



PLANE-SPOKEN MAN

Retired Roseburg Police Chief Mark Nickel went looking for a hobby and discovered a passion for collecting and restoring hand planes.

Story by **Dick Baltus**

He didn't intend to mislead his wife. Mark Nickel truly believed he'd keep the promises he made a few years ago when he told Kathleen he had a new hobby.

He would remain focused, he promised. He would not spend a lot of money on it, he assured. It wouldn't take up a lot of space in their home, he maintained.

But, when all was said and done, Nickel says, "Those were all lies."

The retired Roseburg police chief seems a little sheepish when he recalls the moment he announced his plan to start restoring and collecting vintage hand planes. But sheepish and repentant are two different things.

In fact, a quick scan of the Nickel household would indicate he's fairly proud of what has transpired here since he purchased his first plane in 2013. In a corner of the family room, near a bay window, are several display cases containing shelf upon shelf of the antique hand tools — each of which looks, at least to the untrained eye, an awful lot like the one next to it. And, indeed, they are a lot alike — except for their differences.

All these over here are No. 2 planes, it is explained, and the smaller planes are No. 1s. These are from the Stanley Co., and those are Bailey planes. Here are some Stanley planes with Bailey designs, and this weird-looking one is from Russia ("If they built their weapons like they did this plane, we had nothing to worry about in the Cold War," Nickel quips.)

And these are just the tools that made the cut for in-home display. In Nickel's shop a few yards from the house, there's another large rack of them, not to mention others in various states of disassembly and repair.

Nickel claims he has about 185 in his collection, but who knows how accurate that number is considering it will soon be made public and his wife will take a keen interest in his answer.



Were one to take a quick review of Nickel's biography, one would find little evidence that he was destined to become a plane collector and expert after he retired from a 38-year career in law enforcement.

The majority of those years were spent in Roseburg, where he served as a detective and in public relations and training positions before being named chief in 2003. When Nickel retired in 2010, he set about to answer the question most retirees ask themselves: "Now what?"

Kathleen, director of communications for CHI Mercy Health, had one idea.

"She was working on a project, restoring some antique dining table chairs," Nickel remembers. "The seats of the chairs needed fixing, and I said, 'I can do that.' As it turned out, I couldn't."

Nickel had never claimed to be much of a woodworker, and doesn't to this day. But that hadn't stopped him from building a shop. So now he had a place where he could try to duplicate the indented area in the chair seat — put there to conform to a sitter's rear end.

What Nickel didn't have, however, was the right tool for that job. He intuitively surmised that a plane might do the trick, and ordered one off eBay. He didn't want to spend a lot of money on a tool he wasn't sure was right for the job and he might never use again.

What arrived, Nickel remembers, "was a piece of crap."

Still, Nickel was convinced that a decent plane would do the trick. He went back to eBay and "paid too much" for an old Stanley plane from the 1920s. It arrived with a chip on the blade, which required Nickel to sharpen the blade past the blemish. That was all it took to spark his interest.

"I started researching planes and learned the story of how Stanley became the toolbox of the world," he says. "I was intrigued by how big a part of life planes were back in the day."

Virtually anything made of wood before the 1930s was touched by a plane, Nickel learned.

"If you look at an old Stanley catalog it has hundreds and hundreds of planes," he says. "They had planes for barrel makers and planes for instrument makers and furniture makers and cabinet makers. Everyone had their own special plane."

Nickel says he even ran across a plane on eBay that was designed for use on copper organ pipes.

In the early going of his plane-collecting adventure, Nickel upheld his promise to Kathleen, focusing mainly on Stanley tools. But he soon learned about the Stanley business model wherein the company would purchase the patent of any plane-related idea that showed promise and drive the inventor out of business.

NO ONE IS MORE SURPRISED THAN NICKEL THAT HE HAS BECOME A PRETTY WELL-RECOGNIZED EXPERT IN HAND PLANES.



Mark Nickel with one of the 185 or so planes in his collection.

The most famous and inventive of those was Leonard Bailey, who held several patents for innovations that revolutionized the plane-design industry. “They are still making planes today based on the designs he came up with in the 1860s,” Nickel says.

So much for the focus on Stanley.

Nickel may have entered the world of planes as a collector, but collecting costs money, and there was that other pesky promise he made to his wife. So, to finance his hobby, he decided to start buying, restoring and reselling planes he didn’t want to keep.

He found a market, mainly online, for old Stanley models dating as far back as the 1880s.

Nickel went back online to research methods of restoring the various metal and wood parts that comprise a plane, and soon became proficient in the different processes used to bring a tool back to working order.

Start to finish, restoring a plane in bad condition takes about four hours, Nickel says. Planes in better shape take about two to three hours to restore.

“I don’t like to brag, but I’ve gotten pretty good at it,” he says. “They don’t look brand new, but they look pretty good and are completely usable.”

To sell his restorations Nickel heads back to eBay where small- or medium-sized planes sell for between \$65 and \$80 and larger ones fetch from \$150 to \$300.

No one is more surprised than Nickel that he has become a pretty well-recognized expert in hand planes. And no one is happier than him that he has found such a rewarding answer to that question he asked himself several years ago – Now what?

“I had a rewarding career, but I had a job where I never really produced anything,” he says, “I always admired people who went to work and at the end of the day they could point to something and say, ‘I made that.’ I never got that satisfaction. So I wanted to do something in my retirement that would give me that.”

He has certainly found it.

“I’m working with tools that are a significant part of someone’s history,” he says. “Sometimes they’ve been neglected so long they’re not much more than a hunk of rusted iron. It’s very rewarding to be able to turn that into something that can be used for another hundred years.”

To learn more about vintage hand planes, or to purchase one restored by Mark Nickel, visit www.plane-dealer.com. ■■