

# the bygone era of the CABINETMAKER



John Olson

Here at *Workbench*, we consider most anyone who gets to work with tools for a living extremely lucky. So you can imagine how we feel about a guy whose job is to use tools the way they were used 130 years ago.

**Life in 1875** — This is the enviable position of John Olson, cabinetmaker at Living History Farms in Urbandale, Iowa. Since 1970, the mission of the Farms has been to portray prairie life from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They uphold that mission by operating a working

farm, schoolhouse, blacksmith shop, and an entire village called Walnut Hill, all as it would have looked in 1875. As the cabinetmaker, John's role in this community is to educate visitors by creating cabinetry and furniture the way it was made back then.

In that era, John likely would have made a decent living at his craft. As pioneers moved westward onto the open prairie after the Civil War, they needed to establish themselves in new homes. John's skills as a carpenter and a cabinetmaker were in

high demand. Cabinetmakers earned \$3 or more a day — a healthy sum for a tradesman at the time.

**Tools of the Time** — Perhaps as interesting as the era in which John practices his craft are the tools he uses. This J. Marston & Co. "Hand & Foot Saw" (*Photo, below*) had just arrived in shops by 1875. It is operated by a foot-powered treadle to keep the blade running at 1,200 RPM. For an in-depth look at the tools and techniques John uses in his 1875 cabinetmaking shop, see page 96.



# planes & treadles: building in 1875

A project in John's shop starts out the same way it does in a modern wood shop — workpieces are cut to size, and then square, smooth edges are produced with a jointer and planer.

**Planes for All Purposes** — Only John's jointer and planer are not the large, noisy machines we're used to today. Cabinetmakers of the past used a series of four different planes to thickness and smooth a workpiece: a scrub plane, trying plane, jointer plane, and smooth plane. Here, John relies on a jointer plane (*Top Photo*) to smooth the rough edge of a workpiece.

**Cutting Material** — Most cross-cuts and rip cuts were made with hand saws, but if you were fortunate enough to afford a \$50 treadle table

saw, you would have used that instead (*Photo, page 94*). These foot-operated tools typically were only affordable for cabinet shops with 12 employees or more. The "jig" saw shown below is another example of such a tool.

**Life Without Routers** — Treadle shaper tables were just becoming available in 1875, and the first router was still 30 years away. So cabinetmakers relied on other means to produce profiles and joinery. Here, John shows how he makes a roundover and dovetail joints (*Photos, right and lower right*).

**Wood Workout** — John jokes that cabinetmakers got their exercise from all these hand- and foot-powered tools. But a well-crafted project was always worth it, just as it is today. 📖



▲ Planes handled many shop tasks in 1875. Here, John adjusts a jointer plane (*above*) and rounds an edge with a hollow plane (*below*).

► By pumping his foot up and down on the treadle, John causes the arm of this "jig" saw to produce a cutting motion like a scroll saw. Like its modern equivalent, this saw excels at making fretwork and decorative cutouts.



▲ Routers, dovetail bits, and dovetail jigs didn't exist in 1875, so cabinetmakers relied on more traditional methods for creating dovetail joints. First, John lays out the dovetail pins with a pencil and cuts the sides of them with a hand saw. Then, he removes the waste between them using a chisel (*Photo above*).