tools (he now holds the title of director of area A for the Mid-West Tool Collectors Assn.). As he plunged deeper into collecting, Anderson stumbled on a story about British infill maker Bill Carter and was so intrigued that he decided to make an improved miter plane for himself. He still owns that tool.

"I call it 'plane-a-saurus,'" Anderson says with a laugh. "It had  $\frac{3}{16}$ "-thick sides and a  $\frac{1}{4}$ " bottom. It's butt-ugly, but it functions well. It's like your kid's artwork. It's not worth a nickel, but you wouldn't sell it for a million bucks."

Encouraged that he could make a functioning tool, Anderson built more planes (lots more) and started posting pictures of them on the Internet. Woodworkers began to take notice and ask Anderson to make planes for them. Now he spends most of his free time in his shop filing and fitting and fussing with all the details that go into one of his planes.

He has a few machines that assist his work: a small drill press and band saw lend a hand. And he recently purchased a small benchtop milling machine to cut the mouth of the planes. But much of the work is by hand and by eye.

What's most striking about his finished tools is how they don't look much like anyone else's tools. Unlike some contemporary plane-makers, Anderson doesn't revel in making reproductions of classic infill tools from Norris, Spiers, Mathison or Slater. Instead, Anderson's keen eye and impressive collection of files create planes with fluid sidewalls, sculpted and



Photo by David Hyttsten

Wayne Anderson files the bed of a chariot plane in his basement workshop. Tools on the back wall serve as inspiration and they lend a hand with the woodworking on occasion.

scalloped wedges and details that are found on fine furniture more than on tools.

"I was never one to copy a Norris or a Spiers," Anderson says. "Those were the production planes of the era. I was never impressed with the style."

As you can imagine, one-of-a-kind hand-

built planes are more expensive than manufactured ones. Anderson typically charges \$100 per inch of length of the finished tool, plus extra for exotic options such as inlay. So the 9"-long Scottish-style miter plane below cost me \$900. For someone on a writer's salary, that was a lot of saving and scrimping.

But I have to say that I consider it money well spent. Anderson's tools have an undefinable appeal to me that cannot be boiled down to price alone. A lot of hand work goes into the furniture I build for this magazine and myself, and there is something fitting about using a hand-made tool in my work. As I wipe the plane down and put it away, I often find myself marveling a bit at the workmanship and detailing of the tool. And I hope that my own work can measure up to Anderson's.

From a pragmatic point of view, Anderson's planes are quite reasonably priced compared to the cost of the vintage infill planes that are prized by tool collectors. Vintage tools of this caliber are far more expensive and may or may not even be usable. In fact, other tool makers and collectors consider Anderson's planes an astonishing bargain for what you get.

Anderson says he isn't driven by money. He merely prices his tools so he can stay busy making them, that he can do the kind of work he wants and make a tool that's within reach of the serious plane user.

"These are user planes," he says, tapping the table for emphasis. "It's a tool. Take it into the shop and use it." **PW**

—CS



Here is an improved miter plane with Scottish influences. The infill is ebony with a small ivory inlay on the front bun.