

Promise to a Professor

Mr. Sheffield's two-year writing slope.

About a decade ago, I walked into my English professor's office for advising and couldn't take my eyes off of his homemade writing slope. He was talking credits and prerequisites; I was thinking this guy didn't know a tenon from a tang. A couple of quarters later, I felt comfortable enough to comment on his glue-and-screw slope made from AC plywood.

"I made it in high school shop class," Mr. Sheffield said. I didn't want to offend him, but the words spewed out of my mouth before my mind engaged. "I can make you one a lot nicer than that."

The comment came easily; I hadn't taken into consideration that I'd recently moved, and most of my woodworking tools were in storage. And building my shop was on my "do-later" list.

Armed with a small battery-powered Skil saw, a chisel and a block plane, I tromped down to the basement and pressed the ironing board into service as a temporary workbench. I cut the main panel for the slope out of some nice bird's-eye maple plywood I had in storage and sat on the basement floor astride a board for a few hours, hand-planing cocobolo strips for the edging.

Then came the wind storm. The building I'd planned to convert into a shop almost blew over, so that project moved to my "do-now" list. Between building the shop, full-time college classes and two part-time jobs, the professor's project sat in the darkness of the basement waiting its turn. I often heard his voice echoing down the collegiate hallways with, "I'm still waiting for that slope!"

Almost a year and a half later, I graduated and became employed by the same college. The voice continued to chide me, teasingly. He wasn't going to let me off the hook.

Finally, the slope completion topped my project list. I decided to take a little extra time and make the professor's desk especially nice by adding his signature in mother-of-pearl and abalone. Another week, tops. What I hadn't planned on was a death-bed request from a dear friend: Would I please repair and refinish a walnut table made for her by a past paramour, something she could leave to her daughter?

The two simple slope pieces sat as I tackled the walnut table, a task I expected would take a couple of weeks to complete. A couple of months later, the daughter of my departed friend picked up her heirloom, and I was able to begin work, again, on the slope desk.

With the signature inlay completed, the *bête noir* of woodworking confronted me: the finish. The Danish oil I wiped on wasn't pretty enough, and the brushed polyurethane left bubbles. Spray lacquer spewed and sputtered out of the can, and the gods of the French polish had not yet deigned to bestow their grace upon me.

I was sanding off the second or third finish when I felt a soft spot under the veneer. A tap with my fingernail elicited a hollow sound reminiscent of a ripe watermelon. Cutting back to the edges of the hollow spot revealed a football-shaped void under the veneer. I contacted the professor and told him the project would take longer to complete.



A luthier once gave me great advice for patching unexpected inconsistencies in a wood surface: "Slap some mother-of-pearl on it and charge an extra hundred dollars." This desk was a gift, so no extra money. But I did create a scroll and quill inlay to fill the void, and it looked as if it had been part of the plan all along.

I've never felt satisfied with the wipe-on polyurethane finish I finally resorted to, but the professor won't let me take the desk back now that I have mastered French polishing. Methinks he's afraid another two years will pass before he sees it again. And that might very well be the case. **PWM**

Autumn enjoys woodworking and writing; she finds inspiration from living in the foothills of Washington's Cascade Mountains.

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