

# Shucking (Stripping) and Flattening Covers

## In Ten Easy Lessons Or One Hard One

by "Billboard Bill" Thomas

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Today's domestic matchbooks are easy to shuck. Insert both thumbs between the two cards of matches and wrench it open, the way you do with a paperback book to make it lay flat. The rear card is now free. Grasp the front flap of the cover and, with the other hand, wiggle the front card off the staple. The staple can then be pushed out with the fingers or with pliers if your nails are delicate. This method is handy because you need no tools and can watch the jiggling on the TV while shucking. If you prefer a tool, Ralph Arnold sells one, which grasps the staple front and *rips* it out (ugh?) like pulling a tooth from a polar bear, but you have to look at what you're doing.

Neither of the above is suitable for old, rusted staples or for some European ones of heavier wire. For both of those, pry up the staple ends with a dull knife or letter opener. For unrusted staples, push or pull out the staple with sturdy fingers or with pliers or a knife. If the staple is old & rusty, seize one staple leg and try to push it partly through so the staple's front becomes grabbable, then *gently* wiggle it out. Might be better to snip off parts of the staple and do the removing in parts. Be very gentle with the matchbook if it is old and brittle, it could come apart during this surgery.

Glued-in wood matches are easy. Again, break the two cards apart first, then use a dull knife or letter opener to gently saw the matches away from the front and back of the cover. Some paper will come off with the matches, it can't be helped.

Opening boxes to flatten them? Some, like Pocketbox, Ace & Atlas have little "spot welds" and can be parted open by inserting a dull knife or letter opener into the inside of the box, then sawing it along the glued seam. Some pop open easily with little or no residue. Slim, Ultra Slim and most all European and Asian boxes are glued for keeps; here is where you need your surgery 101. With a sharp, curved blade X-acto knife, push down into the glued seam and wiggle the knife sideways while doing so. Try to part the entire glued seam by wiggling rather than by cutting, to minimize injury to the box. Once parted open you may have to remove some residue from one side of the opened seam.

Flattening is easy, just takes some time and lots of pressure. It's easier to flatten a group of covers all the same size than to flatten just one or two. Lay down your stack of covers, alternating one face up, then one face down and head to toe, repeating this for a whole caddy or more. Make a sandwich with 2 slabs of 1/4" thick plywood, same size as your covers as the bread and with all your stacked covers in between as the meat. Now, mash this sandwich as hard as you can, any way you can. Heavy rubber bands will work, but a couple of C-clamps are even better. I use a bench vise in which I can mash up to 500 covers at one time. Pressing them under heavy books or an Olympic weightlifter will work too. But you must leave the covers under pressure for at least 24 hours, and preferably longer. Note that each fold in every cover is facing a flat part of the adjacent covers; that is what makes the covers come out flat. Make separate stacks for each size of cover, and same for your boxes. Get some high school shop class Kiddo to cut you about 6 slabs of each size--20-s, Jewel, 40-s and 10-s. The Jewel size will also work for Jewelites and 30-s. Masonite will work just as well as plywood.

Now, sometimes you're in a hurry to give or to mail just one newly shucked cover and don't want to wait for the flattening process. Lay the cover face down on a smooth, flat surface and with a smooth, round object like a pencil or a rolling pin, scrub the back of the cover where the folds are, at an angle to the folds. You'll get rid of most of the fold and provide a much more flattened looking cover.

Real elderly, brittle covers need more care in flattening. If it looks like the fold at the bottom might part upon being bent flat, hit the cover with a *bit* of moist heat from a steam iron or a teakettle. Don't dip or soak in hot water as the cover dyes might run. Once the cover is flat enough to press, apply a bit of Scotch tape to the back of the fold--the invisible tape is better than the glossy tape, because it's invisibler. Then continue with the flattening process. If you injure a cover, don't cry--your tears will get it wet.

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