

Let There Be Light

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY KERRY PIERCE

Last week our power went out.

I was in the shop, cleaning up a set of mortises with a paring chisel when the fluorescent bulbs above my bench flickered out and the radio died. I placed my chisel on the bench top and waited. Sometimes, these outages last only a few minutes.

I looked down at the pools of inky black which had already collected in the mortises. I brushed at them with my hand as if I could whisk them away. I waited some more.

I could see a rectangle of light through the open shop door, and silhouetted against that rectangle, I could make out the shapes of my tablesaw and my jointer. And I thought I could identify my paring chisel on the bench top.

I walked outside and looked up into the sky. No lightning. No thunder. Not even any rain. Sometimes the power outages on our rural electric co-op last for hours, and once, after a heavy, wet snow, we went without for three days.

A power outage means washing up in Evian. It means carrying water up the hill from the creek in five gallon buckets in order to flush the toilets. No tv.

And during that evening last week, it meant no work in the shop.

I swore softly under my breath. My evening thus far had been a good one. After turning and sanding the four legs, I had begun the mortises for the apron tenons using my 3/8" mortising attachment for the drillpress. I had then moved to my bench and had begun changing those 3/8" mortises to 1/2" mortises with the use of a paring chisel. Easy work in the soft cedar of the table legs. Satisfying work. The material pared cleanly with little effort. It would be a handsome set of mortises. I didn't want to stop.

Fifteen years earlier, I had written my master's thesis about cabinetmaking in Fairfield County, Ohio (my home county) in the first quarter of the 19th century. How had those guys worked in

their shops after dark? Lanterns? Candles? Well, we had some candles. And then I remembered something even better than candles. After our most recent power outage, I had purchased a small, battery-operated fluorescent light. If those 19th-century guys could work in the glow of a candle, surely I could work in the illumination of a small fluorescent light.



I went into the house, found both the light and some batteries, installed the batteries, took the light to the shop, and clicked it on. I picked up my chisel and went back to work.

At least I tried to. I could see the chisel and the leg and the outlines of the mortises just fine, but I couldn't see down into the mortises—not without lifting the light and holding it directly above them. Of course, I couldn't work the chisel if I was holding the light. So I looked for a way to hang the light above the mortises.

A short length of 12-gauge electrical wire would work. I bent one end into a loop through which I drove an 8d nail into the

side of a ceiling joist. Then I bent the other end into a hook and suspended the light from the hook.

I picked up the chisel and went back to work, but this time, the light was in the way. I shortened the distance between the loop and the hook on the 12-gauge wire, raising the light another 6". Nope. No good. Still in the way. I pulled the 8d nail and renailed it to an adjacent joist. In that position, the light wasn't in the way, but once again I couldn't see into the inky wells of the mortises.

So how did the old guys do it? How could they work after dark? For that matter, how could they work during the day? I never had less than a dozen fluorescent bulbs burning in my shop, even at high noon.

In the Georgian, a restored 1830s home in the Fairfield County seat, there's a set of saber-legged chairs made by Jesse Woltz early in the 19th century. The carving is crisp and clean. And there are other pieces of Fairfield County work which can be dated to the same era, and most are crisply and cleanly executed. And what about the 18th-century work done in Philadelphia, New York, Boston, and Newport, arguably the finest cabinetwork ever produced in this country? How did those makers manage such marvelous execution in shops where the lighting was almost certainly worse than the lighting in any contemporary shop?

The next day, after our power had been restored, I paged through some photos of Newport secretaries and Philadelphia highboys. How had they managed to accomplish such work without a circular saw? Without a planer? Without a truck to haul the finished piece to the home of their client? And how had they managed to execute such meticulous work in shops lit only by candles and lanterns?

Incredible.

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