

The Tool Chest

by Liz Gibbons

As you descended the basement stairway in my childhood home your attention was drawn to a tool chest that stood against the wall. It was a big wooden chest elevated off the floor about eighteen inches by a blue-gray painted wooden frame that had been added years later. The outside of the chest was rough looking. However, when you raised the lid it was a work of art inside. It had been lovingly crafted by a relative back in the 1860's. Lying on top of the opened chest toward the back was a beautifully finished, somewhat narrow board the width of the chest inlaid with the date, May 3, 1863. Lifting this board revealed a compartment that held various hand saws. In front of this was a wider board. You could move it along a ledge toward the front of the chest or remove it entirely. Below it were three drawers stacked one on top of the other. They had wooden knobs so you could pull the lower drawers forward on narrow ledges to reach their contents. They held various chisels, ballpein hammers, claw hammers, pliers, wrenches, screw drivers – some with fat wooden handles – and other small tools. There was still some room in the bottom of the chest and a large open space in front of the drawers. Here were planes, a rabbit plane, draw knives, hand drills, and other larger tools used by craftsmen. Some were probably the original tools, and others had been added over the years.

This chest had been crafted by an uncle of my grandfather. This uncle had built the chest before he went off to fight in the Civil War in which he was killed. Although my grandfather was born in 1863, this chest was eventually passed down to him and then to my father.

My father had a small shop set up in our basement. He had a large workbench near the tool chest. There was a small room nearby that had cabinets on one side where my dad kept odds and ends such as jars of screws and nails, paints, and other shop supplies. He loved to tinker with various projects. When in high school he had made a beautiful cedar chest which I still have.

After my father died my brother took the tool chest to his home. A few years later when he and his wife were moving from Indiana to Wisconsin, my brother decided to sell it. There was an engineering professor at Purdue who collected old tool chests and tools, and he bought it. Accompanying the chest was a paper that gave its history. My brother was reluctant to part with this information without making a copy of it. The professor said he would copy it and send it to him. He never did, and my brother learned some months later that the professor had died. So we are missing that important information. I am particularly curious about what the date, May 3, 1863, references as our younger son was born exactly one hundred years later on May 3, 1963.