The TOOL SHED

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A CRASH COURSE ON HANDLE MAKING

by Herb Kean

Although this article is concerned with making handles, I hope it goes beyond that for the non-woodworking reader. The making of handles, wedges and other small wooden parts provides an entry into woodworking that is within the scope of most people's talent and equipment. If you are strictly a tool collector, and never had a passion to try your hand at the skills of the trade, then this article is for you. Almost every collector, at one time or another, reflects upon how well a tool will cut. For some, that is where it ends - just a reflection. But just about anyone can be a handlemaker!

To start with, you don't need much money or experience - just a few tools and some stock. Many primitive handlemakers had no lathes, and we will follow in their footsteps. You will need, however, a few saws, a drawknife, a small chisel, some files, and an all-important vise (smoking or drinking won't do!). A grinding wheel is almost a necessity. You can use a small hand wheel, but it is much better to put a wheel on a salvaged appliance motor.

You will have to sharpen your tools more often than usual, as most handles are made from tough stock (hickory, ash, and rock maple). Sharpening is an art, and is quite satisfying when you get it right. It can be frustrating if you don't give it enough concentration. The trick is to keep from "turning over the edge" - i.e., inadvertently twisting the blade from its proper angle so that you cut off the very edge you have worked so hard to get.

The sharpening angle determines the ease of entry into the wood. An acute angle starts the blade better, but will dull or chip quicker. Even so, the more acute angle is best for the beginner, as it affords greater accuracy with the tool. If your sharpening is right, you should feel no burr, see no edge shine, and be able to shave the hair on the back of your wrist (if you're hairless, you will never be a handlemaker).

Your first project should be something easy, like fitting an old handle to that great axe head that has been laying around for years. Old handles can be bought cheaply at flea markets. Start your fitting by marking out any large amounts of wood that have to be removed. This is best done by saw. Now start shaping-in with the drawknife. At this point you will undoubtedly run into the phenomenon of the "run-of-the-grain." When the grain runs out - i.e., is slightly diagonal to the surface you are working - the tool will dig-in in one direction and cut smoothly in the other (see Figure 1). Sharp tools and fine craftsmen can cut in either direction, but I suggest that the beginner learn early how to turn the tool around to cut "with the run."

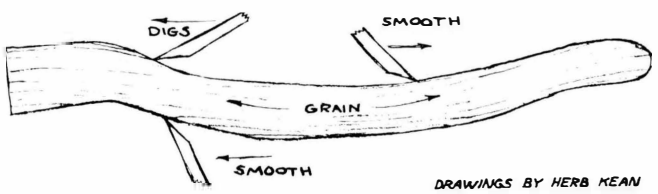

FIGURE 1

The handle can be smoothed-in or finished with the spoke shave and block plane, melding the new cuts with the old body. It can be filed and scraped to blend in the patina. If a wedge is required, one can be cut with a dovetail saw and flushed off after being driven. If you make a few small mistakes and take too much stock in some areas of the eye, drive some fill wedges in these "holes." If you really louse up, cut off the head and use the remaining handle for a hatchet head.

After you have cut a few axe-wedges, try your hand at plane wedges. They are not really hard, and they can put new life into an otherwise functionless tool. The stock is easy to get from old plane bodies that are missing all their parts and are sold as scrap. A few joiners cut up can make a pile of wedges. If you don't care about the age of the wood, you can get all kinds of small pieces at any lumberyard that carries hardwoods.

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Contributions, especially about New Jersey tools and trades, are welcomed.

LETTERS

In Alex Farnham's article on the Bob Carlson auction (Tool Shed, February, 1979) he wrote:

"The most outstanding item sold in the non-tool category was a cast iron lady's shoe! What it was used for I don't know, but it struck me as a very decorative piece. It went home with me for $55."

From the brief description, I assume the shoe was one used on a mannequin. Some years ago I printed an explanation of cast-iron shoes in the EAIA Chronicle (Vol. XVIII, March, 1965) with pictures illustrating how they were used. . . . In this case they were boy's shoes.

-Raymond R. Townsend
Williamsburg, Va.

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First, plane the stock to width and thickness. Then make a layout of the angle and cut it out of cardboard. Adjust for fit, then cut your wedge. If you have some wedges in other planes that fit, you can save all the trouble of making a template - just trace the wedge that works. A coping saw and some files will "round-in" the knockout portion of the wedge. Make sure you do the knockout portion last, leaving plenty of extra stock.

Now you are ready for your first creative handle - the broad axe. The proper way is to cut the stock from an already bent piece (which is difficult to get in a seasoned condition) or steam bend it (which is also difficult with meager equipment). So we will cut the bend angle into the stock by starting with a piece thick enough to accomodate this angle. Surprisingly enough, a pick-axe handle is thick enough to give you a couple of inches of "sway." Mark out your cuts and rip saw out the bulk (see Figure 2). Then fit the head as you did previously with the drawknife and plane. Shave, file smooth and wedge up. Most primitive broad axes were wedged between the eye and the handle, rather than down a slit in the handle as are the modern axes.

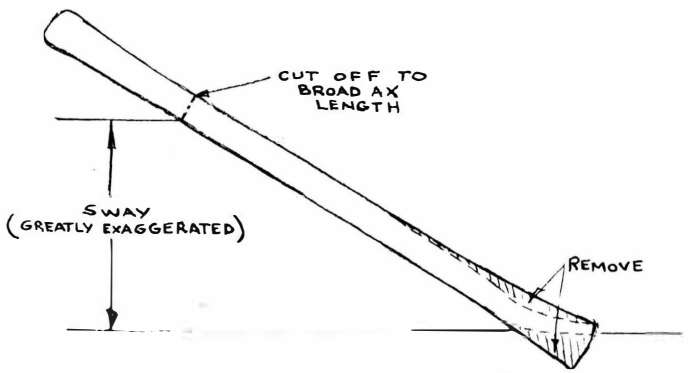


FIGURE 2

If you have done well on the broad axe, keep your eye out for a goosewing without a handle - preferably foreign, as they have larger eyes. For stock, use an old wagon axle or tongue. There is a lot of this stuff around in barn sales and junk shops, once you start looking for it. Remember not to take the rust off the inside of the eye as you can use it as an indicator of the high spots. There is a lot of trial and error to making this handle, but you'll be proud when it is finished and it looks the part.

The piece-de-resistance of handle making is the American goosewing with its 3/16 inch eye. But how many of us are fortunate enough

to get a good American goosewing, even without a handle? If you do, remember to make a couple of cardboard inside templates before you start. It will cut down the trial-and-error tremendously.

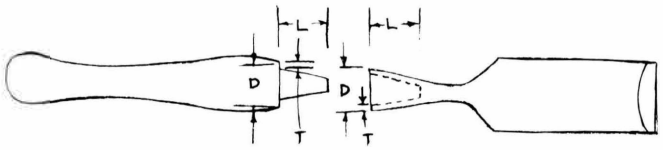
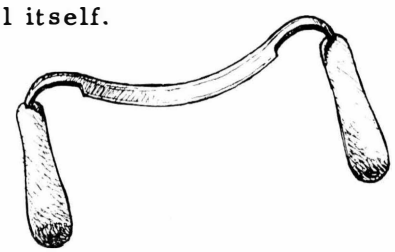


FIGURE 3

Chisels and draw knives can be rehandled with round stock, shaped with a drawkife and drilled in steps to achieve a tapered hole. Slicks or socket chisels can be handled from old table legs, baseball bats or large implement handles. The difference between a workman-like job and a "botch" is the taper of the socket portion. This should be measured with a pair of calipers, and the diameters transferred to the handle stock. Don't jam in a tapered handle without shouldering it first. This can be done with a dove-tail saw and a chisel (see Figure 3). Make the "L" length slightly shorter on the handle, so it doesn't "bottom." Be sure that the overall diameter "D" of the end of the socket is the same on the handle where you start your shoulder cut. Cut down no deeper than the thickness of the socket "T". Chisel out the taper and smooth with a drawknife. File down so that when lightly pushing the handle into the socket there is about 1/8 inch between the socket and the shoulder of the handle. Then ram the handle home. If it is too loose, put thin wood shavings in the socket and ram it home again. Wrap tape around the socket to keep from breaking the patina of the iron if you miss with the file, and file the handle so that it becomes an exact extension of the socket. Then stand back and admire your work!

Handle and wedge making can do wonders for your collection, and you might get to really enjoy it. It is no disgrace to refit a head or an iron. This is exactly what the craftsmen of yesterday would have done - and in many cases actually did. The satisfaction of putting a fine tool in working condition is on a par with owning the tool itself.



THE MYTH OF THE SITH

by Raymond R. Townsend, Williamsburg, Va.

In Hog Plow and Sith (1973) Peter H. Cousins alleges that a particular style Flemish scythe is known by the name "sith." The basis for this assertion is a statement by Jared Van Wagenen, Jr., in The Golden Age of Homespun (1927), under the discussion of "Farm Implements," which Cousins cites.

However, he either failed to read further or ignored the continuing comments made by Van Wagenen: "The spelling of the word 'sith' is strictly phonetic and my own. In the Century Dictionary 'sithe' is given as 'obsolete for scythe,' but there is no indication that a similar word was used for what was definitely a different tool, which might imply that there are bits of lore which even the big dictionaries miss." (my underlines)

Among numerous works consulted, the spelling of scythe as "sith" is mentioned, but none of them indicates that it designates a particular kind of scythe. To quote a few authoritative sources:

Samuel Deane's The New England Farmer; or, Georgical Dictionary (1790) says: "The sithe—a well-known instrument to cut grass. This instrument should consist of rough iron and the best of steel, well wrought together and finely tempered."

Abraham Rees's The Cyclopedia... (1810-1824) does not mention "sith" but says that "scythe" is "...sometimes written sithe, or sythe."

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MEETING ON APRIL 22nd

Swap & Sell Moved Again

The next meeting of CRAFTS will be held on Sunday, April 22, from 2:00 to 5:00 p. m., at the Field Homestead, 260 River Road (Rte. #18) in Piscataway.

Please note that the later starting time means that the "Swap & Sell" will be held at the end of the meeting.

The afternoon's program will feature Mrs. Erna Stenzler, of Elkins Park, Pa., who will speak on and demonstrate "The Art of Wood Sculpture."

Harry O'Neill will preside over the "What-sit?" identification, and the meeting will conclude with informal tool talk and "The Swap & Sell."

The last meeting of the current year will be held on June 10.

Cont'd from Pg.3

The Oxford English Dictionary (1933) gives "sith" as a 14th to 17th century spelling of scythe.

The excellent The Complete Farmer by a "Group of Gentlemen" (London, 1777) has: "SCYTHE, Sithe, or Sythe, the instrument used in mowing, being a crooked blade joined at right-angles to a long pole."

FLEMISH SCYTHE FROM THE COLLECTION OF BOB FRIDLINGTON

Raph A. Salaman was also consulted. He replied with the O.E.D. reference and pointed out that Dr. Samuel Johnson's Dictionary (1755) preferred "sithe" as "etymologically correct" and that the editors of the O.E.D. agree.

The above, although brief, is conclusive enough to indicate that any collector who has a scythe as shown in this publication does not have a "sith," but very definitely does have, as is stated, a Flemish Scythe.

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