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## EC77-2041 Restoring or Refinishing Old Trunks

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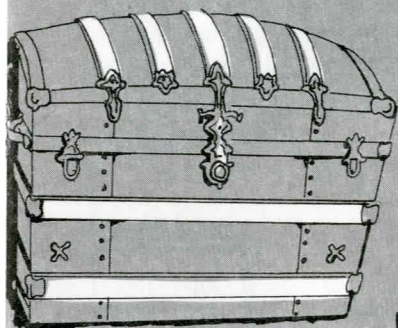
#EC 77-2041

# Restoring or Refinishing OLD TRUNKS

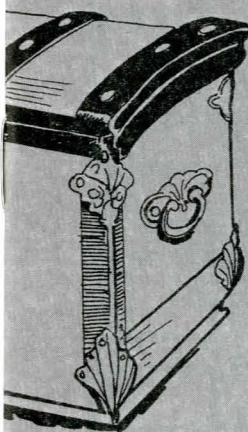
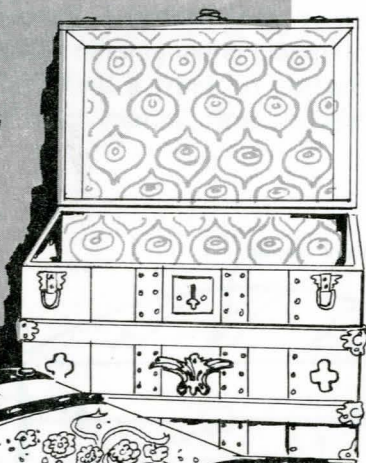


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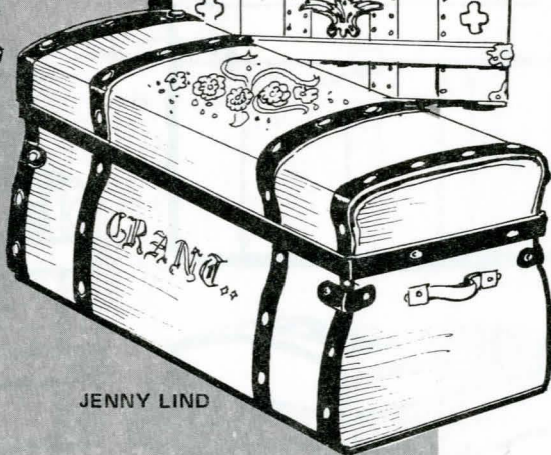
CANVAS BACK



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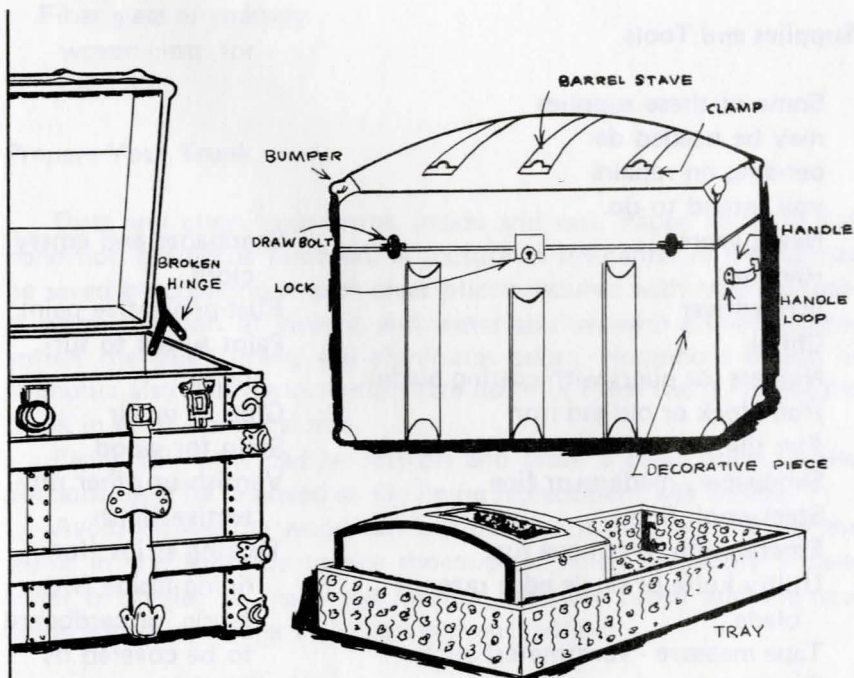
# Restoring or Refinishing Old Trunks

By Magdalene Pfister  
Extension Specialist (Home Furnishing)

Trunks are found in many sizes, styles and materials. Usually they are covered with canvas, paper, metal and occasionally leather. Sometimes the metal is embossed. The tops may be flat, domed or oval.

A restored or refinished trunk can serve as a treasure chest or other useful purposes. It could be used for storing woolens, clothes, toys, dishes, as an end table or as a hope chest. A family trunk is truly an heirloom.

Some of the problems with old trunks are loose and missing hinges, broken metal covering, a broken lock, missing barrel staves across the top and broken or missing metal clamps at the end of the staves. You probably won't find a trunk in perfect condition, but you should consider how much money, time and effort you want to put into repairs.



Before bringing an old trunk into the house, spray it well with an insecticide to make sure silverfish, clothes moths or other pests are not brought in. After thorough spraying, close the trunk tightly for 24 hours.

Decide where and how you will use it. What is the decor of the room in which it will be placed? The finish, color, decorating theme and lining will be influenced by these questions. Coordinate paint, wood colors and metal with your furnishings.

A goal in restoring or refinishing a trunk is to make enough repairs to make the trunk useful but not to make it look new. Try to stick to the original as much as possible, for example, do not substitute chains for missing handle parts.

It is usually hard to find a matching mate for hinges and other parts so a complete set has to be put on. Save the old parts for another project.

Junk shops, Goodwill, Salvation Army and antique shops may have some parts of trunks from which parts can be salvaged. Luggage shops may have replacements. A source for leather replacement is a shoe repair shop.

## Supplies and Tools

Some of these supplies  
may be needed de-  
pending on repairs  
you intend to do.

Newspapers  
Hammer  
Screwdriver  
Chisel  
Nippers (or pliers with cutting blade)  
Iron block or old sad iron  
Flat file  
Sandpaper, medium or fine  
Steel wool, fine  
Emery cloth to remove rust  
Utility knife or single edge razor  
blade  
Tape measure - yard(meter) stick  
Steel brush

Sandpaper and emery  
cloth  
Rust-preventive paint  
Paint suited to sur-  
faces  
Glue to repair  
Stain for wood  
Varnish or other pro-  
tective finish  
Tacking strips (for  
lining inside with  
fabric, or cardboard  
to be covered by  
fabric)



Power drill (with steel brush attachment to remove excessive rust)  
Riveting hammer  
Awl  
Tack puller  
Tin snips or cutters for tin repairs  
Valley roofing tin or number 5 shim  
stock aluminum metal tape, or stove-pipe tin to replace tin  
Wood molding — to add design  
Trunk tacks and nails  
Rivets  
Screws  
Flat screws or stove pipe bolts  
Padding, fabric  
Tacks or upholstery tacks  
Glue  
Fiber glass or coarsely woven cloth for canvas

Metallic wax to highlight embossed surface  
Sponge and cloth  
Rustroleum — naval jelly, kerosene (to remove rust)  
Neat's-foot oil - for softening and preserving leathers  
Saddle soap — for leathers, to clean and condition  
Shoe dressing  
Spackling paste to fill holes in wood  
Auto body red putty to repair metal; metal filler

## Prepare Your Trunk

Dust and clean your trunk inside and out. Paper lining in bad condition should be removed. A picture in the center of the lid may be saved by covering it with clear plastic secured with masking tape. A warm solution of vinegar and water applied with a sponge helps soften the glued lining and eliminates odors. Household bleach or ammonia also will remove odor. (Do **not** mix these two!) Placing the trunk in sunshine helps, too.

Paper still tight can be left on and given a clear finish. Loose portions must be removed so the lining replacement will adhere.

Avoid getting the wood too wet because it may warp. Place the trunk in the sunshine to dry thoroughly. When dry apply a clear sealer or shellac to make the interior moisture proof and the new lining adhere. Presealer also helps prevent mildew.

## REPAIRS

### Nail Removal

Clinched nails are used in trunks to hold handles, loops, clasp or bumpers. These were made by using tacks or nails longer than the thickness of the frame and by holding a heavy object like a sad iron to the inside of the trunk. When the nail was hammered through to the inside it curled back like a fish hook. These bradded or clinched nails require careful removal. The nail head must first be removed. Use a tack puller, chisel or file to raise the head so it may be cut off with a nippers or chisel or filed off. A power drill may be needed to drill them out.

### Stays

Most trunks have two braces to keep the lid open and prevent it from falling backward and damaging the trunk. These should be repaired or replaced first to prevent any damage and for safety's sake.

To replace the stay, use a rivet to attach the stay first to the trunk lid. The head of the rivet should be in the outside of the trunk then the washer on the end of the rivet and then the stay. The washer keeps the brace from cutting into the wood and makes the lid operate easier.

Next, open the lid to a 45-degree angle from the frame and move the lid back about two inches more. Then attach the stay to the trunk body.

### Handles

The leather generally dry rots and cracks after years of storage. Weak handles will break easily.

The most common handle is the "loop with a peg." To replace the handle the loop must be removed and if possible salvaged. Some top trunks and trunks made from 1850 and after have this loop with a peg. Another type is the butterfly loop which holds the handle with ends exposed and bridges the handle.

To replace the handle put the new handle against the trunk body; replace the "trunk loop peg" first. This is the center nail. The proper

replacement handle has a "slot" cut in the handle of each end to receive the "peg."

Rivets or flat-headed bolts may be used to replace the loop.

Leather handles in good condition may be cleaned with saddle soap or other cleaners. Neat's-foot oil will condition and darken leather. New leather replacements should always be mellowed by applying neat's-foot oil or antique glazing.

## **Straps**

Leather straps going around the trunk and buckling in front may be removed, conditioned or replaced. Leather may be painted. Be sure to use a latex primer followed by a latex-type paint.

**Lifts** above the lock may be replaced with leather or with a window sash lift.

## **Hinges**

Hinges are located in the back of the trunk. If replacement is necessary, remove them with a cold chisel held against the rivet head base and hammer away from the center of the hinge in order to shear off the head. If a nut and bolt were used, unscrew, chisel or cut off.

Align the hinge with the lid and body. Make sure the hinges on the lid will meet at the right place in the body.

## **Locks**

Luggage shops may repair or replace locks and hinges. Locks missing or unusable should be replaced on most trunks. However, those made before 1800 had hand wrought locks and these should remain to enhance the value of the trunk whether or not they work.

There are many kinds of locks but most are set in a hole to hold the works compartment and to allow the lock to lay flat against the body. The removal of the lock is done the same way as the handle loop. Take care because the wood is brittle.

Choose a lock about the same size as the original. The hole in the trunk may have to be enlarged and new holes drilled. Rivets will cause less damage to the frame than nails will. If a hole is left, plug it with a rivet.



## **Draw Bolts and Catches**

The two metal clasps equidistant from the lock help to close the lid tightly. Nails or rivets holding these are usually countersunk with the head below the metal catch. Ease a screwdriver under the catch and tap gently around the catch until it is raised and you can pull out the nails with a pliers or cut them off with a nippers.

To replace, close the trunk. Line the top and bottom on the trunk front so the top and bottom of the draw bolt correspond to the opening of the trunk.

## **Trunk Bottom**

Most trunks have slats on the bottom with casters inserted. If these slats or runners are missing, replace them. Lumberyards can cut these for you. Hardware stores carry ball bearing casters which are easy to install. These will make for easy moving and will protect your carpet. While refinishing and lining the trunk, cover the casters with masking tape so the trunk will stand still.

## **Corner and Slat Braces**

If replacement is necessary, the top and front should have the originals. Place the back ones to the front and replace the back with new.

# **RESTORE TRUNK EXTERIOR**

## **Outer Coverage**

If your trunk is in good condition or of historic significance, cleaning and restoration is all that is needed. Wood, metal and canvas may be cleaned by using equal parts vinegar, turpentine or mineral spirits and boiled linseed oil. Apply this mixture to a small portion and rub with fine steel wool. Wipe and polish with soft dry cloths.

The leather trunk was a favorite during gold rush days of the late 1840s. In the 1850s the Jenny Lind trunk was quite popular. If you are fortunate to have one of these kinds, you may wish to keep the leather cover in its natural state. Use saddle soap to clean it and when dry give it several coats of leather dressing, such as neat's-foot oil.



If the leather is torn and brittle use warm water and oil to soften it before gluing it down.

Canvas or leather coverings on antique trunks may be in such poor condition that they must be stripped. A sharp utility knife or razor can be used to cut through the covering along the edges of slats before the canvas is dampened. Dampen with warm vinegar and water solution to soak off the canvas. Often it can be peeled off with a spatula or scraper. Wipe off old glue and paste. Some antique authorities feel that stripping the canvas will not lower the value.

Canvas usually was given a coat of varnish. If this finish is flaking give the surface a good sanding before painting.

Embossed patterned wallpaper or lace may be glued to the surface and finished to resemble the embossed metal.

### **Metal Parts**

Clean and prepare metal before you remove the outer coverings and old finish from wood, because rust remover may stain unprotected wood.

Damaged areas may be removed and replaced with stovepipe or Valley tint available at hardware stores. Sand new tin with emery cloth. Loose tin edges should be tacked down. Metal holes can be filled with "red putty" from an auto body shop. If unavailable, liquid aluminum or liquid steel may be used. Any of these products can be sanded smooth.

Apply rust remover to badly rusted areas. Steel wool, a steel brush, toothbrush or emery cloth helps.

### **Painted and Wood Parts**

Use a commercial paint and varnish remover to strip the old finish. Follow directions carefully. Work outdoors or in a well ventilated place.

Missing wood may be filled with wood putty, spackling, plastic wood or sawdust and glue. If you are going to stain the wood make certain the product you use can be stained. Sand the surface when it is dry.

## EXTERIOR FINISHES AND DECORATION

Before any type of finish is applied, the outside should be clean and dry. The surface should be smooth but don't sand out all cracks and holes because they add character.

Some finishes are paint, antiquing, fabric or vinyl-covered paper, metal tooling, decoupage, or combinations of these. Folk designs such as the Norwegian rose maling, or Pennsylvania Dutch or other applied design may be appropriate. Wood moldings may be glued on for structural interest.

Finish wood staves and slats first. These may be naturally finished, stained or painted. A combination sealer and stain or an oil stain works well. If the base wood under the canvas is to be finished in a wood tone, stain it so there is contrast with the staves and slats. Be sure the colors go together.

To increase or decrease the contrast between colors, lighten one by rubbing it off quickly or thinning the stain. To darken the wood, apply additional coats. Follow with a clear protective coat before the metal and other parts are finished.

### Painted Finish

Use a rust inhibitive paint or metal primer on the metal parts. Use an undercoat on other parts to prime and seal and to provide a good surface for the top coat. Sand and use a tack cloth before applying the next coat. A tack cloth may be made by dampening a lint-free cloth with turpentine or mineral spirits. Add about two to three tablespoons of varnish and wring out. The cloth is now ready to pick up sanding dust without scattering it. Be sure to paint the lid brace stay areas and also the lip and rim area of the lid. Use finishes compatible with each other.

### Antiquing

A glazing liquid is applied to the painted or enameled surface (flat paint doesn't work well) and wiped off to give an aged mellow look. Soft lint-free cloths or a dry brush works well. Start on the back side. Leave more glaze in cracks and indentations. Excess glaze may be removed with paint thinner if necessary. Special effects may

be made by spattering. Fly specks may be added with India ink or glaze using a tooth brush and screen.

### **Added Decorations**

Folk designs, tole painting, decals or pictures may be added to the metal or wood surface before giving one or two protective clear finish coats.

### **Fabric Coverings**

Upholstery fabric may be used to replace the canvas. Nylon or olefin fabrics can stand rough usage. Apply with an adhesive that will dry clear. Removing staves and slats is difficult. Try pushing fabric sections under the slats and staves with a knife blade rather than removing wooden parts. Spray fabric with a commercial spray to resist soil. Vinyl may be applied in the same way. Fabric may be applied in patchwork fashion, overlapping as you glue.

### **Paper Coverings**

Pictures, wallpaper, newspapers, gift wrap or paper may be used and applied like decoupage. Glue paper to the surface. Pictures may be distressed, torn, dipped in tea or have edges burnt to make them look older. Pictures and newsprint with printing behind them need to be sealed before gluing. White glue thinned 1/4 water to 3/4 glue applied to the back of the picture will seal it. After gluing the picture in place, apply the finish coats.

### **Highlight Metals**

Waxes are available in various colors of metal such as gold, brass, copper, silver and pewter. Jewel tones also are available. Rub your finger in the wax and then apply to hinges, locks or other metal portions. Antique Gold is a good choice. A jewel color such as jade often is effective when rubbed on the raised part of embossed metal.

Embossed trunks originally came in all sorts of color combinations: blue over silver or black, red over silver or grey, yellow over red. Apply the rub-on metallic wax after the protective finish.



## Apply Finish Coat

Finish the trunk with clear penetrating sealer, polyurethane or varnish to protect it. Flat or semi-gloss is generally more attractive than a shiny finish.

## LINE THE TRUNK

It takes patience and time to line a trunk. Choose a lining appropriate to the use and style of your trunk. Provincial prints, gingham, chintz, velveteen, corduroy, felt and quilted fabrics make good linings. Wallpaper, gift paper, vinyl, cedar and cork also may be used.

Papers may crack and split if not applied to a clean and sealed surface. Self-adhesive vinyls (contacts) will not stick permanently unless the trunk interior is free from all dust and oil.

If the trunk will be given hard use as a toy box or used for fire-wood storage, use paint or upholstery vinyl. These can be cleaned easily.

Determine the amount of lining by measuring the sides, bottom and top of the trunk and the tray (remember the outside of the tray, too!). Allow 1/2" to 3/4" for turning under. Make templates (patterns) of these sections and lay out on the lining width for accurate yardage. Keep in mind that matching a design will require extra fabric.

Besides lining you will need:

- . Cardboard from suit boxes if fabric is used for lining.
- . Padding — Upholstery cotton is good because it can be pulled apart to 1/4" to 1/2" thickness.
- . Braid, gimp, lace, fringe, rickrack or wood strips to cover staples or tacks.
- . Staples, white household glue that dries clear

Lining may be glued directly to trunk interior. For a good fit, put the lining in by sections, using fabric over cardboard with padding in between.

Cut cardboard pieces to fit each section of the trunk and tray. Trim each piece 1/4" smaller to allow for the padding. Cut the

padding the same size as the trimmed cardboard. Lay the cardboard on the fabric and turn ends over and tape to check for size. If it fits, glue edges over the cardboard template.

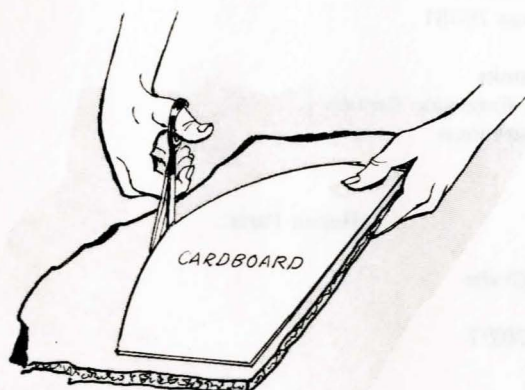
Glue sides, then front and back with the bottom last. Put glue on both trunk and cardboard. Staples may be used to tack around the rim and then be covered with gimp or other trim.

If your trunk has a tray, cover the runner but do not use padding. If you do not have a tray, the runners should be removed.

When making a cardboard section for the upper right side, be sure to cut out a curve to allow for the support arm both on top and bottom.

Tacks or staples can be used on the rim and trimmed by gluing braid over them. Line flat trunk lids in sections similar to the sides and bottom.

Dome-topped trunks are more difficult. The cardboard needs to be bent to fit the curve then covered with fabric and padding and glued in place.



Another method is to use foam or batting. Cover with fabric. Use decorative upholstery tacks to create a tufted effect and to keep the padding in place.

A picture or original trunk paper or shipping label may be the focal point of the lid. Trim with braid or cording.

## THE TRAY

Finish the tray last. If you padded the trunk you may need to sand the tray so it will fit. The tray may be cut down in size but this may be difficult. Paint or cover the outside of the tray first, then the inside may be finished the same as the trunk inside.

A tray may be made from cedar. In this case, the wood would not be given a finish coat because it would destroy the aromatic fragrance.

Enjoy your trunk!

### References

#### **How to Repair, Decorate and Restore Antique Trunks — \$2.00**

Martin and Maryann Labuda  
United Forms Printing Co.  
Cleveland, Ohio 44113

#### **Heirloom Treasures from Antique Trunks — \$2.00**

Dorothy Mae Groves  
Spearmen, Texas 79081

#### **Treasure Trove Trunks**

Ethel Bennett, Extension Service  
University of Arkansas

### Repair Parts:

#### **Corner Cupboard Crafts**

Box 368  
Lilburn, Georgia 30217

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