

Compact Workshop 7—A Traveling Shop in a 5th-Wheel Tow Vehicle/Lloyd Leech

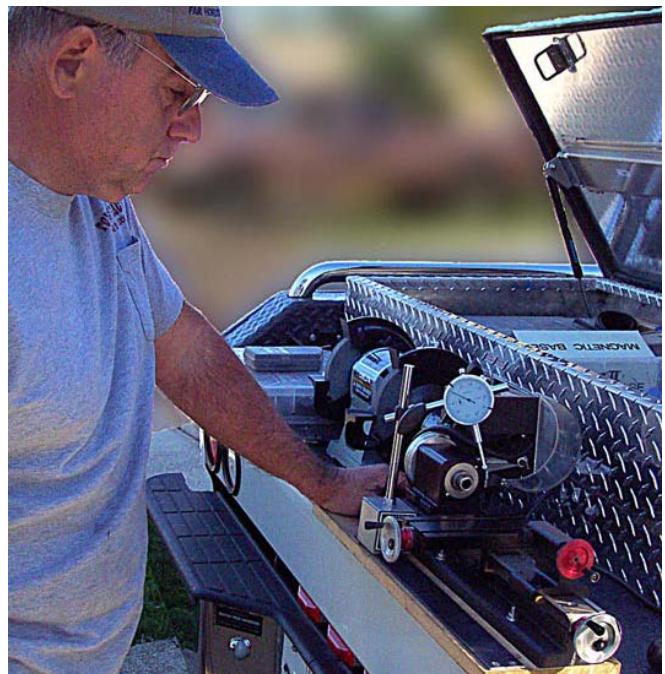


Lloyd Leech enjoys working with miniature machine tools while on the road.

When advised by the “boss” in 1996 that we were going to quit our investment jobs of 25 years and hit the road full-time, I was confronted with a huge challenge represented by hundreds of pounds of metal- and wood-working machinery and the hobbies attendant. With two years to prepare, I set out to reduce a shop that occupied a full garage bay to a shop that would travel in a fifth-wheel and/or truck and travel inconspicuously.



Lloyd's choice of vehicle included the proper tool boxes to include his hobby tools for a life on the road.



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Having no idea that such a mission was practicable or even reasonable, we began looking for tool solutions concurrent with evaluating vehicles and coaches for living on the road. Fortunately, I had been using Blue Ridge Machinery in West Virginia as a source for lathe tools and had a dog-eared copy of their catalog on a workbench in the bay. Routinely thumbing through the pages one day, I noticed the “tools, not toys” introductory admonition to the four pages of Sherline products that Blue Ridge distributed. Grabbing the phone, I called Blue Ridge to talk with Chuck Feeney, who manages sales for the company and had helped me with tools in the past [note: It probably was Rob Stonestreet, Paul’s son, who since has made the incomprehensible decision to become a damn lawyer]. Thrilled with the explanations and descriptions of the small tools, I ordered a 4500 long bed lathe and a 5500 mill, each with an assortment of chucks, collets and tools.

Our shop hobbies ranged from making half-scale Civil War cannon to building modern semi-auto handguns, from carving large wood sculptures to turning sophisticated patterns for use by a local foundry for molds. Some capabilities we were willing to lose as impractical or unworkable in a mobile environment, but the bulk of our capability to fabricate were important parts of our lives – hobbies that lent joie to our vivre.

Despite the great “marketing” answers from the Blue Ridge folks, I was very skeptical about these Sherline mini-tools that I’d ordered. The ability to continue making chips was certainly an exciting prospect, but ultimately only if something useful would result! Cutting modern gun steel, as an example, requires both muscle and accuracy from the tools employed, particularly stainless gun steel. After two hours of testing the new arrivals, I was satisfied that the solution exceeded all hopes, let alone expectations. Using discretion in depth of cuts and feeds, I found that the small DC motors did yeoman work on the toughest steels that I had in stock. We began 1997 with the hope that we could find coach and tow vehicle manufacturers that met our needs as well as the Sherline machinery.



Lloyd's big Ford F-550 and Hitchhiker 5th wheel get them wherever he and his wife want to go. Once there, he breaks out the tools for a session of machining...in this case on a handy picnic table.

Fortunately, Hitchhiker and Ford produce wonderful vehicles that provide great comfort and performance with proper customization. The boxes that we use on the F-550 tow body are custom made by Highway Products to our specs and provide great storage facilities for the Sherline tools as well as other electronic and hand tools.

*Regards,
Lloyd L. Leech, III*