

You Don't Know Jack

by M. Lee Wachs

“You Don't Know Jack,” is what the embroidery on his baseball cap said. Well, I knew Jack; he was the old curmudgeon behind the counter at the tool store.

For a few years, my wife Nancy and I traveled one day each week some sixty miles to Santa Rosa. She participated in an all-day medical procedure related to her severe diabetes. My habit on those days was to find as many diverse things as possible with which to busy myself. These included walking in a very nice nearby park, going to a health club, frequenting local aviation facilities (I am a flying enthusiast), and browsing discount stores and the like. Being an inveterate tinkerer, mechanic, and sometime builder of experimental aircraft, it was natural that high on my list of haunts were tool and hardware stores.

I relished my role as a hardware detective, the Sherlock Holmes, if you will, of long-forgotten gadgets and whatchamacallits. Only the oldest of stores would do, wooden floors that creaked, an abundance of dark comers and ceiling-high dust-encrusted shelves; preferably overflowing with an accumulation of “stuff” long forgotten and never desired by unknowledgeable treasure hunters such as I. When finding such a cavern attended by an ancient “hardwarian” I knew the gods had smiled on me that day and nirvana was not far off.

The anticipation of the spoils that were there, if only I could find them, was often more than I could bear. If I only know where to look! One must be cunning with great powers of deduction to be a “hardware hunter.” First, you must get permission to delve into the chambers’ innermost recesses, all the while promising to be inconspicuously quiet and neat. “For after all,” I assure the wary owner, “I fully realize the sanctity of where I am.” I can't recall ever being denied. Sometimes, after fully explaining my search for the Holy Grail, I'm offered admittance to the holy of holies, “the back room.” It is here that might be found rough castings and long forgotten tools of black steel such as a “Fresno,” bearing names like “Erie Forge and Youngstown Tool and Die,” names over a hundred years old.

Once I came across an unidentifiable item proudly displaying the name of its creator; the “Ashtabula Bow and Socket Company.” Years later, having forgotten the incident, I found myself in Ashtabula, Ohio. While wandering about enjoying the sights I happened upon a decaying great hulk of what was once a proud red wooden building. It was huge! Three blocks long and in some places four stories high. I say in some places, because the building had settled so dramatically that its roofline was serpentine. But the sign on the end of the building was still there, quite faded but still readable. It once, I'm sure, announced that this was the Ashtabula Bow and Socket Company and Foundry, having been established in 1830, year of our Lord. By the way, this seems a good time to mention that I had previously found out what the item I found bearing that name was. Indeed it was a bow socket, which allowed the cloth or canvas top on a horse-drawn buggy to be folded down like a top on a convertible car.

Obviously, the company had gone the way of the horse-drawn buggy. I saw no harm in casually inspecting this giant, apparently abandoned hulk. After waling about a block, I was surprised to see a parking area containing about a dozen cars and then it was that I heard noises of industry. A familiar odor wafted in the air; “fiberglass resins” I said to myself, wondering what in heaven was going on in that tomb's innards. Bravely, like a jungle explorer, I literally stumbled into a large, well-lit workshop area where men in white lab coats were busily laying wet fiberglass cloth onto a mail mould. The mould seemed about the size of a car, which in fact it was. This was the prototype of the Studebaker Golden Hawk that I had found purely by accident—the equivalent of the Roswell flying saucer repository. Luckily for me, there were no armed guards with itchy trigger fingers!

Little did those lab-coated “mad scientists” know that they were once again working on a soon-to-be-extinct mechanical contrivance. I would be remiss if I didn't tell you that Mr. Studebaker started his business career in Placerville, California, selling wooden wheelbarrows to miners for \$8 each. In commemoration of this, each year at the Del Norte County Fair, you can watch or participate in the Studebaker Races, where very athletic people push heavily laden Studebaker wheelbarrow replicas over and exhausting obstacle course.

You don't know Jack (continued)

“So what,” you may rightfully ask, does Jack have to do with all of this? Well, Jack had once owned one of my “hardware houses of pleasure.” Sadly, that ubiquitous stamping, “Made in China” (or Japan, or some other far-off place) forced him behind the register, as an employee, at that monster tool store where we met and chatted weekly. I came to find that Jack and I were of the same ethnic background. We could toss Yiddish words and phrases at each other and smile at the incredulous looks of the “import” buyers waiting in line. Jack would say, regarding an item about which I was inquiring, “This is ‘chazarye’ or ‘schlock.’ If you buy it, be sure to keep the receipt and be thankful for our generous return and replacement policy.” On rare occasion, he would screw up his face into a frown while saying, “No bad reports, yet,” seemingly disappointed that maybe the import was a satisfactory product. Jack would always check to see if my items had a cheaper price in the company’s catalog and he would give me that price, rather than the store price, a little known or used policy.

One day, after a long absence from seeing Jack—due to my wife’s passing and a long infirmity of my own—I called to ask Jack about a tool I saw in the catalog. The young male voice said, in a seemingly uncaring tone, “Jack’s dead.” But, yes, I knew Jack.