



## Collected Wisdom

by Chuck Green



**Carpentry and Interior Finish: More Tricks of the Trade from an Old-Style Carpenter — Second Edition**  
by Bob Syvanen  
(The Globe Pequot Press, 1995; 860/395-0440).

Softcover, 8 1/2x11, 325 pages. \$21.95.

In 1982, I bought Bob Syvanen's book, then new in its first edition, having enjoyed his two previous books. In the years since, Syvanen's book has been required reading for every carpenter who works for me.

Beginning carpenters have learned the most, but even the more experienced workers have gained something from the book. Very little has been changed in this new edition, although the handwritten text, which was in the style used on architectural plans, has been replaced with typeset text.

Like Syvanen's other books, *Carpentry and Interior Finish* is quirky and somewhat uneven, but in the best sense of those terms. The book is not a thorough primer on carpentry or interior finish, nor does it pretend to be. It is rather like having an older experienced carpenter sharing his areas of concern while teaching the fundamentals as he sees them, going into greater detail here and there as he sees fit. The illustrations are all hand drawings, and they often are remarkably successful in conveying the desired information.

Syvanen also uses gentle humor to get his point across with tremendous success; in the section on countertops, he advises that fumes from contact cement "will make you light-headed in a hurry, so ventilate the area or wear a protective fume respirator." Next to it is a simple drawing of a guy with a glazed look, leaning out the window of a car with the hood and front end crumpled, as he says to a skeptical policeman

leaning on the car, "Honest officer... countertops."

*Carpentry and Interior Finish* reads easily and well, as this kind of guidebook should. It starts by covering preparation in the late framing stages, which many carpenters I've worked with have never thought about before. Syvanen's simple text and illustrations quickly convey an understanding of why additional blocking for baseboard should be installed at inside corners and door openings, and how to level a ceiling prior to insulation and wallboarding. Here and there I disagree with his methods, such as how to trim a joist one finds hanging too low. Syvanen suggests snapping a line and making the cut with a circular saw, but I think making an overhead cut while walking is too dangerous. I'd use a power plane.

What is important, however, is that Syvanen gives a broad view of the sit-



uation and shows the reasons for taking action, then covers one or two ways to do so.

The 13 pages Syvanen devotes to doors concentrate on fitting door jambs properly, correcting problems, and cutting hinges, though there is too little said about hinge layout (and I disagree with using only two hinges on doors) and no coverage of precased split jambs. This is typical of where the book is uneven and incomplete, yet what Syvanen does cover can be applied in the other situations. If he doesn't specify how to back up a split jamb with shimming, his coverage of nailing a solid jamb would probably lead an inexpe-

rienced installer to do the same with a split jamb.

His treatment of paneling is among his most thorough. Though we rarely install paneling, the techniques he chooses to cover are methods we use all the time — layout, scribing, back beveling, and avoiding dirty fingerprints on the finished surface.

I take major issue with Syvanen only twice. I feel that his advocacy of cutting dadoes for door jambs and bookcases on the table saw is misguided and possibly even dangerous. His drawing of a jig he uses for holding boards as they are cut does not include his characteristic warnings about where danger lurks and where to clamp carefully, since the potential for kickback is high. A radial arm saw would be a much better tool for the job, but if a table saw is used the setup needs much more support than is shown. Similarly, in the section on mudding, Syvanen draws a pair of homemade stilts, also dangerous, though he notes that they are illegal in some areas. I would only use commercially produced stilts with counterbalancing springs.

These and other minor issues I have with Syvanen seem to come from his being an overly thrifty Yankee. He clearly does not seek to compromise on quality, and often advocates labor-intensive methods of work. He seems reluctant, however, to spend money on materials and equipment. For instance, he suggests that a homemade joint compound hawk is almost equal to a \$15 aluminum hawk (after holding one for 15 minutes, most people would disagree); uses only two hinges per door; takes the triangular cutoffs left over from cutting 2x10 stair stringers and nails them onto a 2x6 to make a cheap center stringer; and uses a homemade jig rather than a commercial stair router guide for routing let-in stair stringers. The methods he suggests are often ones my employees will not use, but they do learn from them.

Despite these minor points of disagreement, I feel that *Carpentry and Interior Finish* provides good information about a wide range of carpentry topics. I'll keep having my employees read it. ■

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