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Axe Care Tips
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An article on axe skills may seem out of place given today's environmental sensitivity and no-trace camping, but the increased use of wood-burning stoves and involvement in forestry conservation projects mean that Scouts still need to know how to use wood-cutting tools safely and efficiently. Keep in mind Scouting's ethics and practise axe handling skills only on dead or downed trees.

Our accident and injury survey (J/J '91) identified knife and axe injuries in Scouting as a potential concern. Let's look at some points to remember when teaching Scouts the proper way to handle an axe.

Choosing the Tool

First, what is the right axe for the job at camp? Experienced campers favour a small pack axe for cutting firewood and light chopping. For chopping logs and limbing trees, they choose the larger pole or three-quarter axe, which takes both hands to use safely. The still larger logger's double-bitted axe is overkill

for most Scouting situations.

When choosing a pole axe, select a handle about as long as your arm from armpit to finger tips. Check the axe for balance; you don't want a heavy head on a light handle. The quality of steel used for the head affects the ability of the bit to hold an edge. Imitation "army surplus" axes that can't hold an edge will give you less cutting power and a whole lot of frustration. Buy quality steel heads.

Check the oval-shaped end of the axe handle to see which way the wood grain runs. Look for grain that runs parallel to the length of the oval. That handle will absorb the hitting shock better than one with crooked grain running across the oval.

Next, lay the handle along a straight line and eyeball it for warpage. For best performance, you want a nice straight handle with no knots. Avoid handles finished with varnish or glossy paint. They can raise friction blisters and become dangerously slippery when wet.

An axe must be sharp to do its work. To sharpen your axe, place the head in a vise or peg it against a small log. Carefully run an angle file in one continuous stroke along the bit from heel to toe. Make six or seven strokes, turn the head, and do the other side. Concentrate on the entire cutting edge, not just the nicks.

Using the tool

Before you start cutting, prepare the area. Grasp the axe head and swing the handle around, over and below to see if it contacts any brush or overhanging branches. Make sure spectators stand a minimum of two axe handle-lengths away so that they can't be hit

by the axe or flying chips.

Always use a chopping block. It can be an old stump or thick deadfall. Never chop into the dirt. It will dull the blade, and you run the risk that the axe may hit a rock and glance off into you.

Let the axe head do the work. The keenness of the blade and weight of the head perform the cutting. There's no need to wind up like Babe Ruth. Lift the axe head with a smooth wrist and forearm motion, aim the bit by looking at the point you want to hit, and let the axe head fall in a guided driven drop.

Contact chopping is a safe method to learn for cutting sticks and small firewood pieces. You keep the axe bit in contact with the wood you want to chop throughout the cutting, bringing both down against the chopping block at the same time. First, tap the bit into the wood where you want to cut. Hold the axe handle with one hand; with the other, grasp the wood a safe distance from the axe head. Raise axe and wood, and bring down both in a guided drop to the block. Continue until the head splits the wood.

Limbing is the process of removing branches from a downed tree. Always work towards the top of the tree while chopping branches. If you chop into a branch crotch, the axe head is likely to stick. For safety, stand on the side of the trunk opposite the branches you are cutting. This keeps the tree between you and the axe head.

Logging or "bucking" is the term for cutting a tree into suitable lengths for transport or burning. In logging, you start with "V" shaped cuts, each as wide as the tree is thick. Continue cutting until the axe goes through.

For splitting logs into pieces for the fireplace, wood stove or campfire, stand up the log on the chopping block. Pick out a splitting line, line up your blade, and swing down. When you swing your axe, it's a good idea to flex your knees and follow through so that the angle between wood and axe at contact is 90 degrees. This way, if the axe glances off the wood, it will not hit you.

Never lean the wood against a log on the ground and chop from the opposite side so that the log will stop the axe when it comes through. If you hit a little high, the wood will flip up and whack you on the head.

And never lay the wood on the ground, straddle it, and swing the axe into the end. One of two things can happen. Either the wood will go shooting off like a croquet ball, or your leg will go shooting off like a croquet mallet handle. Use the chopping block for all wood splitting.

When you are finished cutting for the day, carry the axe by holding it just under the head. Point the blade down or away from you to minimize the chance you will fall on top of the blade if you trip. Keep the axe head in a sheath or securely sunk into a stump or log. Never sink an axe into a live tree or leave it lying about camp.

An axe is like any tool. Cared for properly and used wisely, it can make the job of cutting and splitting wood easy, safe and enjoyable.

Resources

Field book, Boy Scouts of America

Fieldbook for Canadian Scouting, Scouts Canada

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Woodpile Axes, Blair and Ketchum's Country Journal; October 1977.