

Chapter 1 – Introduction

An old saying that experienced axmen commonly hear goes something like, “my grandfather had the same ax his entire life, although he did replace the handle numerous times and the head twice.” While humorous, this saying actually speaks to the intrinsic value of the ax and its place in American history.

Have you ever heard someone say “he can’t get the hang of it?” Today, that expression typically means that someone does not understand something or is unable to complete a task. “Getting the hang of it” actually refers to the proper placement and alignment of an ax head on its handle. While the importance of the ax and the traditional skills required to properly maintain and use it have declined with the development of motorized tools (such as chain saws), the importance of the ax is so ingrained in our culture that we will forever use the expressions associated with it.

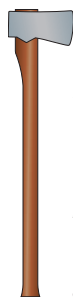
In this manual, the author provides a brief history of the ax, describes various types of axes and their uses, and explains how to choose, maintain, and personalize an ax to fit your needs. He also describes the historic importance of the ax in the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, and explains why the ax is still relevant for fulfilling the Forest Service mission of caring for the land and serving people.

This manual serves as a guide for Forest Service employees, volunteers, and cooperators who work in the backcountry to maintain Forest Service trail systems, preserve historic structures, and protect wildlands. It is dedicated to preserving knowledge about the working ax and to the men and women who use this fundamental tool in the forests of America. It is not a comprehensive guide to axes and ax use, but is rather a primer to help ax users gain an understanding of this important tool and its safe and proper use.

While this manual focuses mainly on axes, it also contains information about crosscut saws and wedges. Crosscut saws and wedges are companion tools to the ax and are particularly useful in wilderness settings where the use of motorized tools is prohibited.

To many of our ancestors on this continent, the ax was an integral part of life and a prized possession. People used axes, along with other traditional tools, to help carve out an existence on the vast American frontier. In some ways, the ax was as important to our ancestors as food and shelter, simply because it helped them to acquire both. The ax is, quite literally, one of the tools that helped to build America.

At first glance, the ax appears basic and uncomplicated, but it is far more than a metal wedge on the end of a stick. You can learn the basic skills to use this tool in a short time, but learning to master the skills takes a lifetime.



Let us guide our students over the road of discipline from materials, through function, to creative work. Let us lead them into the healthy world of primitive building methods, where there was meaning in every stroke of an axe, expression in every bite of chisel.

—Ludwig Mies van der Rohe

At one time, people learned traditional skills through hands-on tutoring and mentorship. As the use of traditional tools declined, hands-on instruction also declined. Other methods for conveying information about traditional skills evolved. Most recently, the internet has become a source of information for people interested in ax use and traditional skills in general.



There are hundreds of different ax styles and patterns (figure 1–1), covering a wide variety of specialized uses. This manual focuses mainly on American-style axes used in a forest setting. Axes from Australia and New Zealand also deserve recognition. People use these wider-faced, single-bit axes extensively in America’s national forests; they are excellent for field and trail use.

Ax aficionados have very strong opinions about axes. Personal preferences for specific ax head styles, ax grinds, and handle lengths are an integral part of ax use. Historically, variations in axes generally worked for the needs of specific regions, or they became phased out or changed over time. There is no universal best choice for an ax, but over time and with trial and error, you can find the ax that works best for you.



Figure 1–1 – Various ax styles and patterns.

A quality ax can last a lifetime with proper care, so choose your ax carefully and maintain it diligently. A new, mass-produced ax that you buy from the store today may not be an efficient cutting tool until you profile and sharpen it to fit your needs. Learn proper filing and chopping techniques and you will find your jobs easier.

Whether you use an ax or a crosscut saw, allow the tool do the work. A sharp, well-balanced tool will do the hard work for you; all you need to provide is the guiding force and direction. Chopping or sawing is strenuous, but it does not have to be difficult. Do not force the tool. Simply allow yourself to be an extension of it. Learn to develop a rhythm that enables you to move with the tool. Focus on smooth, fluid movements in conjunction with your breathing and you will find the work more enjoyable and rewarding. If you are fortunate enough to observe people who truly know how to use these tools, you will see a measure of grace and style in their movements.

Throughout his career, the author has been fortunate enough to receive mentoring from some of the best axmen in the Forest Service. The term “axman” is generic and refers to either male or female ax users.

The author’s hope is to encourage readers to better appreciate the ax through an understanding of its nuances so that they may find the right ax for themselves and develop their own safe chopping habits and styles.

