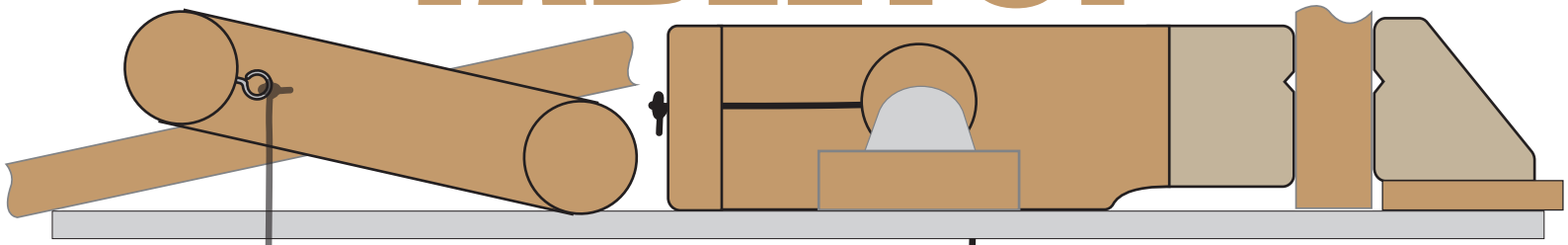


TABLETOP



SHAVE / SPOON HORSE / MULE



**A portable tabletop shave horse/spoon
mule-style woodcarving vise, without a
dedicated bench**

made
by Mike
Craghead

Portable tabletop shave horse/spoon mule-style woodcarving vise, without a dedicated bench

History: Shave horses and spoon mules and other arguably-similar items date back to Roman times and beyond. They've been used by carvers ever since, so it's hard to pinpoint the exact date when someone first put one together. I also don't doubt that they could have evolved separately across multiple unconnected cultures over the years, which muddies the historical waters even further. That said, [This guy makes a good case that shave horse-like benches were in use in the 1550s](#), and I have no reason to doubt him, so I won't.



Hands, etc.

When you're carving wood, there are countless ways to hold your workpiece. The simplest is "in the hand not holding the tool," which serves nicely when you're whittling and carving with little chisels and knives, because it's very easy to quickly change the position of your workpiece. You're always at risk of accidental perforation due to unpredictable wood breakage and tool slippage, and while you can use one of many available safety products like thumb covers and chainmail gloves, you'll always be limited to smaller work; hands are hand-size, and some tools (especially those for bigger work) require the use of both hands.



Holding your work in a vise is a great option for many reasons. I've used a "jawhorse" style standing vise to great effect, and a simple benchtop vise is a tried-and-true woodcarver's companion. However, when you want to change the position of your workpiece, you always have to pause your work in order to loosen, adjust, then tighten again.



The simplest solution to that constant pausing is a "lap bench" or "lap vise" or "whittling board" or more specialised "spoon-carving seat," which uses a rope looped through holes in a flat chunk of wood. The rope goes around your workpiece and under your foot, for hands-free loosening and tightening. Sometimes the carving support surface sits on your lap, sometimes it stays in place because you're sitting on it. These work great, but the single



looped rope they rely upon can limit your holding power and the size of your work.

Equine Solutions

The next step up in workpiece size and complexity is a vise controlled by a pedal or lever, which loosens as soon as you stop pushing on it, and re-tightens instantly when you reapply force. One such device is called a “[shave horse](#),” which presses a workpiece down to a surface using a horizontal bar or block. A “[spoon mule](#)” clamps the work from its sides. Both devices are traditionally mounted to a bench where the carver sits, usually wielding [spokeshaves](#) and [drawknives](#). Many newer designs include modular sections, which enable one bench to switch between a shave horse and a spoon mule, with a little shuffling of pins or bolts or dowels.



The variety is stunning; some are very rustic, chopped right out of logs, others feature ornate embellishments and fine joinery. Some fold flat for storage or transport. The range of engineering is enormous and beautiful, and it would no doubt be lots of fun to build one! You really should do that. Use your favorite evil interwebnet search robot, or start with these links:

- [Traditional English Shaving Horse](#) (PDF from WoodandShop)
- [How to Make a Shave Horse](#) (WoodworkersInstitute)
- [Expand Your Workholding with a Spoon Mule](#) (FineWoodworking)
- [Spoon Mule](#) (WoodSpiritHandcraft)

Smart Benchtop Solutions

There are several versions of this idea out in the world, as plans, or items for sale, or as plans for sale. If you've got the cash and/or inclination, you should buy and/or make these, they seem great!

- [Shave Pony](#) (RenaissanceWoodworker)
- [Woodworking Benchtop Shave Horse](#) (YouTube)
- [Bench top shave horse](#) (Reddit)
- [Spoon mule attachment for my workbench](#) (LumberJocks)
- [Legless Mule](#) (WoodTamer)



My Tabletop Solutions

I'm quite enamored with the free-standing horses/mules, and found myself tempted to make my own. However, I've learned this about myself: building stuff that helps me build stuff, sometimes prevents me from building stuff! So I decided to hold off on building a "real" shave horse/spoon mule, at least for now.

I also ruled out the benchtop solutions above, because I don't have a decent workbench that can properly accommodate that category of contraption; I need a setup that can break down entirely, that can be used with my fold-up workbench or table.

So I started doodling, and thinking about how I could re-create the forces at work in these devices without spending a fortune in lumber and time, and without creating a new piece of equipment with a footprint that I couldn't accommodate in my current workspace.

Contrary to tradition, my design worked out enough of the issues on paper that I was able to slap it together pretty quickly. Your mileage will vary depending on what kind of tools and materials you have laying around, but the general ideas should be quite transferrable to a wide range of random garage scraps, if you're inclined to make your own.

As of this writing I've only tested these ideas a little, but that was more than enough to convince me that the concepts are sound, and they've definitely been added to my woodcarving toolkit!

All these solutions need to work is one hole in a table or work bench or stool. They can be used in a standing or sitting position (just adjust the length or configuration of the foot pedal), and they're small enough to stow in a travel carving kit.

To install, simply run the rope from the device through any hole in your work surface, then attach the rope to the foot pedal, adjust the length, and tie it off.

For the spoon mule, the stationary "jaw" also needs to be mounted to the work surface, using screws, bolts or clamps.

Tabletop "Shave Horse"

This effect can be achieved using any number of different strategies and materials, but the basic goal is to clamp your workpiece vertically. In a "real" shave horse, this is usually done with either a big, hammer-like lump of wood or a horizontal bar.

My version uses round stock (salvaged from an old shovel), screwed to a couple curved and rounded bits of plywood, with a cross-piece where the rope attaches. One of the rounds touches the workpiece, and all the one at the other end does is support the plywood, which is in contact with the table surface and provides a pivot point. The rope runs from the crosspiece to the foot pedal, and the force you add to that pedal is what holds the workpiece in place. By definition that's going to be less force than you can generate by pushing sideways on the lever like you can do on a traditional shave horse, but after a little experimentation it's more than sufficient for most uses.



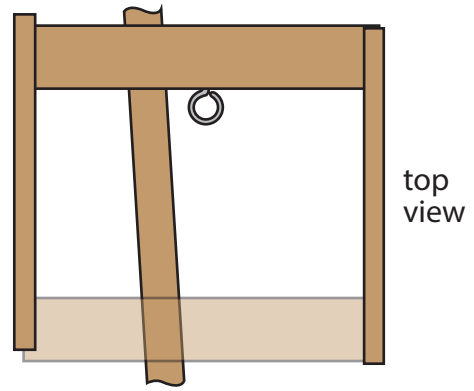
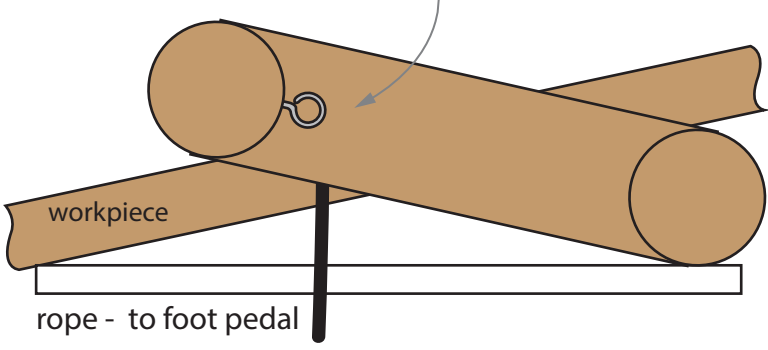
Benchtop Vice - Shave Horse style

- Easily installed/removed from almost any workbench or table
- Only one hole in bench required.
- An optional block or wedge can be used to change the angle of the workpiece.

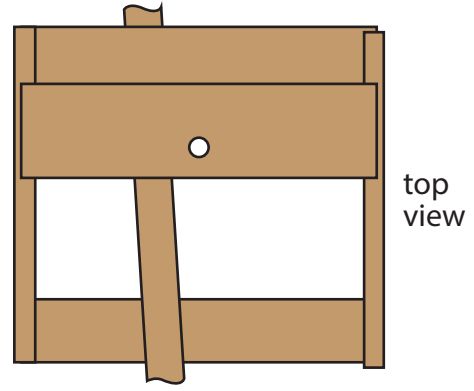
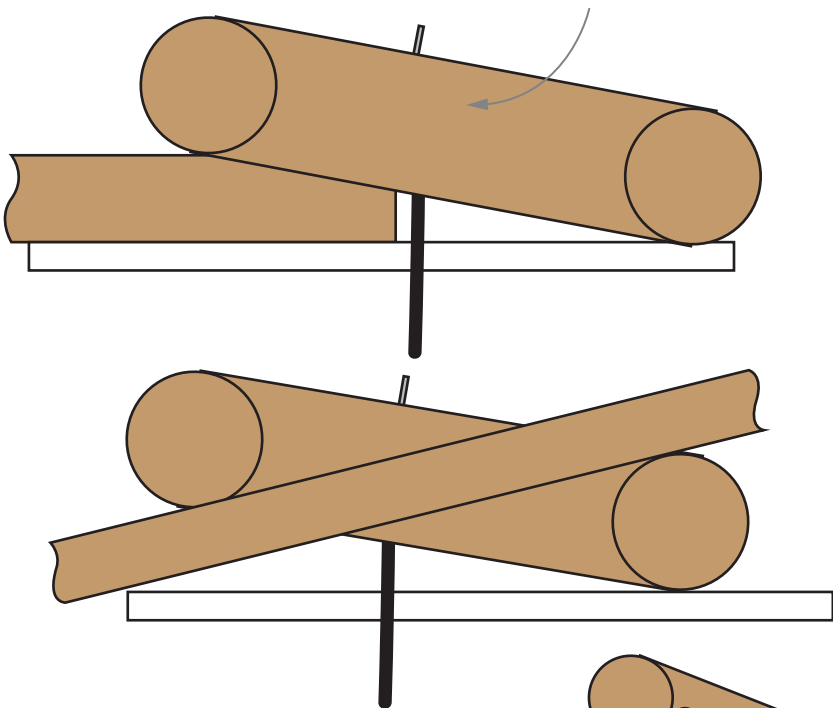
traditional shave horse



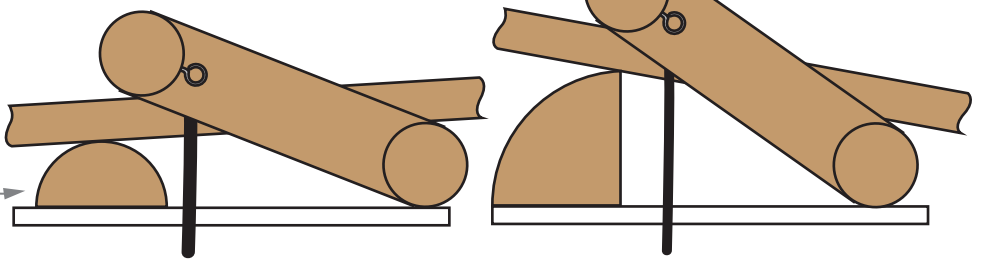
Rope attachment point on top crossbar:



Rope attachment point closer to bottom crossbar:



Wedges added to change angle:



This design mimics the action of some "shave horses," which pinch the workpiece when the user steps on a lever. It requires only one hole through the workbench for the rope.

I settled on round crossbars because so many traditional shave horses are built that way. The only requirement is that the attachment point for the rope is far enough away from the base crossbar, to give the rope some leverage. Attaching to the top crossbar itself would maximize leverage, but the width of the workpiece could be restricted.

To change your shave angle, add a block or wedge between the bench and the top crossbar.

You can of course omit the wood parts entirely and just loop the rope over the piece and back through the hole. You'd give up some mechanical leverage, but that's how many "lap boards" work, and I'm sure it's more than adequate for many situations.

Tabletop “Spoon Mule”

To mimic the side-to-side clamping motion of a real spoon mule, I used a pulley I had on hand, which transfers the vertical force from the foot pedal so it's horizontal. Note: I'm convinced this can be done much more simply; in fact if I hadn't already had that pulley, I'd have tried much simpler solutions, like a 1" piece of PVC pipe or conduit. This would greatly simplify the construction, and I doubt the increased friction would matter much; all you need to do is transfer that force 90 degrees, and most rope will slip easily over most kinds of pipe!

The idea here is to put the pulley on its own little platform, which sits inside a rectangular “box.” The rope is tied to the back end of that box, then it runs over the pulley, through a hole in the table and down to the foot pedal. When the rope is pulled, the box moves independently of the pulley, and a clamping “jaw” on the end of the box is forced sideways, pushing the workpiece into a separate, fixed jaw, which is either bolted or clamped into place.

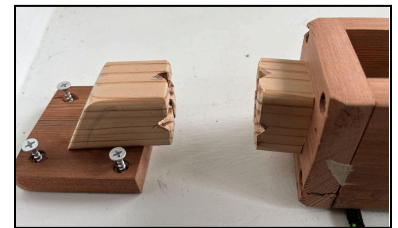


The pulley platform is naturally kept in place over the hole in the table because of the force of the rope, but I also added some rubber (from a bike innertube scrap) to the bottom to create a little more friction. The box glides easily side to side, and an even very wider range of workpiece sizes can be accommodated by changing the location of the fixed jaw.



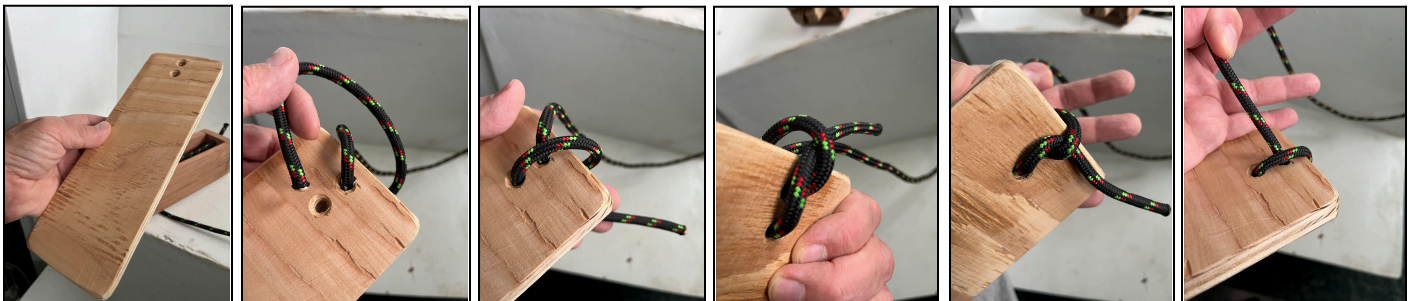
The box has an inclination to lift where the rope is fixed to it. I settled on drilling a hole in the back of the box that placed the rope slightly above level, and while that seemed to mitigate the lifting, some experimentation with angles or weight (or actual knowledge of physics!) might be useful there.

Depending on your needs, rubber or leather pads might be a helpful addition to the jaws. I added crossed slots like I've seen on other devices designed to hold on to skinny items, like spoons.



Foot Pedal

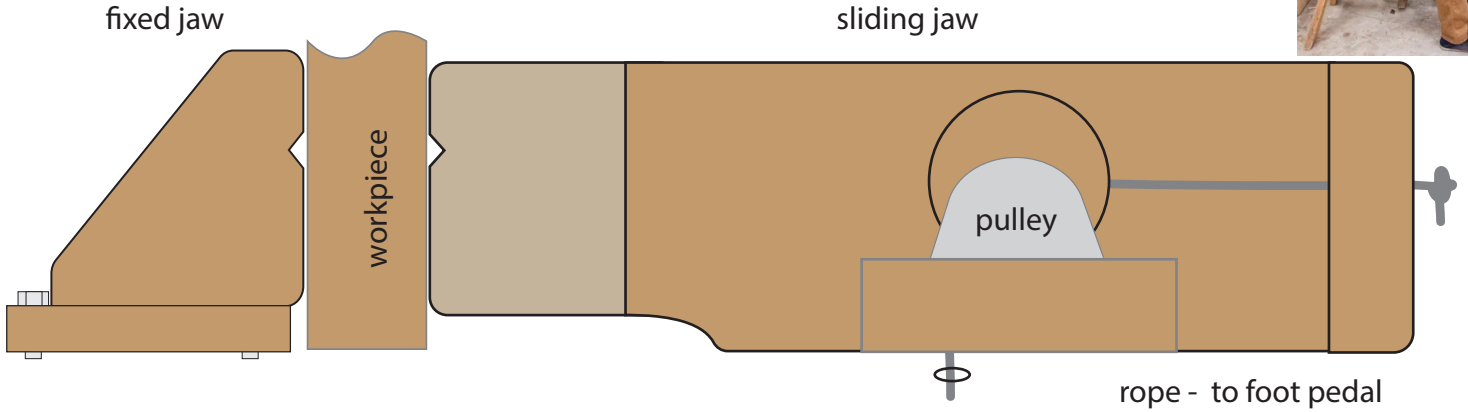
You can just tie a loop at the end of the rope, but adding a rigid piece to step on can add leverage. I settled on a plywood scrap with a couple holes drilled in it to accommodate the rope. There's enough friction there so a simple hitch holds it nice and tight, and it's easy to remove and to adjust the length.



Benchtop Vice - Spoon Mule style

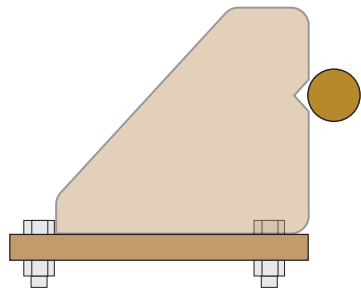
- Easily installed/removed from almost any workbench or table
- One hole in bench required for rope, more if fixed jaw is bolted rather than clamped.
- Can be rotated to any angle.

traditional spoon mule

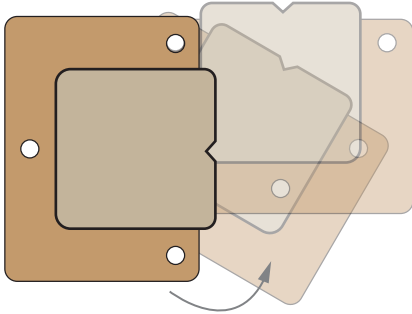


Fixed jaw

- bolted or clamped to bench
- notched (vertically and horizontally), to hold skinny items (like spoons).

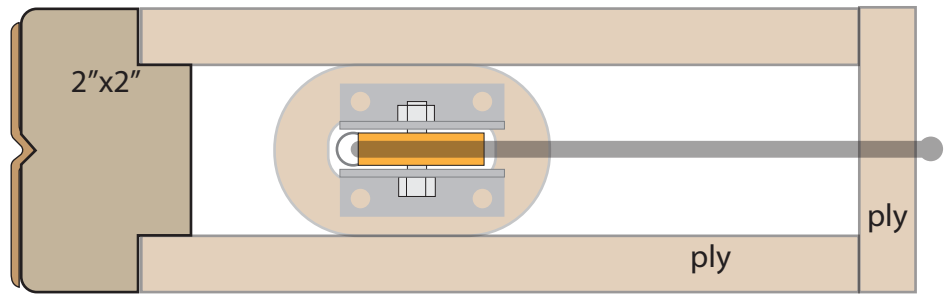


drill additional holes or re-clamp to allow 90° rotation:



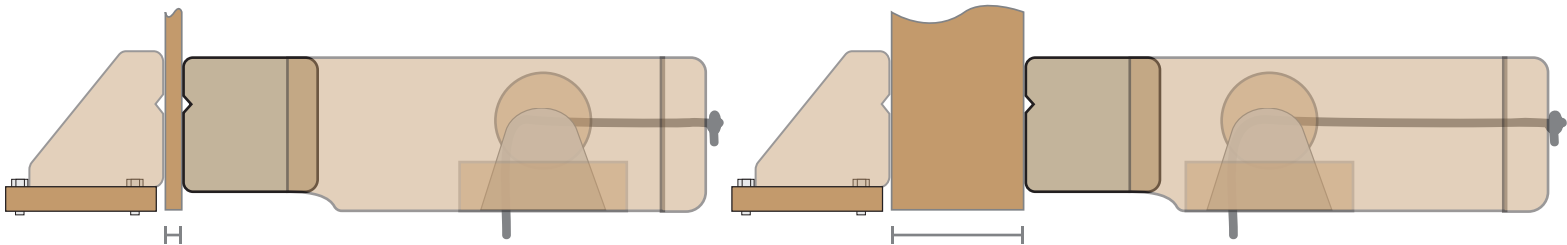
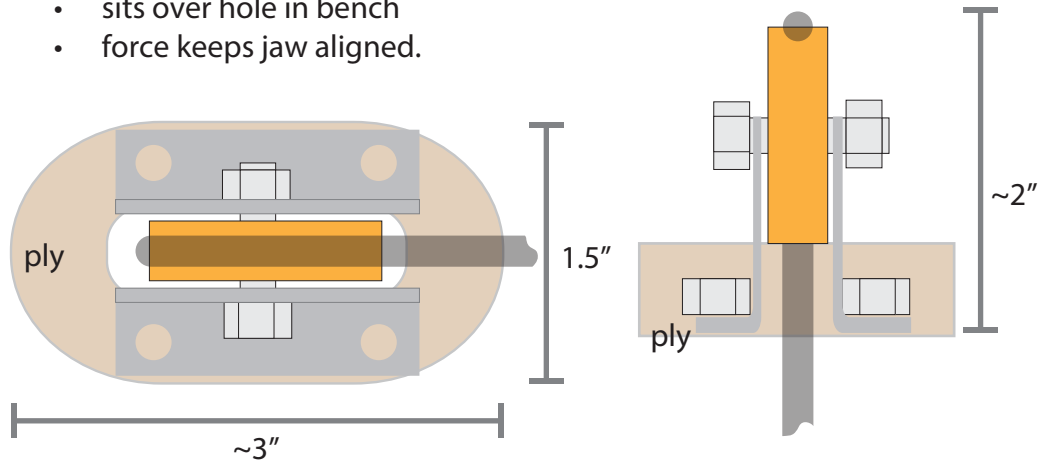
Sliding jaw

- "box" around pulley platform
- rope fixed to back end, connected to foot pedal.



Pulley platform

- sits over hole in bench
- force keeps jaw aligned.



These jaws mimic the action of some "spoon mules," which pinch the workpiece when the user pushes outward on two wooden bars using their feet or knees.

This design accommodates a wide range of workpiece sizes. For even greater range, the length of the sliding jaw could be increased.

Happy carving!

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Mike Craghead

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made
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