

# The Marking Gauge Collector

by Jim Fox

I am a marking gauge collector. I have hundreds of them. When friends see these tools they ask, “What do they do?” The answer seems rather funny and embarrassing. “They scratch a line parallel to the edge of a board.” That is it. That is what they do. They are a basic layout tool of the carpenter, machinist and other tradesman. Rodney Dangerfield often said, “I don’t get no respect!” That seems to be the case with the humble marking gauge...it gets no respect. However, the diversity and unique features of some of these small tools make them highly desirable. When I first began collecting old tools I collected anything and everything that appealed to me. I still purchase the odd tool from time to time. But ten years ago, I purchased my first mortise gauge and everything changed. The gauge was battered and had no maker mark but was constructed of beautiful rosewood and brass. I was hooked. Soon afterward, I purchased Milt Bacheller’s book, *American Marking Gauges Patented and Manufactured*, and I was on my way. I highly recommend the book to anyone contemplating gauge collecting. It is a well researched and written book with many colored and black and white photos.

## There are several reasons why the collecting of gauges can be appealing.

First, many of the marking gauges are constructed of beautiful tropical hardwoods; rosewood, mahogany, boxwood and ebony, couple that with brass trim and wear surfaces and the result can be striking. There is still much to be discovered about marking gauges and their makers. It can be interesting digging into historical records or discovering new information from the tools themselves. Occasionally, scarce gauge models and features are coming to light, as well as details about the makers themselves. This provides us with the incentive to explore this field of collecting. There have been many nondescript gauges come to the market that turn out to be rare tools, if one knows where to look for maker marks or specific features. Size is also a benefit to gauge collecting. A large collection can be housed in a relatively small space. I can fit quite a few in a common shoe box for storage. Another appeal is the gadget characteristic many gauges possess. Some gauges are quite complicated with many operating parts. An example of this is A. H. Blaisdall’s Carpenter’s Gauge, Patent No. 79,052, June 23, 1868 (Photo 1). This gauge has a series of linkages that allow two curved “feet” to adjust to the curves on the edge of the wood. This gauge comes with several optional features such as brass wear bars and even a pencil holder. It also comes in a miniature size with a large price tag.

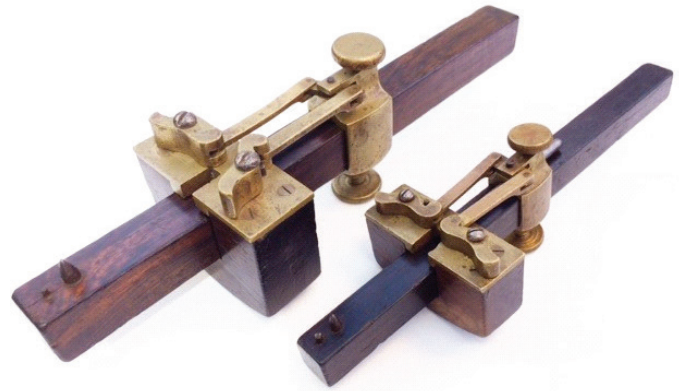


Photo 1

When speaking of marking gauges, I refer to marking devices used in all the trades. This includes large slitting gauges used to cut veneer as well as the small common marking gauge. Marking gauges are often collected in specific categories. The most common category seems to be the gauge maker in general. These makers often produced rules, bevels, levels, squares and braces in addition to marking gauges but they are known to us as gauge makers. A good example of the gauge maker is S. A. Jones of Hartford, CT., c. 1838 – 1865. Other quality gauge makers we recognize are M. M. Brainard, Green River, NY.; F. Curtis, Stockbridge, MA.; D. M. Lyon, Newark, NJ. and a host of others. (Photo 2, left to right) Again, refer to Milt Bacheller’s book for a listing of many of the gauge makers.

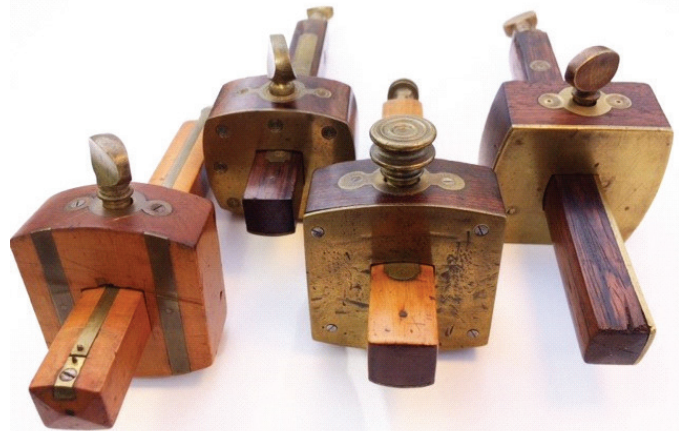


Photo 2

Another category often collected is the patented marking gauge. The entire first half of Milt Bacheller’s book is dedicated to patented gauges and their makers. This is a fun and interesting area on which to focus. Some collectors only collect patented gauges. This category is extremely varied and ranges from the all iron butt gauge to the wooden gauge with patented features. Probably the most famous of the patented gauges is the Brown and Berry, Carpenter’s

Gage, Patented July 7, 1868. Talk about the gadget factor the B & B has it all with five thumbscrews and five brass slides. It also has a stationary scratch point all on an eleven inch, hexagonal rosewood beam. Unfortunately, you will have to make a sizable cash withdrawal from your bank account in order to purchase one of these crazy gauges, that is, if you can find one. Reference Photo 3.

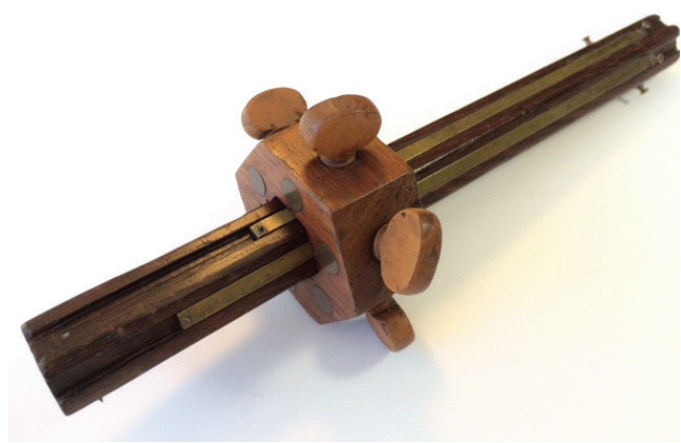


Photo 3

There are still some patented gauges out there yet to be “discovered.” Recently I purchased a J. S. Duffy Combined Cutting Tool And Gage, Patent No. 972,757, October 11, 1910 (Photo 4). Other than being listed with the U. S. Patent office, I could not find another reference to this gauge. Imagine the thrill of holding a little fellow like this in your hands as an extremely rare but affordable tool. I have never seen another.



Photo 4

One category of marking gauge collecting that can be a challenge is the gauge made by the plane maker. I personally believe that most plane makers made or at least

sold some marking gauges. I have found gauges made by J. Kellogg, H. Chapin, D. P. Sanborn, Griffin in Ravenna, OH., J. Colton and the partnership, Dunham & M'Master as well as others. As a whole, this is a skimpy area to collect. They are difficult to find. The plane maker E. W. Carpenter of Lancaster, PA. made a fairly large number of gauges and these can be readily found with a little effort. There are even gauges out there marked by Ohio Tool Co., Auburn Tool Co., and Sandusky Tool Co. Few of these have been found or even seen. One of the finest plane maker gauges I have found to date is a David Bensen gauge from Albany, NY. This mortise gauge is constructed with both steel and brass trim on a boxwood body resulting in a strikingly beautiful gauge (Photo 5). To date, I have not heard of another Bensen gauge. That is true of many of the plane makers.



Photo 5

There is a specialty gauge called the butt gauge. No, it has nothing to do with the size on one's derriere. Before the days of the pre-hung doors these little gems were used to lay out butt hinges on doors and door jambs. Door hanging is an exacting job and a poorly hung door will either stick or be sprung in the frame. The butt gauge makes this chore much easier for the carpenter. Because the market for quality butt gauges was so strong many manufacturers produced a variety of styles and complexities. Collecting butt gauges is a rich area for collecting and often crosses over with patented gauges since many of them have patented features. Quite a few of the butt gauges also have that gadget quality; levers, slides, cutters and knobs. A few examples of butt gauges are (From left to right ) the J. A. Marden, Improvement in Gauges, April 16, 1872, V. B. Staples, Door Butt Gage, Patent No. 592,026, October 19,



1897 and Dikeman's No.75 Handy Butt Gauge along with a host of others. The Duffy gauge mentioned earlier in this article is a butt gauge.



Photo 6

There are marking gauges used in the machinist trade. They are produced by familiar companies such as L. S. Starrett, Athol, MA. Other manufacturers include Billings & Spencer, Hartford, CT. the E. Walker Tool Co, Erie, PA. and Phelps Mfg. Co, Oakland, CA. Most of the marking gauges produced by these companies are made entirely of steel or other metals. They do not have the visual appeal of wood and brass but possess a clean, efficient, mechanical nature that has it's own attraction. Many of the gauges made by these and other manufacturers are scarce. You will look for quite a while to find an Edwin Walker Micrometer Marking Gauge, Patent No.359,336, March 15, 1887. See Photo 7.

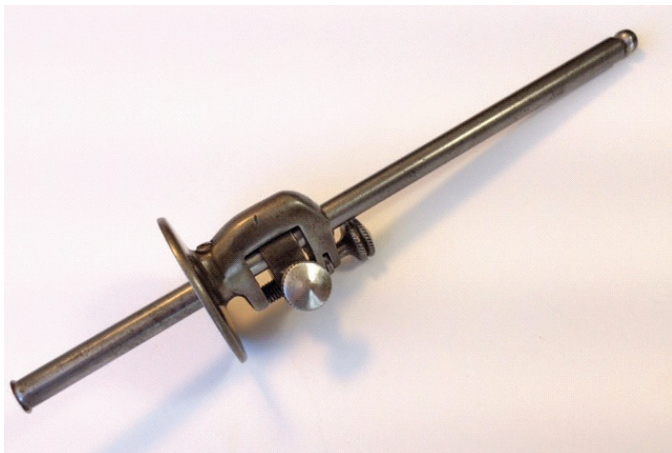


Photo 7

There are gauges made for specific uses in many fields. ( See from left to right in Photo 8.) An entire group of gauges was designed to lay out linoleum floor covering. One such gauge is the Hutchinson Brothers "Bullet" Lino-

leum Scriber. This dandy little fellow had multiple uses in flooring applications such as inlay work, circle scribing and contour cutting. It is marked "patent pending" but no patent has been found so far. A recent acquisition was a gauge made by the John Hasburg Company called the Hasburg's New Ceramic (sic) Gauge used to make tin foil stencils for use in the ceramic industry. The stencils are used to lay out patterns on glass and ceramics. A number of gauges have been designed, and some patented, to mark clapboard siding boards to length. Such is the Frank Tustison patented siding gauge, Patent No. 766,919, August 9, 1904. I will bet you have never heard of that one. Also Gabe Waters patented an obscure Combination Tool which, among other features, scribed clapboards. See Patent No. 933,278, September 7, 1909. In addition, but not shown are wallpaper slitters, hat brim trimmers, pistol shaped leather slitters, cloth markers and even a patented four fold boxwood rule equipped with a glass cutter wheel and glass snapper manufactured by H. Chapin's Son, Co. (See J. F. O'Neil's Combination Rule, Patent No. 630,100, August 1, 1899.) What else is out there waiting to be discovered?



Photo 8

Have you ever purchased a sash plane and found a small, flat steel accessory screwed to the side of the body? There are four sharp points on one end and two on the other. That little gadget is a marking gauge to help the sash maker lay out the putty rabbits on the one side of the sash bar and the top profile on the other. I have a George Burnham Jr., Amherst, Mass, split body sash plane with one of these beauties attached (See Photos 9 & 9a.). I also have a B. Sheneman, Phila sash plane with the same type marking

gauge on its side. You never know what will turn up in the course of your quest to collect tools but interesting objects are still coming out of hiding.



Photos 9 & 9a

Last we come to a favorite category of almost everyone, the Stanley Rule & Level Co. products. This is a rich area to explore since Stanley made such a vast array of tools. I now understand why so many collectors are drawn to Stanley tools. Stanley made a large number of models from the simple marking gauge to pattern maker's gauges to large slitters. What many do not realize is that in addition to the many individual gauge models produced by Stanley, there are also many varieties within each model. These varieties came about as the gauges evolved through the years. The earliest gauges made by Stanley were produced in 1859. These gauges are beautifully made but are almost unrecognizable as Stanley products. Few of the early gauges were signed and they preceded the identifiable and iconic mustache shaped wear plate that most of us recognize or the protective brass shoe that protects the beam of the gauge from the thumbscrew. It takes a bit of sleuthing to identify these early treasures but it opens up another world of gauges to the collector. Photo 10 shows the No. 65 marking gauge on the left, the No. 79 mortise gauge in the center and the No.



64 marking gauge on the right. In a future article I hope to address the identification of unsigned Stanley gauges.



Photo 10

Over the years I have come across gauges that were produced in England for the American market. A mortise gauge by David Flather of Sheffield was over stamped by Hornor & Son, 47 Market St, Philadelphia. Hornor was a hardware dealer c.1836. Corsan, Denton, Burdeken & Co. ( later just Corsan, Denton & Co. ) also of Sheffield, England, had hardware dealerships in both Boston and New York City where they sold their products. Several of their mortise gauges have turned up recently. Interestingly, this company sold knives to both the North and the South in the Civil War, P.A. Lanauze & Co. was a hardware company in New Orleans during the mid 19th century. His mortise gauges were undoubtedly produced in England judging by their style. In the opposite direction I have come across a Disston mortise gauge that is marked: Made in the USA and stamped Bennet B Burley, Glasgow (Scotland).

We are often confronted by makers, styles and types of gauges previously unknown to us making this field of collecting interesting and exciting. There seems to be no end to the variety of gauges available to the collector.

Many tool collectors have purchased a few marking gauges to add variety to their collections. Our tool collections are brightened by these little treasures. It is also fun to be able to "talk gauges" with other collectors. As this segment of collecting grows, more gauges will turn up and our knowledge of the venue will increase. I encourage your comments and discussions. Contact me if you have information to share.

*Email or mailing address change?*

Please send changes to Kerry McCalla at [kmccalla@bellsouth.net](mailto:kmccalla@bellsouth.net).