AXES

Axes have existed for several millennia. The first hand axes consisted only of a stone head with a sharpened cutting edge. Axe handles began to appear around 6000 BCE. Most handles were made from deer or elk horns. As civilizations moved from stone to metal, the axe evolved with the process. First copper, then bronze and iron, and finally, in the 19th century, steel provided the material for axe heads. Metal axe heads required handles. Beginning in the Bronze Age, all axes had handles.

European traders introduced axes with metal heads to the indigenous peoples of North America in the 16th and 17th centuries. The first European axes contained broad blades and no poll (the back blunt end of the axe head). These axes were good for hewing (smoothing a tree into a square log or a board), but not for felling trees. North America was covered with immense virgin forests. European colonists needed to modify the Old World axe in order to meet clear and plant the land.

Americans made three basic modifications to the European axe. Each modification improved the stability and cutting ability of the axe. The first modification was the addition of a heavy, square, blunt end opposing the cutting edge called the poll. The poll was designed so that the axe could be flipped and the poll used to drive wedges or hammer spikes without damaging the cutting edge. The heavy poll also added weight that provided an effective counter balance and greater accuracy. The addition of the poll made the work of felling trees much easier.

The second modification was the flattening of the sides of the axe head. This flattening provided for a smoother, continuous surface on each side of the axe head. The blade, then, wobbled less during the swing and the cutting edge could penetrate deeper into the wood.

Lastly, the introduction of steel in the 19th century allowed the axe blade to be made of hardened steel. This reduced the friction between the blade and the log. Polished steel axes reduced the size and weight to be reduced while maintaining efficiency.

The length, shape and mounting of an axe handle is known as the “hang.” If an axe is properly hung, the cutting edge will touch the top of the table at a point one-third of the way from the heel. Prior to the 1920s, most axe users made and fitted the handles to their own axes. They found that straight-grained hickory makes the best axe handles. This practice of fitting axe handles to axe heads led to phrases in our common conversation that still exist today. Compliments like, “You handled that well,” or “You handle yourself well,” come from fitting axes and handles. The opposite is also true. “That was poorly handled,” means that a poor job was done.