

WORK SMARTER IN THE SHOP: Hand Tools By Barry Denton

To me there is nothing better than going up to the shop and having all my tools organized, polished, tight, and ready to go to work. Normally the day before I start a new project I will make sure everything is in order. There is nothing more irritating than starting a project and having to stop because you can't find something or you have to repair it. During my shoeing career Sunday afternoons were always spent sharpening and repairing tools for the week ahead. Because I punched and counter punched hundreds of horseshoes each week, I would keep about 6 of each style of punch on hand. In the normal course of work I would break or melt the tips of my punches so I always had another to move on to. This allowed me to keep the dollars rolling in by not stopping to repair a tool. I simply laid the damaged one aside and proceeded with the next punch. The damaged punch would wait until Sunday afternoon to be repaired. The point being, not to hold up production due to breakage.

The most important tool in my box is my hammer. My primary hammer is a rounding hammer, next is my cross pein, and third is a ball pein. Each of those hammers perform their functions very well if they are properly maintained. I switch hammers to make my working time more efficient. Yes, I can probably do 90% of my work with just one hammer, but it makes it much easier on me if I have the right hammer for each job. Blacksmithing is hard, taxing work so why not make it as easy as you can on yourself? All three of my primary hammers weigh the same, so when I happen to switch hammers I don't have to readjust my body to accommodate the new hammer. I also have secondary hammers of heavier and lighter weights for different applications, but for now let's concentrate on our primary hammers.

The first thing in my mind when I pick up a hammer is balance. Hammer balance allows a fluid even swing when you are striking metal. If your hammer is balanced it will swing with minimal effort, will rebound nicely, hit squarely, not turn in your hand and not make your forearm tie up.

Avoid hammers that are clubby and unbalanced as they will only contribute to the destruction of your arms. Hammers are very much like cars. You can go anywhere in a Volkswagen that you can go in a Lincoln. However, when you arrive in a Lincoln you will be a lot more relaxed and less worn out. Expensive hammers are always worth the extra money. What you hammer with everyday when you are 25, will have a direct effect on how you

hammer when you are 45.

The face should be constantly watched and polished. This keeps your work free from unnecessary marks left by a chipped or distorted face. A few minutes on a belt sander with a #400 belt goes along way on an air hardened hammer head.

Something else that is important is the tightness of the head. The head should be absolutely solid on the handle. If it is moving around you are wasting energy. Maintaining tight hammer heads under the drastic conditions of the Mojave Desert takes some ingenuity and extra effort. First of all I drill all my hammer heads through the middle from side to side and put a pin in them. About once a month all my hammers find their way to a bucket with about 2" of anti freeze in the bottom. I put them in head first and soak them about 4 hrs. The anti freeze seems to keep the head tight for a long time and does not rot the wood as quickly as water. I have tried many things over the years, but this is what works best for me.

Lastly let's talk about tongs. The worst thing you can have in a blacksmith shop are ill fitting or poor working tongs. Remember that your hammer hand is the "power" hand, but your tong hand is your "smart" hand. Therefore, use a little time before you start a project to make certain all the tongs you will use fit the work, swing open easily, and fit comfortably in your hands. If you are trying to present a professional image of your self in front of a customer there is not a worse thing to watch than a blacksmith fumbling with tongs that don't fit or don't open. Your work gets out of position and so do your hammer blows which in turn distort your forging project. I like all my tong reins small and rounded so they feel good in my hands. If I buy a pair of tongs at a yard sale that are big and clunky I'll take the rivet out and forge them down to my comfort zone. Tongs are very easy to make so I really like the control I have when I do that. If I buy a new pair of tongs, I will buy the best I can and still alter them. Forging and belt sanding go a long way to making a pretty and comfortable pair of tongs. When you are working and a rivet seizes up on you, dip your tongs into the water bucket quickly, then immediately drop the end of one rein on the anvil face. Nine times out of ten "jogging the rivet" in this manner will free it up.

Hopefully you have a few new ideas on maintaining your hand tools. Now get out there and be efficient! It only makes your life easier.