

Expectant readers. I trust you won't dismay when I introduce this month's subject: shovels. Given the quirks and caprices of the cosmos, the Professor seems to be spending inordinately long hours clutching the shaft of those earthy, practical tools. Last week I even operated a mechanized model, "the Ditch Witch," an exercise I found comparable to dragging a rhinoceros in heat across the Serengeti Plain by its tail. Shovels have haunted my dreams and waking hours for several weeks. I've begun to philosophize and mentally ramble across shovel territory. I ask you, what would become of the works of man without the shovel? A sand shovel and bucket often number amongst our earliest childhood toys. When ashes return to ashes and dust to dust, a solemn shoveller consigns our remains to the earth.

The shovellers themselves are often contemplative souls, given to leaning on handles and reflecting about the universe and its operations. "Alas, poor Yorick," says Shakespeare's famous shovel wielder, the grave-digger in Hamlet. Alas, indeed. In a time gone by, outlaws were forced to dig their own grave sites, ample time to reflect on life and justice. Think of those diggers trenching the Maginot Line or digging the moats of Medieval Europe. What would history be without the shovel? I think it deserves the same status as the wheel or the inclined plane. Drive by any Oregon Department of Transportation highway project. What do you see? Armies of men leaning on shovel handles. Shovels move the mountains of men's lives.

Shovels and shovelling find a place in contemporary terminology and phrases: "He dug himself into a hole." "Stay in school. Do you want to grown up to be a ditch-digger?" "That cat really dug the scene." (This phrase has become passe now but was popular in recent memory.)

If you'll allow me, tolerant reader, I would like to do a short bit of free-ranging regards shovels, their qualities, and use--in short, my customary blather and drivel. Excluding power shovels, excavators, steam shovels, back-hoes and the like, the hand shovel and its kin slices, chops, and lifts virtually any mass imaginable. The common kitchen spatula, for example, is a form of shovel. Blubber spades used by early whalers for flensing strips of fat from a whale carcass were also a shovel type. The Old English word "scofl" and Frisian "skofel" were terms for early digging instruments. The Dutch used a "schoffel" or weeding hoe; the term "scuffle" derives from that word.

Clam shovels, flat shovels, spear points, trenching shovels, specialized telephone-pole digging shovels of an earlier time (these had very long handles--one shovel was for cutting the hole's diameter, the other ladle-shaped one removed the dirt), entrenching tools used by the military for constructing trenches and ramparts and filling endless sandbags, planting shovels, manure shovels, snow shovels, and endless more. The mind fairly reels at the scope of shovelness. Even the game shuffleboard originated in early Britain as "shovelboard."

My friend Larry Dean Moore launched into a complex dissertation on shovel technique and shovel qualities one morning at a favorite surf break.

"One of the finest shovels ever made is the True Temper '0' or '00' speed shovel. Professionals favor those," he told me. "My landscaping buddy had one with a stainless blade. That blade would make you sing while you dug a ditch or moved soil. You were that happy!"

I have never personally found elation or giddiness after a day moving earth, but I have certainly developed a stubborn, ox-like perseverance, a personality trait not without its merits given the rigors of modern living. Put simply, shovelling, like the Marines, builds character. For you young bucks out there who want to become characters, I recommend a few hours behind a shovel.

I've heard tell that Scotsmen walked around on all fours until they were introduced to the shovel. The truth is elusive.

A closed mouth gathers no feet --John Buckley

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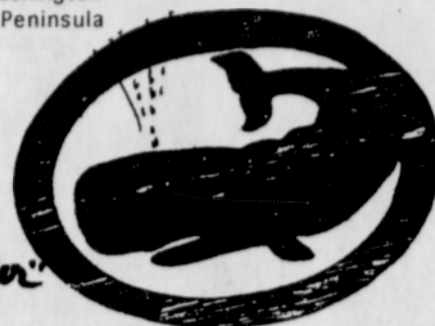
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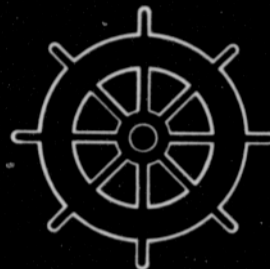


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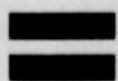
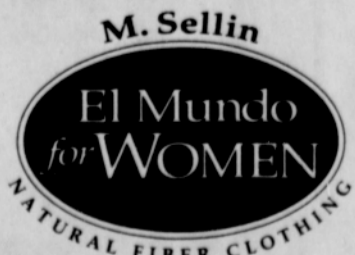
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