

Melvin

Photographs

by
Joe Lipka

Melvin is a life long bachelor of eighty plus years. He has lived on the same plot of land for most of his life raising sheep on the oats and hay grown on his land. Growing up and working a small farm means that one has a lifetime education in self-sufficiency. Part of that self-sufficiency is the ability to repair farm equipment. All small farmers have a part of the barn, or a small building set aside for repairs. Melvin is no exception. Melvin's shop is a curious amalgam of equipment and tools. By current standards the equipment is at best antiquated, and at worst, just shy of museum vintage. No matter what contemporary thought might be, these machines have served Melvin's need for the better part of a century.

The proper name for the heart of Melvin's work area is a "single-shaft machine shop." The name is like the men that designed and worked these machines; straightforward and descriptive. All the machines in the original shop are powered by a single motor, which drives a single shaft suspended from the rafters. Each machine in the shop is connected to this shaft by a leather belt that transfers the power from the single shaft to each machine. When these machines were manufactured, the world embraced technology as a wonderful thing. Society was proud of these monuments to the engineer's art.

As technology progressed, society became less enamored with these advancements. The extraordinary became commonplace. Machines were no longer works of art. They lost their specialness and were very often cast aside when the technology advanced. This did not happen in Melvin's shop. The old machines were not cast aside, but were kept, "just in case." One never throws out an old tool. There just might be a time when only the old tool can solve a particular problem, or be used in a new way. (Maybe there's a lesson here in how we treat our older workers?) The new, and the old were both used in the shop to help keep Melvin's (and his neighbor's) farm equipment running.

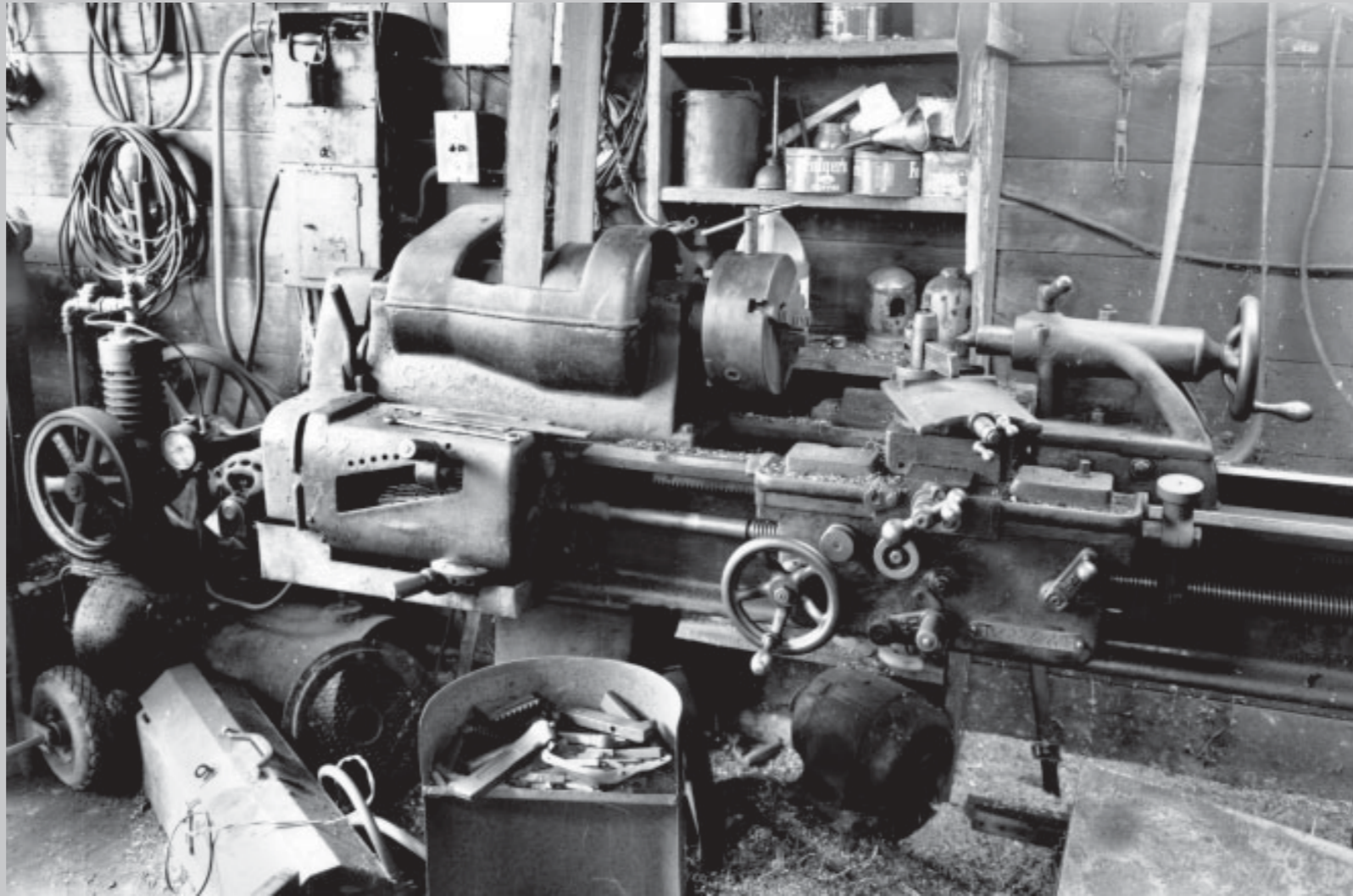
Melvin leaves tools, supplies, gloves and unfinished work right where he left them. Spend some time in Melvin's shop. There is no artifice here. Just Melvin's machinery, tools and coffee cans of hardware accumulated through a lifetime of repair. Plain and simple, this is the stuff of his life. A man's place arranged for the way he lives.

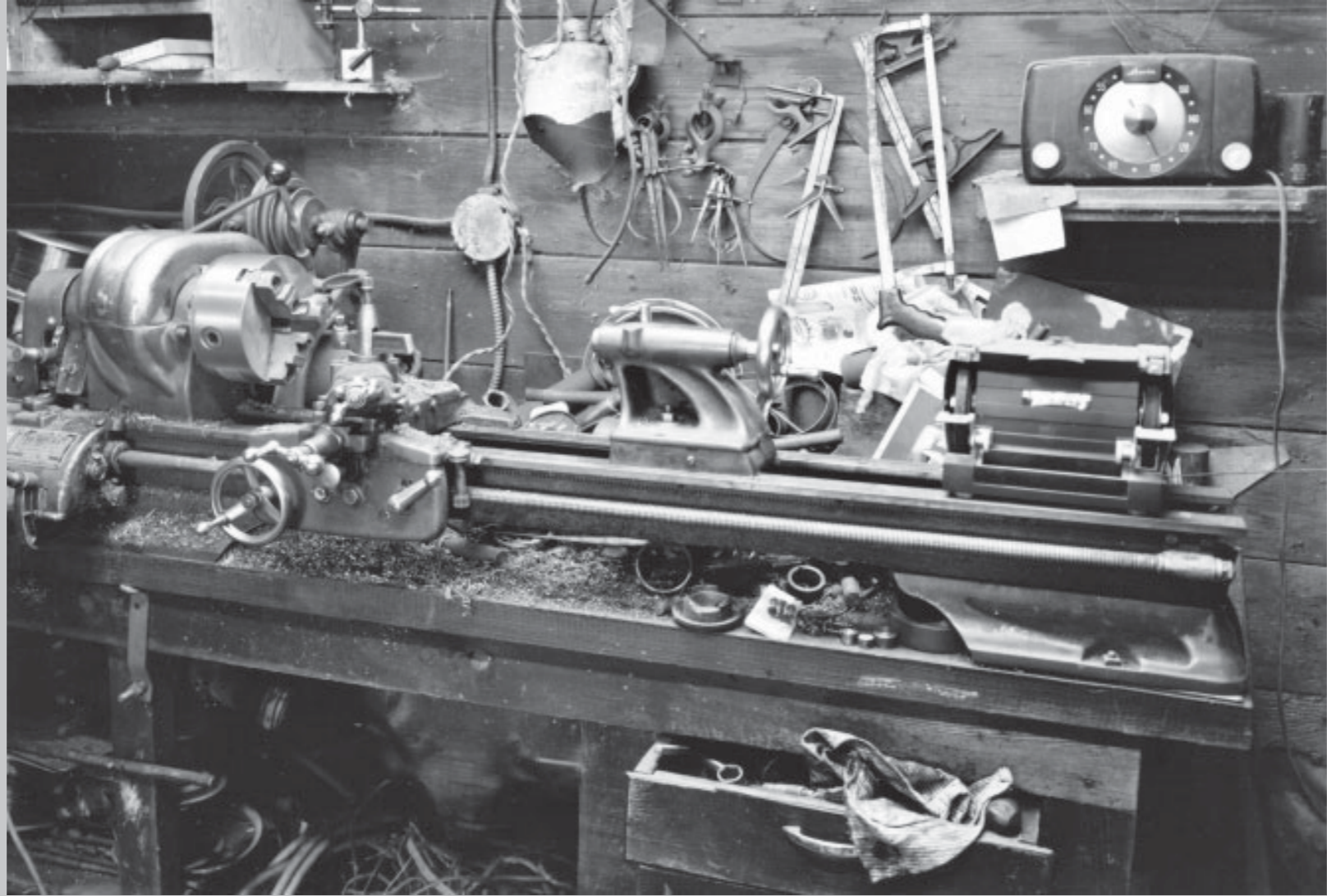
The Photographs

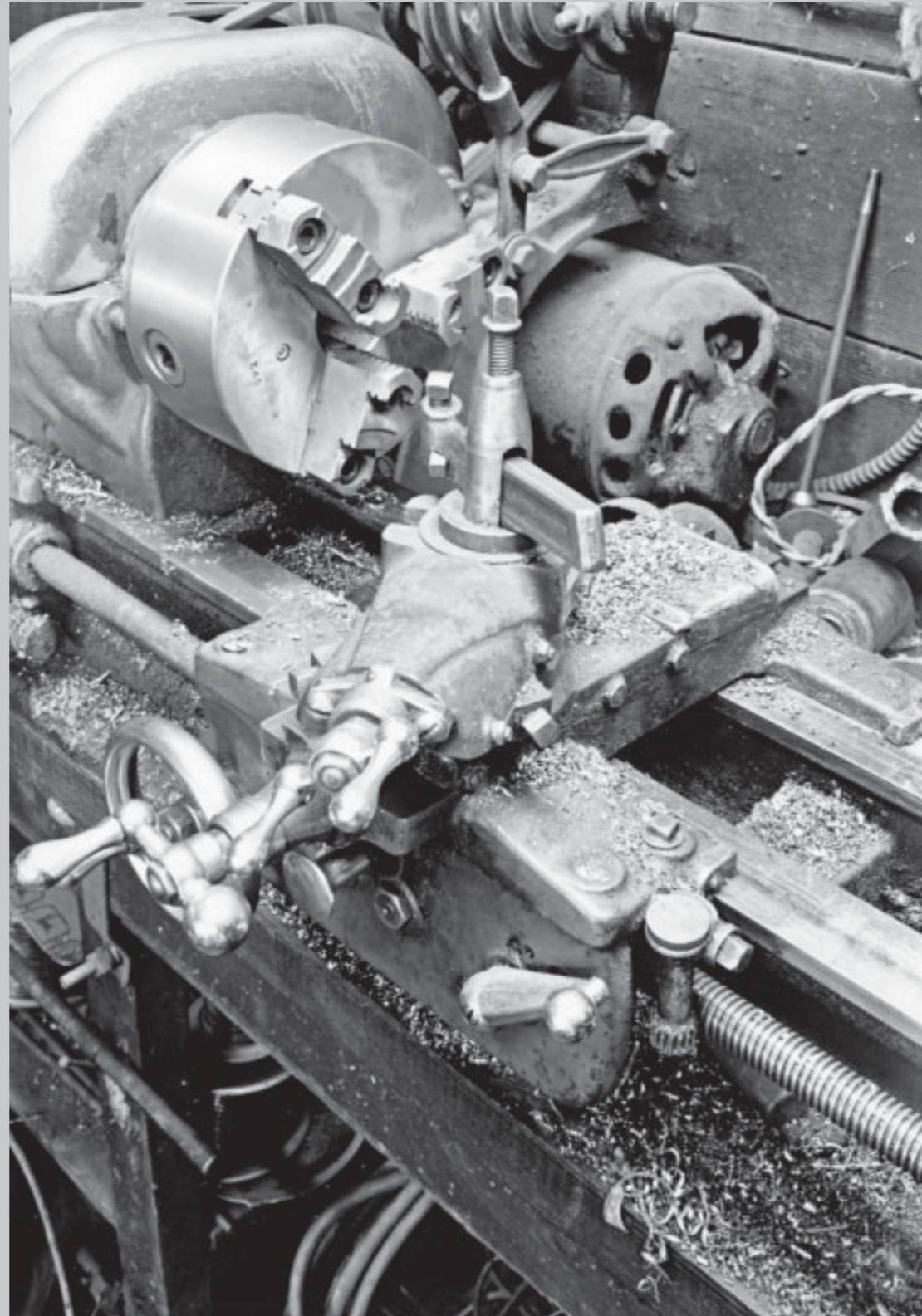
Melvin and Susie
Melvin's Old Lathe
The New Lathe
New Lathe Detail
Blowtorch and Coffee Cans
Welding Tools

Extra Image:
Shearing Sheep at Melvin's















Afterword

Susie drove Brooks and I over the hill to meet and photograph Melvin. For a white bread suburban boy (me), sheep shearing was a new experience. That afternoon we spent more time watching that little dog herd sheep than photographing. After the sheep were shorn, three men and the dog were relaxing. Sometimes people arrange themselves better than any photographer could. All I had to do was turn the camera and expose a sheet of film.

The following spring we came back to photograph Melvin's Shop.

For those interested in the technical details, "Shearing Sheep at Melvin's" was printed in gelatin silver from a 4x5 negative made in May 1992. The other prints were printed in Platinum/Palladium on Palladio paper from negatives made in March of 1993. The film was TMAX 400 developed in D-23 two-bath developer. The camera was a Wista 4x5 with a 5x7 expander back.