Cupboard Panel

Built into the wall just below the first landing on the stairs there's a cupboard where we store cleaning supplies and light bulbs. It reaches deep in under the next flight of stairs where they turn. In its deepest recesses, I'm quite certain there are 25 years' worth of light bulbs for appliances we no longer own and long since evaporated cans of liquid floor wax but I've yet to think of a compelling reason to reach back there past the cobwebs and old dust rags. It's an odd feature but the construction suggests that it's original. The house was built in either 1896 or 1905, depending on which title search you choose (we like 1896) and is what the real estate agents somewhat imaginatively call a Dutch colonial, surrounded by an eclectic mix of turn-of-the-century Victorians and assorted models of Cape Cod bungalows sold by Sears mostly after WWII. Odd that whoever designed and built the house thought to include a small storage nook in the stairway but somehow neglected to include enough closet space for a practicing naturist.

At some point, a previous owner or resident nailed a piece of cheap plywood paneling over the opening. The panel itself and the hinges that hold it in place serve as a sort of archeological artifact, a record of every paint color applied to the walls since it was first installed. Over the 24 or so years that we've owned the house, the panel has been slowly falling apart. Recently, the plywood finally split so completely that the door to which it was nailed no longer closes reliably and, if we do manage to slam it shut, everyone who walks past it risks a sudden assault as gravity overcomes friction. My wife ignored it for quite a while and I ignored it for quite a while longer. Finally, though, minor marital discord threatening, I had no choice but to tackle the repair.

It seemed simple enough—just buy, cut and replace a piece of plywood, then a couple of coats of paint. Rather than make a mess with paint spatters on the stairs, I elected to remove the door and its hinges and take them to my workshop in the basement. First mistake. The hinges were covered in half a dozen different shades of paint and clearly needed to be replaced. The old plywood panel was held on with nails so cheap that they pulled through the plywood and were left in the frame. Attempting to extract them only served to de-stabilize the frame which, it turned out, was held together by the same cheap nails hammered in at an angle on each corner—"toe-nailed" I think they call it. Attempting to extract those effectively demolished the frame. I was back to square one—build a frame, cover it with a plywood panel, attach new hinges, paint it and screw the whole thing back in place.

This would probably be a good time to point out that I have the general carpentry skills of your average guinea pig—and I have the advantage of opposable thumbs, a solid education and many hundreds of dollars worth of tools. Despite what would seem to be significant advantages, I have yet to create a 90° angle out of two pieces of wood. This disability does not result from a lack of manual dexterity. I can shape, fit and finish a rifle stock from a block of walnut. I make almost professional quality hunting knives from Damascus bar stock and ironwood. I can even tie a reasonable facsimile of a Pale Morning Dun. All of these, however, involve 3-dimensional visualization, slow free-hand work with fine tools and, most importantly, curves. It's the right

angles that confound me. Some years ago, my young son and I decided to build a playhouse at our farm in the hills of western Maryland. Knowing that T-111 plywood comes in 4 x 8-foot sheets, I decided to build the playhouse as a cube 8 feet on each side and 8 feet high. After many very careful measurements, I managed to build a structure that was 7 ½ feet on one side, 8 ½ feet on the other and 9 feet tall. I won't go into the details of the roof except to note that the local carpenter I finally paid to finish it threatened to use a nail gun on me if I ever again picked up a hammer or saw.

There must be something about creating 85° angles where a 90° angle is required that also manifests as an inability to attach a hinge so that the door swings freely in the right direction or to align a catch so that it actually holds a door closed rather than preventing it from opening or closing in the first place. Maybe it's a left brain-right brain thing. Maybe it's the same genotype that leads me to look always at the horizon rather than at what I'm about to trip over. If it is, indeed, genetic, it must be a dominant trait as our farm is well-adorned with raised garden beds and birdhouses in the shape of diamonds and rhomboids but not a square or rectangle on the place.

Birdhouses and garden beds work equally well irrespective of the angles at which their sides meet. Cupboard doors and panels do not. What was intended to be a 24" x 20" frame required nearly 12 feet of 2" x ½" pine boards and, in the end, was only a little more than ½" off in either dimension. Not bad by my standards. That small irregularity, of course, meant that, when fitted to the frame, the previously cut sheet of plywood hung over on two sides and left the framing boards exposed on the other. Easy enough. A sanding block evened out the overlapping sides and a decorative frame of tapered moulding glued to the front would cover the gap on the others. As it turns out, 45° angles are even more challenging than 90° angles and tapered moulding creates the opportunity for mistakes in at least 3 dimensions. Sixteen feet of pine moulding later, the door now wears the equivalent of a picture frame glued to its face with the inevitable and irregular gaps filled in with caulk. With a couple of coats of leftover paint, it looks almost as abused as the original, if a bit cruder.

Now the hinges. Should be simple—just mortise out the slots at the bottom of the panel and install new ones. It *was* simple. I mortised out the slots, filled them back in with putty and wood strips, mortised out the slots again but this time on the correct side of the panel, bought 6 sets of hinges that didn't fit and eventually made leather hinges out of the scraps left over from a knife sheath.

I'm pretty certain that no one who's thinking about buying the house will bother to open the cupboard on the stairs but, one day someone may have to consult with an archeologist about the use of leather hinges—a technology largely replaced by metal in the early Middle Ages—in a house built in 1896. Or 1905.