Pickup-Truck Tool Storage

Long sliding drawers let a builder get to his tools, even when they're under a stack of plywood

by Ray Lincoln

I'm a builder who works on a variety of jobs at different locations during a typical week. As a consequence, my pickup truck is a rolling hardware store, and I often need to haul around a stack of building materials to boot. Anyone who's had to carry both tools and materials in the same pickup knows what kind of problems can result—the tools inevitably end up under a pile of lumber or drywall, inaccessible when they are needed.

Because I carry so many tools, I want them to be safely locked up inside a shell that covers the bed of the truck. The shell eliminates the easy addition of a lumber rack, so I needed some other way to carry tools and materials that allowed ready access to both.

My solution is a simple one. I keep my tools in a pair of 8-ft. long drawers made of 1x14 knotty pine boards and plywood. The drawers are subdivided into compartments for various kinds of tools and supplies. Over the years I have noted which tools I use with the greatest frequency, and I keep these—my carpentry tools and tool belt, extension cords and general-purpose hand tools—in the compartments closest to the tailgate. In the middle bays I keep three toolboxes devoted to door-jig equipment, socket sets and wrenches and miscellaneous hardware. In the back bay of one drawer I keep my power tools, and in the other I stash painting equipment, shim stock, nails and other fasteners. To speed up loading and unloading, I keep related tools in lift-out trays or toolboxes that nest into the compartments.

The drawers fit into a steel and plywood carcase that is covered with four plywood lids. If I

Lincoln's pickup-truck storage system consists of two 8-ft. drawers that ride in a steel and plywood carcase. Here the drawers are fully extended, with their inboard ends bearing on the second steel crossbar. The drawers are divided into compartments for related tools, hardware and supplies. Four plywood lids atop the unit make a flat surface for carrying cargo. The carcase stays put between the wheel wells without mechanical connections.

don't have a load of cargo resting on the plywood, I can get at the drawer compartments through the doors in the side of the shell. Notches cut into the plywood sides of the carcase allow me to sneak a hand under the plywood lids so that I can lift them away to gain access to the tools.

If, on the other hand, I've got a load of materials resting on the cargo platform, I can pull the drawers out so that about 6 ft. of their substantial length is readily accessible (photo facing page). When the drawers are extended this far, their inboard ends bear on one of the steel crossbars, which resist the considerable upward thrust of the fully loaded drawers.

A steel framework—A local welding shop fabricated the steel skeleton of my storage system. As shown in the drawing below, the outside dimensions of the frame are 49 in. by 97 in., which gives me a little wiggle room on the top of the platform for loading 4x8 sheets of plywood or other material.

The top and bottom frames and the corner posts are made of ¾-in. angle iron, while the uprights on the side and the three-sided border around the top frame are made of flat iron. To beef up the frame at the tailgate end, I had the welder add a piece of ¾-in. by 3-in. rectangular steel tube as a header. On the inboard side of the header, a piece of angle iron picks up the edge of the plywood lid. It takes four lids of equal dimension to cover the carcase. Their edges bear on angle-iron flanges.

I paid about $300 to have the steelwork portion of this storage system built. That price included grinding down the rough spots and a coat of primer. For a finish, I bought some cans of black lacquer spray paint and applied a few coats myself.

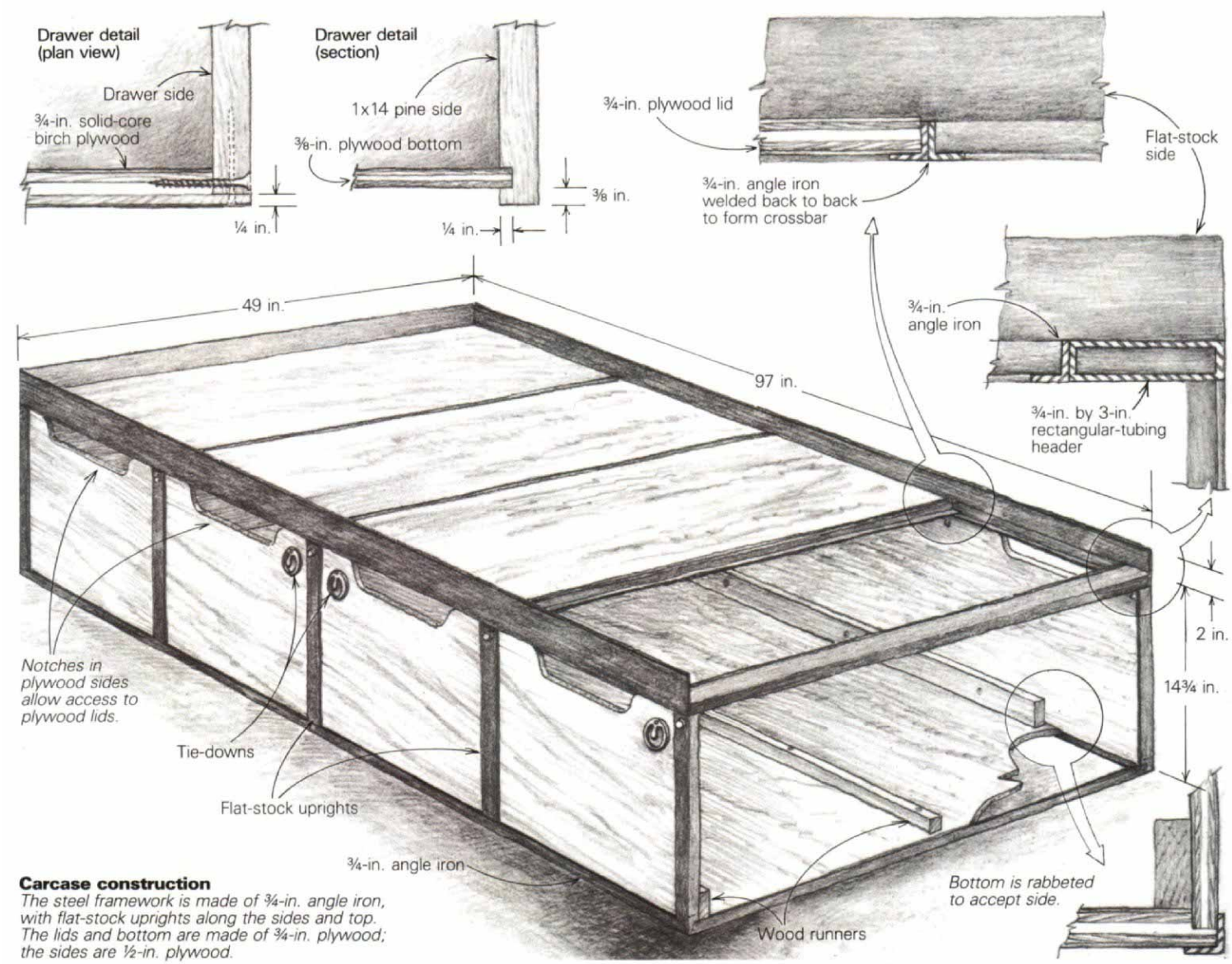
Since the steel parts are ⅛ in. thick, I used ¾-in. solid-core birch plywood for the lids and the bottom of the carcase. That way the wood ends up a little above the edges of the angle iron. The sides are ½-in. thick plywood, held in place by ¼-in. machine bolts through the flat iron uprights. I used self-locking nuts for the sides because I was concerned about road vibration eventually working the nuts loose. I've driven a lot of miles since I installed the storage unit, and to date the nuts have hung on tight.

Because I sometimes rest lumber on top of the platform that is longer than the bed of the truck, I installed three tie-downs on each side of the carcase. They are secured by machine-thread screws driven into T-nuts embedded in the plywood sides.

The carcase fits just inside the wheel wells, and gravity and friction have proved to be strong enough forces to keep it in place. I didn't use any mechanical fasteners between the plywood bottom and the frame either. It just rests there, held in place by the plywood sides and the angle-iron flanges. Three runners divide the bottom into two bays for the drawers. The space between the runners is about ¼ in. larger than the width of the drawers to keep things from binding up. I think the only time the runners are really necessary is when I'm working in the hills. Then they help to keep the drawers from shifting around in their slots.

I have been using this storage system for a couple of years now, and I've noticed that it has a hidden benefit. Not only do I keep my trips to the hardware store to a minimum, but I often have an obscure tool or part that one of my subs needs. And that can keep a job from stopping dead in its tracks. □

Ray Lincoln is a licensed general contractor based in Castro Valley, Calif.



Carcase construction
The steel framework is made of ¾-in. angle iron, with flat-stock uprights along the sides and top. The lids and bottom are made of ¾-in. plywood; the sides are ½-in. plywood.

Drawing: Christopher Clapp