Episode Book

EPISODE #5650

Electricians, Rentals, and the Skill That Waits

PUBLISHED	30 September 2026 at 19:59 UTC
DURATION	22:26
LISTEN	myweirdprompts.com/episode/electricians-rentals-skill-memory/
HOSTS	Corn, Herman, Hilbert
SCRIPT MODEL	deepseek-flash
VOICES	chatterbox-regular (chatterbox-local)
PIPELINE	V5.2
BOOK GENERATED	19 October 2026 at 17:38 UTC

SYNOPSIS

Daniel spent a day doing electrical work in a rental with almost no outlets, and it cracked open three threads that don't obviously belong together. The craft: why a skill you haven't used in years comes back cleanly, and why that doesn't make the job easy. The trade: how electricians actually get into the field (spoiler — it's mostly money, not fascination with electrons), and how a 140-year-old technology ended up wrapped in a medieval-style guild with waitlists a decade long. The rental: what it means to have a skill that waits for you while living in a space you're not allowed to touch. It's not rent versus buy, and it's not should you become an electrician. It's about who's allowed to touch the wiring.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Okay, I'll start. Daniel spent the day doing electrical work in a rental that has the fewest outlets per room he's ever seen in his life.



Herman

Which is a real thing. That's not him being fussy.



Corn

Right, and here's what he wrote in this week. He did power runs, wired plugs, built some extensions. It had been a few years since he'd done any of it, and he says you get out of practice quickly, but it's also one of those skills you can put down and pick up, and when you do it feels like meeting an old friend. You pick up where you left off. Deeply satisfying.



Herman

I love that.



Corn

Then he goes somewhere else entirely. He says he has no ideological problem with renting, that a well-controlled rental market is a legitimate long-term way to keep a roof over your head. His issues are all practical. Tenancy at will. Contract laws against drilling. Poorly done wiring he isn't allowed to fix. Small things that would seem tiny to most people but decide whether a space feels like home.



Herman

And then the third thread.



Corn

Then the third thread. He told a friend who's an electrician that he'd be wiring that day, and they ended up talking about beer instead. But it left him wondering. Are electricians actually fascinated by electricity? How do most of them get into it? And given that electricity is a relatively new phenomenon in human history, how did this even become a trade?



Herman

And then he hands it to us. His words, a random podpourri of thoughts.



Corn

His words. So we've got three threads here. The craft, the trade, and the rental.



Herman

Three threads that don't obviously belong together.



Corn

They do, though. That's the thing. Electrical work is the most abstract thing in the room and the most physical thing in the room at the same time. You can't see it, smell it, or hear it until it's already hurting you. And meanwhile you're on your knees in a crawl space pulling cable through joists with your shoulder against a stud.



Herman

That's the whole tension of the job in two sentences.



Corn

The craft demands total focus. The trade has a guild structure older than the technology it serves. And the rental problem is really a question about who's allowed to touch the wiring.



Herman

Say that last one again, because I think that's the spine.



Corn

Who's allowed to touch the wiring. Daniel can wire a plug. He can run an extension. He can't drill the wall, and he can't fix the thing that was done badly before he moved in.



Herman

So the episode isn't should you become an electrician, and it isn't rent versus buy.



Corn

No. It's about what it means to have a skill that waits for you, and what it means to live in a space you can't touch.



Herman

Let's take these one at a time. Start with the thing that actually happened today.



Corn

The first thread is the one Daniel felt in his hands. The skill that came back.



Herman

This is the part I actually know something about, and it's better than the folk version. Everybody says it's like riding a bike. Nobody can tell you why.



Corn

So why?



Herman

Because motor skills consolidate into long-term memory, and once they're there, they're remarkably durable. There's a study from 1978, Norrie and Henry, in Perceptual and Motor Skills. They took a gross motor skill, ladder climbing, and tested what a layoff did to the learning curve. One week off. The exponential learning trend was completely unaffected by the break.



Corn

One week isn't years.



Herman

It's not, and I'll flag that. The study is about a short layoff, not a decade. But the mechanism is the same one that carries you across a decade, and there's a nuance in that paper that matters more than the headline. Interference did cause forgetting. If you spend the layoff doing a competing task that overwrites the consolidation, you lose some of it. Leave the skill alone and it sits there.



Corn

So the reason Daniel's wiring came back cleanly is that he didn't spend the intervening years doing something that muddled it.



Herman

He spent them doing automation and documentation. Nothing in that competes with stripping a wire and landing it under a terminal screw. The body filed it and left it alone.



Corn

There's something almost rude about that. You neglect a skill for years and it's fine. You neglect a friendship for years and see how that goes.



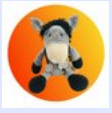
Herman

The skill doesn't have feelings. That's its whole advantage.



Corn

But the old friend feeling is real. I want to be clear that I'm not dismissing it. I've had it.



Herman

With what?



Corn

Leaf medicine.



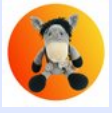
Herman

Of course.



Corn

I hadn't prepared a poultice in a very long time. My hands knew the fold.



Herman

I'm going to let that stand.



Corn

But here's where I want to push, because the romance of the old friend can carry you into a false conclusion. The skill came back. That doesn't mean the job is easy.



Herman

No. And this is where the trade school material is useful, because it punctures the idea that this is a hands job.



Corn

Go.



Herman

Borin Reyes, he's an electrical contractor in Oakland. He was asked what the work actually demands, and he said you really have to be focused because of safety. Hands-on most of the time, solving problems. And then he says that's one of the things he likes best. Solving problems.



Corn

The focus isn't a personality trait.



Herman

It's a safety requirement. You lose focus for four seconds and you're the path to ground. That's not a metaphor. That's the actual circuit.



Corn

And the code side. This is the part people outside the trade never see.



Herman

In Connecticut, trade students log seven hundred and twenty hours of theory. That's classroom work, all of it required for the license, on top of the shop time. The National Electrical Code is a hardcover reference text they work from daily. It's not a pamphlet. It's a book you keep on the bench and argue with.



Corn

Seven hundred and twenty hours. That's most of a master's degree in some fields.



Herman

For a license to pull wire. And the cross-trade literacy is real too. At one tech school the students build a two-story structure. Residential wood framing downstairs, commercial steel framing upstairs, and they wire each floor to the code for that construction type.



Corn

Because the rules change with the building.



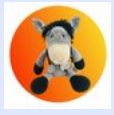
Herman

The rules change with the building. Electricians need to know some carpentry. You can't run cable through a structure you don't understand.



Corn

So the old friend is real, but he's not the whole job. The hands remember. The code doesn't live in your hands.



Herman

The code lives in a book you have to keep reading, because it gets revised.



Corn

Which is a nice thing about being a sloth. Nobody revises the leaf.



Herman

Then there's just the physical reality, and I think David Owen's piece in the New Yorker is the best thing written on this. He watched the electricians restore power to his road, and they spent Christmas Eve in bucket trucks in winds strong enough to make porch screens hum like kazoos.



Corn

In the bucket. Christmas Eve.



Herman

There's a plumber in that same piece who says he's had apprentices quit after a few months because the job was too wet, too messy, too cold, too dirty, too hot.



Corn

Five reasons and none of them are the electricity.



Herman

None of them. That's the honest picture. The skill comes back because your body consolidated it. The job stays hard because it demands focus, code knowledge, cross-trade literacy, and physical endurance.



Corn

So the satisfaction Daniel felt today was the satisfaction of a skill that was waiting for him. Not a job that was easy.



Herman

Exactly that. And I'd add one thing. He noticed the outlet count in the new place before he noticed anything else, and I think that's a tell. It's the first thing a person with the skill sees.



Corn

Because you can't unsee bad wiring once you know how to read it.



Herman

You can't. It's like Herman and a bad-sounding room.



Corn

You're going to make me say it.



Herman

Say it.



Corn

You walk into a restaurant and diagnose the ceiling.



Herman

I do. And I'm right. But the skill coming back is only half the story. The other half is the trade itself. Who gets in, and how it got to be a trade at all.



Corn

Start with Daniel's actual question. Are electricians fascinated by electricity?



Herman

Mostly no. And I love that the sources are this blunt about it. Reyes was asked how you get young people into the field, and he didn't skip a beat. Showing them how much money they can make. That is the key.



Corn

That's the whole recruitment strategy. Money.



Herman

That's the whole recruitment strategy. The fascination, where it exists, is with mastery and problem-solving. Not the electron. Nobody's lying awake thinking about drift velocity.



Corn

What's drift velocity?



Herman

The actual speed at which electrons move through a conductor. It's glacial. Slower than you.



Corn

I resent that and I'm not going to check it.



Herman

The point is the entry motivations are staggeringly practical. There's a student in Connecticut, Thomas Yulo, who chose electrical over machining, and his reason was, do I really want to be working inside all my life.



Corn

That's a lifestyle decision.



Herman

The New Yorker found students following family members into trades, or their parents were alarmed by the cost of college, or COVID soured them permanently on staring at a screen all day. One student, Gabe Green. I've got uncles and aunts in trades. My dad is a carpenter, my brother is a plumber, my other brother does HVAC. My father wants us to be a whole family business.



Corn

That's a dynasty.



Herman

It's a dynasty. And then there's the counterpoint I didn't expect. Pat Ciarleglio, who runs Connecticut's trade school system, says they get electrical engineers who've finished all their formal university education and decide, hey, I don't want to sit behind a desk.



Corn

So the pipeline runs both directions.



Herman

Both directions. And the emotional hook is the one I'd put on a poster. An HVAC tech named Andrew Cozza. One morning I woke up to no heat, and when the service technician got it going again I was like, wow, that guy is my superhero.



Corn

That's the whole thing. Nobody grows up wanting to understand electricity. They grow up wanting to be the person who fixes it.



Herman

That's it. Being the one who shows up and makes the thing work.



Corn

So how did it become a trade? Because that's the question I find strange. Electricity as a practical domestic phenomenon is about a hundred and forty years old. The 1880s onward. That's nothing.



Herman

Nothing. And the trade grew up alongside electrification itself. As buildings got wired, a licensed, code-governed profession emerged to do it safely, because the alternative was watching buildings burn down.



Corn

And the artifact of that professionalization is the code.



Herman

The National Electrical Code. Still a hardcover reference in every trade classroom. That's the moment doing electrical work became being an electrician.



Corn

Here's the paradox though. The technology is a hundred and forty years old. The structure around it is a guild.



Herman

It is a guild. One person described it exactly that way. Capped entry, a long supervised path to journeyman status, and licensing that by law limits who can do the work.



Corn

So the trade feels medieval even though the technology is younger than the telephone.



Herman

Younger than the telephone, and the guild structure is why. And the bottleneck is real and it's current. There's a commenter on Hacker News with a mechanical engineering degree and high-voltage experience who applied for an IBEW apprenticeship. Tested into the highest percentile. Still ended up like two hundred people deep in the queue.



Corn

He tested into the top percentile and he's two hundredth in line.



Herman

Another one said his very smart brother faced a waiting list of more than a decade and went to college instead.



Corn

A decade. You could become a doctor in less time.



Herman

You could. And the structural explanation is the part I want to get right, because it's not just more people applying. One commenter laid it out. The pathway requires being apprenticed to experts. There are licenses that by law limit it to that pathway, but the system breaks in unexpected ways when the experts leave, because it pays better to work at a data center. Apprenticeships are capped. Electricians can't apprentice ten newcomers. So the backlogs explode.



Corn

The bottleneck is the ratio of experts to newcomers, and the experts are being pulled away.



Herman

Pulled away by money. And the teacher shortage is a chokepoint on top of that. Laney College in Oakland nearly lost its electrical program when its one full-time instructor retired. The dean emailed every electrical business in the county and couldn't recruit a replacement. Because employees earn more in the field than they do teaching.



Corn

So the people qualified to teach it can't afford to.



Herman

Can't afford to. The math doesn't work. And that's before you get to the demographic cliff. About twenty-one percent of electricians hit retirement age in the next ten years. The Bureau of Labor Statistics projected around eighty thousand openings a year, and that was the pre-Inflation Reduction Act estimate. Stanley Black and Decker ran a Makers Index in 2022 that estimated six hundred and fifty thousand unfilled US construction trade jobs. Ten million worldwide.



Corn

And the median wage is what, sixty-two thousand?



Herman

Sixty-two thousand three hundred and fifty, May 2024. Lowest ten percent under thirty-nine thousand. Highest ten percent over a hundred and six. Bay Area average is ninety-three thousand nine hundred.



Corn

So the median is roughly what a high school teacher makes.



Herman

Roughly. Which is the honest answer to why the pipeline is thin, and also the honest answer to why the data center money is so disruptive.



Corn

Tell me about the data centers.



Herman

This is the live wire. The New York Times, July twenty-ninth this year. AI companies are recruiting electricians and carpenters by the thousands. Texas is straining its homebuilders because the electricians are going to data centers instead. And Wired ran a piece in June with the headline some electricians think building data centers is for sellouts.



Corn

Sellouts.



Herman

A genuine cultural split inside the trade. And the economics are wild. Commenters described electricians making three hundred thousand one year on data centers and thirty thousand the next when the boom turns.



Corn

Three hundred to thirty.



Herman

That's the range. Union IBEW members have done really well this decade, but they face mandatory furloughs and months without work in the slow periods. It's a boom and bust niche inside a trade that used to be the definition of steady.



Corn

So the guild that exists to make the work stable is now getting pulled into the least stable work available.



Herman

That's the tension exactly. And there's a real argument on the other side, which is that we're at the start of a decades-long curve electrifying everything. Heat pumps, vehicles, induction, all of it. And most of that involves an electrician.



Corn

I'd take that trade. The electrification of everything is a longer story than one AI cycle.



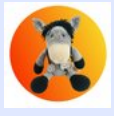
Herman

I would too. But I'd want to be honest that the boom is what's paying right now, and booms end.



Corn

Okay. Now the rental thread, because that's the half of this I think is actually the most interesting, and I don't want to rush it.



Herman

Go ahead, because you've got a position here.



Corn

I do. Daniel's gripe is contract laws against drilling and poorly done wiring you're not allowed to fix. And I want to defend that as a serious complaint, not a trivial one. Rental housing is often the least well-maintained and least customizable housing there is, and it's not because landlords are villains. It's because neither party has the full incentive to invest.



Herman

The renter won't put fifty thousand dollars into a panel they don't own.



Corn

And the landlord won't either, because the return doesn't come back to them in a market where tenants move every two years. So the wiring just sits there, being 1974.



Herman

The outlet scarcity he noticed is documented, and it's not aesthetic. Older housing stock, a lot of it rental, frequently has outdated two-prong ungrounded outlets. That's not just inconvenient. That's a safety issue that everybody has agreed to ignore.



Corn

And the cost to fix it is the reason. There's a case in the Grist reporting where a homeowner was quoted over fifty thousand dollars just to upgrade an electrical panel and replace the outdated two-prong outlets.



Herman

Fifty thousand. For one house.



Corn

No renter takes that on. And no landlord does it unless the code forces them, because the tenant isn't going to pay more rent for outlets they can't see.



Herman

So it gets deferred. Forever. And the person living there is the one who notices.



Corn

Which is the small indignity Daniel's describing. It's not the outlet count. It's that the outlet count is the visible symptom of a house nobody is allowed to fully take care of.



Herman

And you can't feel at home in a thing you're not allowed to maintain.



Corn

You can't. That's the whole of it. Which brings the two threads together. The trade is guild-structured and bottlenecked, and the AI boom is pulling it somewhere volatile. And meanwhile the wiring in the rooms where people actually live is the wiring nobody's allowed to touch.



Herman

Who's allowed to touch the wiring. That's the question under all three threads.



Corn

That's the question. And I don't think it has a clean answer, which is why I like it.



Hilbert

Eleven.



Corn

Sorry?



Hilbert

Eleven outlets. I put eleven in one room once. I was rewiring a house, not mine, and the woman who lived there kept asking for more, and I kept saying yes, and by the end that room had more outlets than any room I've been in since. I can still see the wall.



Corn

Why eleven?



Hilbert

That's not the point.



Herman

What is the point?



Hilbert

The point is nobody thinks about where the outlets go until after the drywall's up. Then it's too late and you're running an extension cord across a doorway for the next ten years. I've never met a renter who complained about where the outlets were. Only how many. That's backwards.



Corn

So the number is the symptom and the placement is the disease.



Hilbert

The placement is the part you only get to decide once. And only if you're the one who gets to decide.



Herman

Which is the thing Daniel can't do. He can add an extension. He can't move the wall.



Hilbert

I had the manual for that panel for years after. Long after the house changed hands. I kept the paperwork, not the panel. The paperwork's more useful.



Corn

Do you still have it?



Hilbert

That's not the point either.



Corn

Fair.



Hilbert

What I remember is she asked, and I said yes, and that was the whole transaction. Nobody signed anything. She lived there. She got to shape the room. That's it. Most people never get to do that once.



Corn

That image, eleven outlets in one room, is kind of the whole thing, isn't it.



Herman

It is. Because it's not about the outlets. It's about being the person who gets to say yes.



Corn

Here's the thing I keep circling back to. The skill that waits for you is rare. Daniel got a day out of it, and what he actually got wasn't the wiring. His hands remembered. That's the gift. Everything else in the day was friction.



Herman

The friction is the story though. The hands remembering is why he noticed the friction at all. A person who's never wired anything doesn't walk into a rental and count outlets.



Corn

True. The skill is what makes you see the problem you can't fix.



Herman

That's a slightly cruel arrangement.



Corn

It is. And here's the cutting-room floor, because this is the detail I couldn't fit anywhere. The trade is about ninety percent white, against seventy-eight percent of the overall workforce, and less than two percent of electricians are women.



Herman

Two percent.



Corn

Which is a staggering number for a job that's hiring eighty thousand people a year and can't fill the seats. The bottleneck isn't a shortage of people. It's a shortage of people who've been told this is for them.



Herman

Leah Stokes put it well. For a long time we've valorized white-collar jobs and tech workers and the knowledge economy. We need a whole new group of people to think about going into the trades.



Corn

Bill McKibben said it shorter. If you know a young person who wants to do something that helps the world and makes a good living, tell them to go become an electrician.



Herman

Which is a good line, and it's also the whole recruitment problem in one sentence. Nobody's telling them.



Corn

So here's where I land. The trade is guild-structured and bottlenecked, and the AI boom is pulling electricians into a niche that pays three hundred thousand one year and thirty the next. So who ends up doing the wiring in the rooms where people actually live?



Herman

The rooms nobody's making money on.



Corn

And if renters can't touch the wiring, what does that mean for the hundred-and-forty-year project of electrifying everything? Because the project doesn't stop at the property line.



Herman

It doesn't. Somebody has to wire the last house on the street, and there's no data center in it.



Corn

That's the open question. I don't have an answer for it. I just think eleven outlets in one room is the right place to leave it. Because that's what it looks like when somebody gets to ask and somebody gets to say yes.



Herman

And most people never get to do that once.



Corn

Most people never get to do that once. Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop, our producer. This has been My Weird Prompts.



Herman

The human-AI collaboration podcast. If you want to send us something, email us at show at my weird prompts dot com.



Corn

We'll be back soon.



Herman

See you tomorrow.