Q&A #1 Transcript.

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GR: Hi there. Welcome to Splinters. I'm Gary Rogowski. This podcast is a special, it's a Q&A podcast. Folks have written into Highland Woodworking and to me to ask woodworking questions. And I'm going to answer these questions with the help of Ashley Piper, former Mastery student in my program and owner of Shallow Creek Woodcraft.

GR: Hi.

AP: Hello.

GR: How are you?

AP: I'm good. Thank you so much for having me on, Gary.

GR: Oh, you bet. Https://www.shallowcreekwoodcraft.com. Go check it out. And I want to thank Highland Woodworking for partnering with us in this endeavor, our partner in education. They've been providing fine tools since 1978, which is when I realized my first good piece, I designed my first good piece, right about then. That only goes to show that we've both been around a long time. But please check out their website at Highland Woodworking.com and send in questions to them or to me at Northwestwoodworking.com. Happy to answer these questions. I want to just say one more thing. I really do appreciate Highland's approach to the value of quality. And it's something that I'm big on. So I hope you'll take a look at their selection of tools.

GR: All right, Splinters. Ash, you have the questions there. Can you read one off?

AP: Yep. Okay. So let's get started here. We have a question from Megan C. How would I initialize chisels?

GR: I love this question. So here's the answer. Clearly you find the USB port on your chisel and plug it into your laptop to charge it up. If it doesn't work, then turn it off and turn it on again and then see if it works. I'm sorry. That's such a wise guy answer, but I couldn't resist the verb initialize.

GR: Here's the long answer. Here's the real answer. Flatten the back. That's the first step is flatten the back of your chisel. First set of chisels I bought were old Stanley's. They were plastic handled with a metal cap on top. Didn't feel great in the hands, butt chisels, so they're pretty short. But I used them and then down the road, I got my hands on an old Stanley 750, socket chisel, and then the Lie-Nielsens, and they feel great in your hands. There's such a difference. Of course, if you're in the Atlanta area, go to Highland Woodworking and put your hands on some.

GR: When you initialize, the sharpening is really the most critical thing you have to deal with in getting the tool ready. And there are three methods of sharpening, and there are, I don't know, four or five different media that you can sharpen with. Doesn't matter which one you use, find it, get familiar with it, and get the back of your chisels flat. How long did it take you to flatten your first set of chisels, Ashley?

AP: Oh, I thought that that's where I was going to die standing. I felt like I was unsure about what exactly I was looking for. And I go, this is where I will be found with my hands cramped over these stones as I'm working on the back of them. And quickly I realized there's no way that anybody's getting any woodworking done with that amount of time spent on the back and that I was probably going too far or looking for things that were unnecessary. So I'm proud to say I made it. I survived through that experience, but getting the backs flat and not going too, too far with them is a good start.

GR: Yeah. Well, yeah, at first it's hard to know what do I do and how far do I take it. But the critical thing is keeping the tool flat. I think that's number one. So you need to polish the back, but you can't be rounding it by kind of dragging your chisel off the sandpaper or sharpening stones. You've got to keep it dead flat. And if you can get it to a mirror polish, that's great. And now that's it. You're done. Now you have to work the bevel whenever it gets dull. And for your first set of cuts, I would work on the bevel. Yeah, get the back flat. That's the most important first step other than the USB port. You got another one there?

AP: I do. I have a question from Chris N. When finishing a project, what are things I should focus on?

GR: Well, I'm presuming we're talking about putting the finish on, not the victory lap that it's finally over. But there are so many rules that spring to mind when it comes to finishing. So here are the ones that I think really have to be dealt with.

GR: Prep your wood carefully and check it. Solve it, wash it to look for scratches that you may have missed or glue spots you may have missed. I once had a glue spot on some wall that I glued up for a tabletop and I said, that's not glue. That can't be glue. And I spent a day looking at it going, nah, it can't be glue. It's right near lamination, but it couldn't be glue because I've sanded and scraped this. Couldn't be glue. It took me another day to finally take a scraper to it and scraped it right off. It was glue. So all you gotta do is hit it with solvent, either paint thinner or alcohol. Alcohol flashes off very quickly, but paint thinner will last 15 or 20 minutes. And you'll see the glue spots. You'll see the sanding scratches. They'll all pop up, get a light source bouncing off the surface up to your eye. And that's a big deal, I think. So prep your wood carefully.

GR: Have your finish room prepped. It may not be your bench space. It needs to be above 65 degrees, I think, below 70% humidity for best results. I mean, you can work around that, but it can take some finishes a lot longer to dry. Conversely, if you're down in Arizona, you may need a retarder to keep your solvent workable in that kind of low humidity situation. But above 65 degrees, you're going to be a whole

lot happier putting on any oil-based finish. You can also warm up your finishes in a water bath.

GR: Do a sample board. Take the wood from your project, do a sample board with the finish that you're going to use. And if you're doing colors, absolutely do the stain on your board because woodworkers have only one direction: forward. It's only drive or overdrive. They don't back up. If you put a stain on something that's ugly, most of us just put another stain over the top of that. Now you got a mess. And then you put something else over the top of that. Finishers strip, not woodworkers, they just go forward. So do a sample board.

GR: Check your solvents to know the kind of finish you're working with. Now, normally they give you all this information. So if it says clean your brush with denatured alcohol, it's a shellac. If it says lacquer thinner, it's going to be a lacquer. If it says mineral spirits or naptha or something like that, then it's an oil-based finish.

GR: So one heavy coat will do the job and look terrible. So many small coats, thin light coats, I think, are much better at giving you a good protective finish. I put four coats of a finish I really like called Pro-fin on a breakfast table that I built. And you know it wasn't holding up. So I put another four coats on and now it's great. So light coats, but build them up.

GR: And the last coat is not your final step. You don't put that last coat on and say, ah, I'm done. No, you wait a week or however long it takes for this particular finish to cure, and then you rub it out. And you rub it out for looks and for smoothness, to blend in areas that don't quite look the same. And that makes a big, big difference. Do you rub out your finishes, Ash?

AP: Yes. Yeah, I have the same approach you do probably also because I learned some of those extra details from you, but thin coats give me a nice level of control. And then I always plan on rubbing the finish out at the end. I just don't feel like it has the same feel to it without doing that step.

GR: Yeah. Now, in my world, in the Pacific Northwest, one other thing I think is really important. And I never used to do this, and that's to raise the grain, particularly if I've sanded or routed or routed and sanded an edge, because with the moisture content grain would fuzz up over time. It's not like it has to get hit with a glass of water, you know, something spilled on it or a water glass sweating on it. Just the moisture in the air can make the grain kind of fuzz up. So wetting it down, you'll know immediately whether it's going to fuzz up in the future. You'll feel it. You'll feel that fuzz. Let that dry and then sand that off with some sharp sandpaper. And that'll help keep things really smooth.

GR: Finally, here's the answer to your finishing questions. You know it, Ashley. Shellac.

AP: Shellac.

GR: That's the answer to all finishing questions. Shellac. I'm a big fan, but. . .

AP: Me too. Me too. Truthfully, very much so.

GR: Once you learn how to mix it up and apply it, it's so easy. And you know I mentioned to my students, you put on like 24 coats, but that's nothing. Putting on four coats of varnish, that's a lot of work. Putting on 24 coats of shellac, eh. It's really pretty easy. Plus, you can use shellac as a stain conditioner,

so put a coat of shellac down first to even out a stain's penetration, or use it as a topcoat. Put a stain down first or an oil. I use an oil as a stain and then shellac over it. So many uses.

GR: Do you have anything else to add?

AP: No, I think it got touched on pretty well. I think it's all the big points of finishing and how those details are important to really ending up with a finish you can leave your shop and be happy about.

GR: Yeah. And it's so important because someone sees your work, what's the next thing that they do? They go up and touch it. And if that touch point, wherever you've designed the piece so that the touch point is gonna get touched, it should feel smooth, generally. Some textured pieces, of course. And this is true for all the finishes that you use and rubbing them out really will help. Oil finishes, you can rub out as you're applying them. So I put an oil finish on with 400 grit wet or dry sandpaper and that really buffs it out as you're applying it. But all others and top coats like varnish or shellac or lacquer need to be rubbed out afterwards. Okay, let's move on.

AP: Okay, our next question is from Lawrence B. I'm writing in response to the fall '24 to winter '25 catalog that recently arrived in the mail. In late June, I was a beneficiary in receiving a log of the subject line species, about six feet long, fairly straight, and free of substantial knots. This was green wood with bark. I measured two lengths corresponding to 19 inches and two others just under three feet. I challenged myself to use my Rikon 10 325 bandsaw as a sawmill. Initially, I used a Starrett 2 TPI 3/4" hook blade to cut the first section, liberally applying Blade Coat. I used featherboards designed for resawing I already had that are tall enough to keep pressure on the workpiece. Over two sessions, I made rectangles out of the rounds. I painted the ends.

Unfortunately, this project essentially consumed the Starrett blade. I have all four billets stored in an outdoor shed, and I'm thinking it wise to bring them indoors for the winter. Despite my efforts, all four have checked. It's obvious harvestable wood can be obtained from all four. I look forward to your reply and would appreciate any suggestions you might offer. In closing, I thank you and your colleagues for the helpful hints when setting up for resawing.

GR: Yeah, Highland's got a lot of resources there online that you can check out for various techniques. But I have some suggestions. So number one, get rid of the bark. Strip it. It's easier to strip, you know spring, summer, but get rid of it. Take a draw knife to it or a chisel, get rid of the bark. That's number one. You just don't know what is carrying as far as dirt, debris. At the very least, wire brush it to clean it but I would strip the bark off. There's no reason to be cutting that stuff. You're not going to use it. It's not going to be a part of the final board. So get rid of it.

GR: You'd be amazed at what you run into in backyard lumber. Bullets, of course, but barbed wire, ceramic. We were sawing up a board down at Mark Azevedo's once, and I had just pushed a cut on, what was it? I think it was a red oak or something that I had gotten and brought it down to Mark's to demo for the students. And he had a small band mill, 36 inch band mill, and it was set on tracks and the log was set in place and you'd just push the sawmill through on these tracks. You know, but it wasn't hard work. It was just noisy and it was fun. And I pushed one through and took that board off, and I said, well, turned to one of my students, 'Well, why don't you try?' And he got on it and there was this puff of gray, a cloud of gray dust, boom, broke the blade. We hit a patch of concrete. Oh yeah, that's fun. So you never know what's inside there. So getting rid of the bark helps. Testing with a wand, if you've got something that can

check for steel inside, that's also a good idea. So you don't run into something and trash a blade. It does happen. Nails, screws, toys, model airplanes. It's just so much stuff. But get rid of the bark, that's number one.

GR: If you can split it, I would split it to make it easier to handle it. And at 19 inches, that's pretty easy. I mean, if you've got your setup and it sounds like you had a decent setup on your bandsaw, then that's fine, but it's also nice to split it. Now it's easier to handle. You may have a flat surface you can register off of to make a 90° cut and that'll help with your resawing. But read the log. This is the thing that becomes so interesting. This is a very interesting hobby. I don't know that I'd take it up as a living 'cause it's tough. But read the log, see what is hiding inside it. So you can see if there's a knot, usually, you're not gonna be able to split that in one direction, might be able to split it in another. It depends on where it is. Crotch wood, you're not gonna be able to split. But if it's a nice, clean looking log, splitting it in two will make life a whole lot simpler. I had what I thought was a clean chunk of walnut one time and it started eating my wedges. So it drove one steel wedge in and then another steel wedge and then a plastic wedge and I went, oh boy, I better stop. Wouldn’t split. So, but start at the end grain and see if you can split the log and make it easier to handle. Coating the ends, absolutely essential as soon as the log gets cut. Sounds like you got that down.

GR: I like the end sealer, this emulsified wax. I know my local store carries it. I think Highland carries it. It's a log end sealer. Easier than paint and guaranteed to stick. So get that on there as soon as possible. You've got to slow down the moisture loss, which is going to occur. Checking, a certain amount of checking is going to occur, and it starts to check within the first half hour, usually. So if you're outside in the sun, get it out of the sun, roll it, drag it. If you can't, paint the ends and get it to your sawmill as quickly as possible.

GR: Okay, a 14 inch bandsaw has some issues. It's probably underpowered. It didn't sound like power was an issue for you, which is great, but it's probably, it's not really designed to resaw, but you're also running a much shorter blade. So I looked up the Rikon model you have. Blade length is 111 inches. My Yates American, my 36 inch, takes a blade that's 232 inches long. I like where you're going with the blade choice, but I'd go even coarser. So instead of two TPI, I'd go one tooth per inch. Hook pattern is good. Width is good, three quarter inch. You want a wide blade because you get beam strength. Your blade doesn't flex as much. A quarter inch blade, you get a lot of flex. Three quarter inch blade, you don't get as much flex. But it's tough to keep a blade like that sharp. I don't care how much lubricant you put on there. The gullets are going to fill with wet sawdust if it's really a green log.

GR: And so I would advise after every cut, heck, I just thought of this. I had a maple log. I got it over to a sawmill and after each cut, he replaced the blade. And that was like a 48" band mill. And he replaced the blade after each cut. I was paying them by the hour. So it was a little expensive. So that tells you something about the kind of work that a blade has to do in order to resaw lumber. It's a lot of effort and they'll cake up and they'll get dull in a hurry. So my Yates American has a carbide tip blade on it. Expensive, but worth it. And then I would clean it. And sometimes I just leave it on the machine. Sometimes I'd take it out. I use the citric solvent, spritz it on the teeth, protect the surface around it, of course, and then let it sit for five minutes or so, and then clean it with a toothbrush. So I would do that just to see if you can prolong the life of your blade. But I would have a couple of blades ready just in case you run into something. And when the first one gets dull. it's hard to keep them, hard to keep them sharp. Where do you get your bandsaw blades?

AP: I actually get my bandsaw blades from Highland Woodworking. I have for a long time.

GR: You use the Wood Slicer?

AP: I do.

GR: The Wood Slicer is a great resaw blade. There's only one problem with it. It's so good, I cut too fast and then it doesn't track properly.

AP: I do the same thing.

GR: Yeah, yeah. It's an amazing blade. So that's something else our questioner could consider is the Wood Slicer blades, great blade.

AP: I agree. It's definitely my go-to.

GR: Once you have sawn your lumber up, I would get it on stickers immediately and sticker it all the way out to the ends, all the way out to the ends of your board, not six inches in. Cuz my guess is that it split up to that first sticker. Every 12 inches, stickers. So a sticker is like a one by one or three quarter by three quarter, dry stock. There's this thing called sticker stain. I don't know why we even have it, except saw mills don't really care, but they'll take whatever kinds of stickers and there's, I don't know, some fungus or something, a mold or something that grows between the wet wood and the stickers and it'll stain the board all the way through. Have you ever run into that, Ashley?

AP: Yes, I've seen it where I just kept thinking it was going to mill out and it was still there.

GR: Another pass, another flip it over another pass. But if you see them regularly, like usually every 16 inches from the sawmill, it goes all the way through. So use dry stickers. There you go. Problem solved. Use dry stickers. And then I would, depends on your space, I had some cedar, you know, you buy cedar and it's green. And I said, this stuff is not gonna bow on me and it's not gonna warp on me. So I stickered it all. And then I weighted the pile with sandbags, put another set of stickers on top, another board on top of that, and then sandbags on top of that. I have also resorted to stickering a pile. I had some holly, and I ran band clamps on it, a couple of band clamps, at least two, three or four, if they're longer pieces, and just cinch it up so it's gonna stay flat. Make sure that your pile starts on a nice flat surface too.

GR: So in the end, and I'm gonna assume these logs were free, nothing's free. There's a ton of work. It can be a lot of fun, but you need stuff. You need stuff to help you with this job. One final thing, you mentioned going into the basement for the winter. I wouldn't. I'd leave it outside. Just make sure it's covered out of the rain or snow, out of the sun, and just let it dry at its own pace, a year per inch of thickness, generally speaking. If it's maple next week, it'll be dry. That stuff dries fast. But anything else, a year per inch of thickness, the alder, the same thing. I have not found alder to be terribly littered with checking. So there's something about your technique that caused this issue. So look at those things. Paint the ends with that end sealer, get the stuff cut and stickered as quickly as possible out of the weather. The problem with storing in a basement is too much humidity can create mold. So if you don't have air circulation down there, so if it's a small basement, you want to probably keep it out of the basement.

GR: It's fun to do, fun to do. But once you decide to start harvesting your own lumber, you realize, I have to do this a lot to have a reasonable supply of wood over the years. So it's work. It's fun work, but you have to have the space. And then once you get into larger logs, the equipment. So pallet jack or forklift, something to lift these logs. My friend Mark, his first sawmill was a homemade thing that some guy out in the valley had built. And it had a four-foot diameter saw blade coming down from the ceiling and a four foot diameter blade coming up from the floor. I brought my students out there. All we did was watch, watch them saw up a log. I was exhausted by the end of the day because it was so terrifying. There are no blade guards on those things. They're just giant saw blades. They're probably taking a quarter inch kerf.

AP: Oh gosh.

GR: Terrifying, just terrifying. And he had hydraulics and all this stuff to move the logs. Oh, I'll have to find the photograph. I'll put that on the podcast cover. Mark would quartersaw, he would quarter the logs, but the logs, these white oak logs, these are trees that live 125, 150 years, maybe a little bit longer. And they blow down. They have a relatively shallow root system in the Willamette Valley. And so he would never cut an oak tree down, but there were lots that he could mill up, four foot diameter, five foot diameter. And he would take them and stick them out in his yard, or Pete's his friend, Pete Kenagy, his farm. He would stick them out there for three or four years, just to let them untwist because white oak is so hard to dry. So the species makes a difference too.

GR: If you're going to dry, if you're going to try and cut up oaks, you just paint the ends, get them somewhere, you know, in the shade, out of the weather, and bide your time because they don't want to dry. Yeah, they're tough to dry. Fun, fun stuff. Okay. So Ashley came prepared with questions.

AP: I did, I did. Okay, so the next question is, do you believe it is a necessary part of the process of a piece to be worked with hand tools in order to have character?

GR: Now see, I read this question and I said, "Huh, well, using hand tools does develop character. You're right." Then I realized that's not probably what you're talking about. So do I think it makes a difference? I gotta say no. It does for my work. I sent you that image, I'm trying to think who sent me this. Of some French veneer makers who make all their veneer out of straw. Some French company that harvests straw and turns it into veneer and does this incredible work, but it's all veneer work. And so when you think about that, you think about the work of Emil Jacques Ruhlmann, contemporary people would be Silas Kopf, experts like that. The character is there in the method. Whereas the work that I'm influenced by Greene and Greene or Charles Rennie Macintosh or Nakashima, there is absolutely character that is introduced by a juxtaposition of tooling and shaping and sculpting.

GR: Yeah, I really like it. I mean, it appeals to me. I leave a lot of joints proud and I carve those or shape those. I like the texture. I know Brian Boggs on his ladder back chairs, everything is precise. His work is incredibly precise. And then the ends of the of the rear legs are chiseled. So that difference in texture. And I think the leg tops of the front legs are chiseled too. So yeah, I think it can be fun. But part of your job, I think as a designer and I said this over and over again in class is to get people to engage with your work. And that's one really great way of doing it is by providing some kind of textural signal or, you know, 'Come touch me.'

AP: Yeah, I mean, that's even visually representative in like Silas Kopf's work. Like you're looking at visual texture. It's not even necessarily something you would touch and say this is differentiating wood species, but your eye looks at that as shadows and dimension. I think that's the way I looked at the straw marquetry as well. So it could just be a very rectilinear shape that that straw marquetry is put on, but it still exudes a whole lot of character. And that's where it's like, I guess it just can be influenced from different methodologies.

GR: You know, I think the important thing for makers of furniture these days is how to stand out from the computer made stuff. I'm going to call them out, you computer guys. And you want to show the hand of the maker. Took this class years ago at Anderson Ranch Arts Center and I'd gotten a Sam Maloof scholarship and me, all guys, 12 guys, 11 other guys, all of us, except for one, we're custom furniture makers and we're all trying to figure out how we could break into what's called the Contract Furniture industry. So this guy named Hy Zelkowitz was giving this class on how that high end market works. So we're talking Steelcase and Knoll and big companies, IKEA. There you go. There's one everyone knows. How do you break in? And basically it was the same as how you break into building furniture. You make contacts, you market, you really show that you have lots of ideas.

GR: But he chided us as furniture makers by saying, 'You know, you're always showing off. You know, you're showing off your joinery or showing off. Look at me, look at me.' But I think we have to. I think we have to let the viewer know who engages with our work that something special is happening here. And it's not the run-of-the-mill kind of stuff. It's not from IKEA. No offense, IKEA, but it's not from that place. And it's built to last, and it's built to delight over time. I think that's important.

AP: Okay, so the next question is, what techniques take a person from an intermediate woodworker to an advanced woodworker?

GR: Boy, another fascinating question. But there's no, I don't think there's an easy answer here, you know, as if to say, okay, once you learn how to steam bend, then you're an advanced woodworker, or once you learn how to do marquetry or carve or whatever. I don't think that's the issue. I think it's experience. And experience takes patience, and patience takes so much work. You have to be really patient in order to learn patience. But it's true. It's this effort.

We are involved in a craft that is incredibly labor intensive. And here we choose to take on all the tasks too. Our friend who's sawing up his own logs to make lumber, to designing it, putting it together, and then finishing it. Taking this on as a craftsperson today means challenging yourself and then completely forgetting about Mastery as a goal. Just don't even think about it. Just go to work, do the work. And one day. Well, mastery is a long process.

One of my mastery students, Marty asked me, so how do you know when you get there? I said, well, you get to this top of the top of this hill and you look out and you see all these other hills. You also have to climb them too. I'm still learning stuff. I don't know that one ever masters this, but you sure can get good at it.

GR: And I know I was 15, 20 years in and I sat back one day and I went, I do know a lot of stuff. I've got some stuff in my bag of tricks for designs and things. And I have certain techniques that I use. That's where I thought, yeah, I didn't see this coming. And I think that's what it takes. You know that that's where you want to get, but it's that journey that you need to engage in. Just keep building. More

experience. That's the real key, I think.

AP: Time, time, time.

GR: Time and building stuff. The experience is just so important. And we were talking earlier, Ashley and I, before we started, about doing craft fairs. And there's a lot to learn about doing craft fairs. I mean, you just don't walk in and say, 'Here I am. Love me. You know, I'm going to sell all my furniture this weekend.' Oh God. The first time you go to a craft show, have you been, have you done a craft fair yet?

AP: I just did one. I did one small one. And it was a learning curve.

GR: You think you're going to sell all this stuff? I'll bring all this stuff and then I'll leave and it'll be great. I have to bring everything back with me.

AP: It's a knowledge investment, just the same. Yeah, you're certainly learning those steps and processes and start to get the details of it down with more time spent and just continuing to try.

GR: Yeah, it's humbling. It's really humbling. But you learn you watch who is doing it right because you walk into some craft fairs and you go, oh, that's a good booth, right? They're doing it right.

AP: Yes, that's what I noticed at the last craft fair I went to, just to walk around at, was that one person had the brilliant idea of making it look like a room space. So Graham with Minerva Enterprises, he made walls and he had his pieces set up and it just looked like this living room environment. And it was fantastic. I mean, he completely conveyed the feeling of his stuff. And I was like, ah, brilliant.

GR: Yeah, booth space. Well, it's a different aspect of the work. It's marketing, not building. And I got into woodworking, so I didn't have to have a real job. But it is, it's real work. Well, this has been great. Thank you, Ashley, for joining me today. I really appreciate it.

AP: Thank you for having me on, Gary.

GR: Oh, it's fun. It was fun. And we'll do this again about once a month. So please send in your questions to Highland Woodworking, https://www.Highland Woodworking.com. Check out their great site and/or to https://www.northwestwoodworking.com.

I can be reached at studio at Northwestwoodworking.com and send in your questions. Happy to bat them around. This is fun to do. So thanks again for listening. Adios.