Hand-Crafted

"Your wooden arm you hold outstretched to shake with passers-by."

This past summer, as Mass Hall was shrouded in scaffolding and protective netting, Primus was reminded of how venerable some Harvard buildings are—and of how much labor went into their construction.

A vivid demonstration of the latter comes courtesy of David H. Armitage, senior project manager for the House Renewal program. In 2016, he reports, during the renovation of Winthrop House’s Standish Hall (opened in 1914), the contractor, Lee Kennedy, called to say that “something” had fallen from a previously inaccessible attic space. The something is a hod: a metal trough mounted on a wooden handle, used to carry numberless bricks to the workers who set them in mortar. As Armitage carried the assemblage back to his office, he reports, a summer squall blew up, and the drops of rain simply vanished into the desiccated wood.

A close observer, Armitage noted that the metal collar where the trough and handle meet is wider than the wood (to allow for disassembly)—but that a worker had jammed nails into the collar to keep them joined. Black tape on the handle enhances further personalization: a more comfortable gripping point. The initials G.A.F. CO, branded into the handle and wooden shoulder rest, indicate a job being done by George A. Fuller—considered the founder of modern general contracting, Armitage notes. (Other Fuller projects: Pennsylvania Station, the Lincoln Memorial.) He wonders whether the hod was left behind by mistake, or as a deliberate signature (“I like to think it’s the latter”). In any event, it is “evidence of exhausting human labor. Given the time frame, this was likely immigrant labor”—rediscovered at a moment when “it’s important to be reminded of what immigrants have given to Harvard and America.”

In the wake of the convulsions that shook American society and this institution in the late 1960s—assassinations, urban upheaval, and the Vietnam disaster (see “A Time of Trauma,” September-October, page 22)—alumnus/professor Henry A. Kissinger ’50, Ph.D. ’54, L ’55, national-security adviser and secretary of state in the Nixon and Ford administrations, did not work out a peaceful coexistence with Harvard. As global strategist, he effected detente with the Soviet Union and the opening to the People’s Republic of China, but is also associated with the bombing of North Vietnam, the invasion of Cambodia, and seeming indifference to the coup in Chile, the shattering separation of Bangladesh from Pakistan...

Signs of thaw with alma mater manifested in a class fiftieth-reunion event in 2000, and an appearance at a Sanders Theatre forum, welcomed by President Drew Faust (see harvardmag.com/kissinger-visit-12 and harvardmag.com/collier-visit-12). Now, his statecraft is explicated in Kissinger the Negotiator: Lessons from Dealmaking at the Highest Level (HarperCollins)—with a foreword by the man himself. The authors, James K. Sebenius, R. Nicholas Burns, and Robert H. Mnookin (of the Business, Kennedy, and Law Schools), co-direct the American Secretaries of State Project, which interviews the emeriti to explore how they worked, and intersects with related University programs on negotiation. In this case, Sebenius explained in a business-school interview, “one distinctive and valuable characteristic stands out”: “Before and during key negotiations, Kissinger would both ‘zoom out’ to his broader strategy and ‘zoom in’ to his individual counterpart, seeking to bring the strategic and interpersonal together” to advance diplomatic aims.

Time may indeed heal, or at least lessen, wounds, elevating past reputations—especially after the past summer’s presidential diplomacy in Singapore and Helsinki.

Charles W. Collier, M.T.S. ’73, senior philanthropic adviser on Harvard’s development staff, died of Alzheimer’s disease at 70, in August. Wealth in Families, his 2001 book, dealt gently with delicate matters, and has become a bible in his field. In The Boston Globe’s obituary, Bryan Marquard wrote that Collier had quipped, “Working with wealthy people, I take confession well.” Perhaps that came from his Divinity School training. More likely, it reflected his old-school character. The last issue’s Pump noted a limerick war about neckties (page 76). Collier wouldn’t have given a fig for the outcome: he looked fabulous in his trademark bow ties (see harvardmag.com/collier-12).

—Primus Vi