



United States Department of Agriculture



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## Axe Handles

One afternoon the last week in April  
Showing Kai how to throw a hatchet  
One-half turn and it sticks in a stump.  
He recalls the hatchet head  
Without a handle, in the shop  
And go gets it, and wants it for his own.  
A broken-off axe handle behind the door  
Is long enough for a hatchet,  
We cut it to length and take it  
With the hatchet head  
And working hatchet, to the wood block.  
There I begin to shape the old handle  
With the hatchet, and the phrase  
First learned from Ezra Pound  
Rings in my ears!  
“When making an axe handle  
the pattern is not far off.”  
And I say this to Kai  
“Look: We’ll shape the handle  
By checking the handle  
Of the axe we cut with.”  
And he sees. And I hear it again  
It’s in Lu Ji’s *Wen Fu*, 4th century  
A.D. “Essay on Literature”—in the  
Preface. “In making the handle  
Of an axe  
By cutting wood with an axe  
The model is indeed near at hand.”  
My teacher Shih-hsiang Chen  
Translated that and taught it years ago  
And I see: Pound was an axe,  
Chen was an axe, I am an axe  
And my son a handle, soon  
To be shaping again, model  
And tool, craft of culture,  
How we go on.

—Gary Snyder, *U.S. Poet Laureate*



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Cover illustration—Two different types of single-bit ax and a double-bit ax.

Poem illustration—A father sawing off a broken ax handle to make his son an ax.

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