TOOL-NAMING BY IRON WORKERS

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First unionized in the latter half of the nineteenth century, the trade of iron worker developed at a time when the industrial revolution allowed, for the first time in history, the erection of steel structures on a widespread scale. The technology of steel construction was new; the men hired to do the actual work, the construction gangs, were for the large part uneducated immigrants willing to work a dangerous job for low pay. The combination of a new technology with a class of worker unfamiliar with architectural and engineering terminology precipitated a colorful jargon which exists, in one form or another, to this day. The vocabulary of this jargon is functional, descriptive, often amusing, and usually obscene.

One of the first elements I noticed while serving an apprenticeship in this trade was the specialized vocabulary used in tool names. Often the tools themselves are familiar to those outside of the trade, but are referred to among trade members by other names. The ways iron workers have renamed their tools are roughly dividable into two categories: tools named according to function, or the manner in which they work, and tools named for the worker's personal response to them and the jobs they are used for. As an example of the first, a device known technically as a chain hoist, a mechanism used for pulling or hoisting beams and other building materials into place, is known universally among iron workers as a **come-a-long**, its function of pulling things along evident in this name. A hammer is simply renamed, also according to function, a **beater**. The variations on this name are many, often evolving further as a worker seeks variety in expression--**beater** becomes **bammer** becomes **that bammin' thang** becomes **hitter** becomes **pounder**; anything that expresses the general idea of the function of a hammer is acceptable.

Yet this tool also has a name derived from the second category. A large, heavy sledge hammer, usually any sledge with a head that weighs more than ten pounds, is called a **monday**. The meaning does not become clear to the uninitiated worker until he actually has to use one of these monsters. Quite simply, after about ten minutes of this physically demanding labor, one feels tired, weak, unhappy about work--precisely the way many people feel about their jobs on a Monday morning.

Another tool name from this category is the **old man**. An **old man** is a brace which clamps to a column or beam and is used to support the weight of a large air-powered drill. Its name presumably

derives from the belief that young, strong iron workers don't need the aid of this device, while older, weaker workers, old men, do. In reality, many of these drills were so unwieldy (they are largely obsolete now, thank God) that it was next to impossible to use one without an **old man**; the appellation is appropriate to the tool because it reminds even the strongest worker of his human frailty.

Hell-dog is another interesting tool name. This tool is in actuality a pneumatic rivet gun. Fitted with a steel ram in place of a rivet-forming head on the end of the piston, it is used to drive out or back out old or defective rivets before replacing them with new ones. Prior to my introduction to the tool, I asked many of the old hands why it was called what it was, and how it got its name. No one seemed to know its origin; all they could say was that it was called a **hell-dog**, that was what it had been called ever since they could remember, and that was probably what it would always be called. It is a singularly unpleasant tool to operate. It is deafeningly noisy, and vibrates enough to rattle one's fillings loose, as it repeatedly hammers at rusty, recalcitrant rivets until it blasts them out the opposite side of a connection. After running one of these **hell-dogs** for a week, I personally could not conceive a better name for the device. My speculation as to the origin of the name is that the tool's major characteristic--its relentless pursuit of its object, the removal of a rivet, and its constant noise, was long ago associated in a worker's mind with the doggedness and barking of a hell-hound in pursuit of its quarry. Given the fact that the **hell-dog** was a major innovation over the human-powered method of rivet removal, the **back-out hammer** or **B and O**, this ability and the ease with which the tool performed its job tirelessly must have seemed almost mythical. Obviously, the name caught on. This is only one example of a term in the trade of iron work that has survived almost a century to become a fixed element in the tradition of this jargon.

Another interesting feature of this tradition is the extent to which the proper names for tools are preserved. The erection of a steel building is, even after a century of steel construction technology, still a fairly primitive business. A building can be put up with a minimum of tools; with the exception of the crane used to hoist the steel into place, many of these tools are but modest refinements on the principles of leverage, concepts that have been around for centuries. Consequently, this class of tools used primarily to pry, lever, push or pull is known more intimately by construction workers than by the general population of this high-tech era. Many of these tools are known among iron workers by the names they were patented under decades ago, while the general population actually calls them by a different term. Probably the most common of these is the tool known as the **crowbar**. A simple pry bar with an extreme bend at the end, this tool is hardly ever referred to by the iron worker in this manner, but usually as a **ripping bar** or, if the worker is being very specific, a **goose-necked ripping bar**. These old, oftentimes arcane titles are perpetuated by a strong apprenticeship program which emphasizes the apprentice's familiarity with the tools of his trade, and the fact that this basic class

of tools used to shift heavy objects is not subject to improvement, and subsequently, irreplaceable. They have been, and will be, around for a long time, unchanged. Hence, the stability of their names among trade members.

This is a peculiar dichotomy of the iron work trade. On the one hand, the nature of the trade and characteristics of the worker make for a jargon which is highly improvisational and rapid in evolution. Yet, on the other, there is an established tradition of professionalism and respect for the tools of the trade, almost a conservative strain which tempers the development of the jargon. The jargon is a mixture of modern, sometimes transient terms, and archaic expressions that may not have been popular since the turn of the century. This combination makes for a functional, yet colorful and descriptive form of the English language which is used daily on American construction sites.