Trestle Table

Lord Ian of Senlac

Trestle tables appear in illustrations through out the Middle Ages. When rooms were multi-purpose a table easily put away was a necessity. In the 21st century at events and individual camps we have the same need for easy knock down, storage and transport. History does repeat - or at least human needs do. Unfortunately, as with many things the illustrations are subject to interpretation. Though Vikings are assumed to have had trestle tables, none have been found. This is my take on the issue.

I chose 3 legs on each end despite having read arguments in favor of a hidden 4th leg. Three legs are as strong and more importantly don't look like a modern table. Bolstering my decision is the survival of 3-legged Viking Age stools showing that the arrangement was used at least in some applications. On uneven ground 3 legs are easier to get stable than 4. Thus I chose to make a trestle table with 3 legs at each end. In this article, I will show you how I made my table and give ideas on modifications.

Everything is based on readily available standard lumber sizes. I used 1 x 12, 2x6 and 2x2 lumber. My top is made of 3 pieces of 1 x 12 cut 72 inches long giving an assembled size of 34 x 70 inches. Big enough to seat 6 adults and still fit in my truck. My legs are 2 x2 s but closet pole sized dowels can be substituted. To begin cut three 1x12s to 72 inches long and set aside. Cut 2 pieces of 2x6 at 30 inches long. These will hold the top together and provide the leg sockets. I put a leg about 4 inches in from each end of the 2 x 6 and centered the middle leg. The outer legs will angle towards the end of the table while the center leg goes towards the center of the table. On my first set of legs I tried to set up a fixture to get just the angle I wanted and to get the legs to match. Didn't work. I did not like the result so next I braced the drill against my chest and free handed the angles. The legs looked much better -- closer to what I wanted. However you do it, drill the holes about ¼ inch smaller than your legs. Now cut 6 legs at 32 inches. This is longer than you will need at the end, but trust me for now. If you are going to go the simplest way and use closet poles then the next step is to cut them down on the ends to fit the holes. Easiest is to make the end of the pole straight sided but smaller than originally. Sand until it fits in the leg socket. Repeat 6 times. Alternately taper the socket by wrapping sand paper around a tapered piece of pole and sand the hole to shape. Taper the leg to match. I used square stock and rounded it per the drawings. I felt it was easier to make square stock look less like modern lumber than it was for a closet pole. Just a matter of taste. However you make the legs, the difference in original leg size and socket size allows for adjustment if the drill wobbles.

Now screw (or use clenched nails) the 2x6s to the top about 6 inches from the ends. Remember which way the legs angle, 2 to the end and 1 to the center. Put in the legs and set up the table. It will be probably be higher than needed and the legs won't all touch the ground. The fix is simple: Put paper under the legs until the table sits level. Measure and decide how much to lower it. My table is comfortable at 30 inches but some modern tables are 28 to 29 inches from top to ground. Measure a table you like and match it's height.

Marking how much to remove then can be accomplished with a deck of cards. Add or remove cards until you reach the measurement you want to remove. Lay the cards on the floor next to each leg and mark. Cut away the excess. I usually do it by cutting close, then sanding to the mark.

Your table is ready to finish any way you want, but the finish should be natural stain color or flat paint. Enjoy it.

Modifications to this table are limited by your imagination. More interesting is a single board table a friend of mine built. He used tapered branches and extended them through his top board. My next table will use that idea but with my 2x6s. The legs then will hold the top from sliding in any direction even though I have 3 boards versus his one. Better yet it will knock down completely and need no tools. I will have to deal with the legs sticking up through the top but that should add more period flavor.