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Subject: The Scout Staff..

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The Spirit of the Staff

Greybeard

Leader Magazine, May 1989.

A staff is a basic tool for the outdoor traveller. For thousands of years, the walking stick has been symbol, weapon, record, and support for the tired feet and legs of the wanderer. Even today, on the trail or in camp, it has a hundred uses.

For centuries, labourers used the staff to support loads and defend themselves against man and beast. Egyptian hieroglyphics picture travellers with sticks in hand. The Bible is full of references to staffs. The ancient Druids, who believed each copse had its own living spirit, apologized to a tree before cutting it for a staff. Banned from owning conventional weapons, the poor of many countries traditionally turned to the staff for protection.

The staff is also a symbol of authority and power. Moses used his to part the sea and to get water from a rock. In Egypt, the staff and the shorter rod were the Pharaoh's symbols of office. Today, the mace, an ornate and stylized version of a staff, symbolizes the power of parliament. At the same time, the staff, especially a staff with a crook, has always represented the humble shepherd. Truly, this is a stick for all men.

In B.-P's day, the staff was considered an important part of a Scout's outdoor equipment. Today, a stylized figure with a staff marks trails in many modern parks and is often used to indicate the availability of hiking trails in

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recreation and wilderness areas. In many countries, the same symbol indicates a hostel - a place of rest for a weary walker.

As a weapon, a stick or cudgel was once a match for the sword, at least in legend. Sensei (master) Frank Lee of Martial Arts International says two major forms of the staff are used in modern oriental martial arts, but he also says that "unless a person is trained to know the spirit of the staff, it is just a stick."

Record keeping is one of the oldest uses for a staff. The ancient Norse used a notched stick called a skor to keep track of numerical information, and the word stuck around to become today's "score". Some native American peoples carried coup sticks decorated with carvings and feathers to commemorate victories in battle. My wife and I first encountered a modern version of this kind of record keeping in the Alps, where every town and tourist attraction sells little metal crests to tack onto a walking stick. We came away with dozens of tiny tin memories of the places we hiked. Now, you can buy the same kind of metal plaques in Canadian holiday areas such as Banff.

#### On the Trail

People tend to personalize their walking sticks. Frequently, they are ornately carved. Many Scouts "keep skor" by carving a mark for every so-many kilometres hiked or inking in the names of trails covered. At the 1971 World Jamboree in Japan, for example, Scouts who climbed Mount Fuji were issued a staff at the bottom. At each checkpoint along the way, it was marked with Japanese characters.

Decorated or not, a staff belongs on the trail. "A hiking stick helps make the miles glide by," wrote Robert Birkby in Boys Life magazine. "It swings comfortably in your hand, offering balance and a rhythm to your gait."

In dense overgrowth, use the staff to push aside brush and cobwebs and to prevent branches from whipping into your face. If the trail is wide enough,

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slip it behind your hips and hoist your pack to give your back a break. You can lift up underbrush to search for berries or pry up logs and rocks to satisfy your curiosity about what's underneath. When it's time for a rest, put your pack on the ground and brace it with the staff for an on-the-spot easy chair.

On more adventurous terrain, the walking stick is even more useful. It is a handy balance aid when crossing log bridges. Used as a brace to lean on, it can be a life-and-sprained-ankle-saver on hills, rocky ground, and slippery-bottomed streams. Marked with a measuring scale (zero at the bottom), it is useful for measuring water depth and the size of specimens. And, it's much safer to poke into holes and behind rocks with a staff rather than your hand.

A staff is handy in many emergency situations, as well. Two staves make a quick litter or stretcher. One can be a reaching aid for a comrade struggling in the water. It will support you if you fall through ice. You can use it as a crutch if necessary, or make it into a mast for a sail on a canoe. Whenever it saves you the time of having to find and cut a pole, you will appreciate having it handy.

In camp, especially above treeline, the staff can become a makeshift ridgepole or tentpole. It is instantly available for lifting hot pots off the fire or propping up a billy of tea. With a few staves, you can produce a flagpole or a camp gadget. Weighted with rocks, snow, or dirt, it becomes a "deadman" to replace those lost tent pegs.

A staff is fun to play with, too. In winter, slide it along the snow in a game of Snowsnakes. In summer, hurl it like a javelin or build it into a pioneering project. And for sheer relaxation on a rainy day or quiet evening, there is little more pleasant than sitting under a tree or tarp and carving a staff.

My favourite hiking stick was one I started with when I first left home. Carved on top with the head of a bearded woodsman, it recorded my climbs and

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hikes, went with me on my honeymoon, saw my move into the country, and was hurled into the air at the birth of my first son. Over the years, such a staff becomes very much a part of your life. When our pup chewed it half through, I was sorely tempted to use it on the mutt and, when it broke shortly after, I felt I had lost a friend. Perhaps Sensei Lee and those old Druids were right. A staff is more than just a piece of wood. There is a spirit to it.

#### Making a Staff

You can make a walking stick from almost any type of wood. Green wood is not suitable and sound conservation practices mean never cutting a living tree. Hardwoods such as ash, oak, and maple are good choices if you can get them. Old Robin Hood would have preferred yew or sweet chestnut. Bamboo is light and strong and, in some areas, diamond willow and saskatoon are popular. Poplar, aspen and birch are okay, although I find them a bit heavy. Conifer saplings are usually straight, light, and strong. Use whatever you can find in your area.

Choose standing deadfall that is straight and free from checks (splits) with the bark firmly attached. When you are ready to strip off the dried bark, a draw stroke works best. It isn't necessary to take off all the bark: simply smooth the stick at the handgrip.

The length of your walking stick is pretty much a matter of taste. Some like a short, light stick just above waist level. Others choose one about chin height. For balance and utility, I've always preferred a staff above the level of my eyes.

Your staff needs to be thick enough to be strong, thin enough to be light, and comfortable to carry. A pole three to four centimetres diameter at the base and four or five at the butt (thick end) is fine for me (I'm on the small side). I carry the butt up because I find the balance better that way, but

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some prefer butt down and others whittle the butt so that the staff is of uniform diameter for its whole length.

When you smooth the handgrip or if you personalize the staff by carving spirals or rings, take care not to cut too deeply. I've seen many carved staffs break at a crucial time. It's best to keep the carving on the head only for safety around the top.

You can protect the lower end with a metal ferrule to reduce wear. A short piece of iron pipe works well. Carve the bottom of the staff until it is just barely too big to fit the pipe, then heat the ferrule with a torch or boiling water. Using a glove or cloth to handle the hot pipe, drive it firmly over the end of the staff. When it cools, it will grip tightly.

If your staff wasn't properly dried, the ferrule may loosen. Drive in a wedge or glue it on with epoxy cement. More simply, you can glue on a rubber cane or crutch tip. This is definitely preferred if you bring the staff into a hostel or hotel room.

Those who are not into rough and rustic can sand or plane the staff and add a finish of any outdoor varnish or occasionally apply a coat of stain or oil. But raw wood takes on a beautiful sheen from perspiration, and you may achieve all the finish you want just by handling your staff kilometre after kilometre.