

A Right Handy Tool

By Dennis Knight

You will find a monkey wrench in the Grainger catalog with a price tag of \$439.25. That's a little staggering, but it's not something for your average toolkit, unless you work on locomotives or large industrial machinery. It's too cumbersome to drop in the pocket of your dungarees and, if you did, at eleven pounds it would take your pants right down and ruin your suspenders.

The twenty-one inches of drop-forged aluminum bronze are engineered for maximum leverage at the end of a burly arm and powerful grip. It has smooth, 4 inch chops adjustable with a knurled screw to grasp a large, square nut. The finish, cold and gray, is nonmagnetic, non-sparking, and corrosion resistant. It meets the standards of the federal government, the military, OSHA and several other agencies with less familiar acronyms. I have described a king sized version, although there are monkey wrenches in the catalog where less bite and torque are specified.

A Baltimore mechanic named Charles Moncky is said to have invented the appliance in 1858. But similar tools were used on carriages in the century before that, and since the wrench mimics the open jaw of a monkey and not necessarily Charley, his claim on the name is uncertain. In a side note, a monkey wrench in Germany is colloquially called "Ein Engländer," or an Englishman.

It is common for the unsophisticated to label all kinds of adjustable spanners as monkey wrenches, but they aren't if they don't have smooth jaws. The tried and true, venerable monkey wrenches are still pulled out by mechanics, plumbers and farmers determined to break loose old, rusted, nonstandard square nuts and bolts.

What really drew me to describe this engaging apparatus is not its heft or utility, but the phrase, "throw a monkey wrench in the works." I have learned that, in the early days of the industrial revolution, workers could get a brief respite from work in a hot, noisy factory by tossing a monkey wrench in to halt the machinery. Our English expression has a big sister in Europe in the word sabotage, which is said to derive from workers throwing their wooden shoes, called sabots, into textile looms or the linkages of industrial machinery for a quick break from monotony or perhaps to make an anonymous statement against a despised foreman.

Of the two expressions, the word sabotage rolls off the tongue, wins the linguistic efficiency award, and universally describes acts of gritty resistance. Saboteurs may be environmental activists, union firebrands, civilian rebels or guerillas at war. Those are all dangerous and romantic occupations, to be sure, but I'll leave them for others to pursue.

For me, I'm still thinking about that four hundred and thirty nine dollar price tag, and whether I can get by with a lesser model. Somehow, throwing a monkey wrench in the works seems more personal than sabotage. It's just you and me, angling for a little time to run to Starbucks.