

R. C. "Doc" Loomis

On The Trail . .

With your Knife, Ax & Dutch Oven

R. C. "Doc" Loomis

A new axe is **not** ready for use.

It needs sharpening, the head needs tightening and wedging, and the factory finish should be sand-papered off and raw linseed oil added.

If used as it is the head will soon work loose on the helve or handle which is dangerous. First saw off about one half inch of the toe of fawn foot or pointed end of handle, then holding it just below there with head hanging down strike the flat top several sharp blows with a hammer or hand axe. This will drive handle through head one half inch or less. This should be sawed off about a penny or dime thickness from the head and the edge of the remainder bradded over with a hammer. This swells the handle and helps keep head in place. To be doubly sure that head will stay tight drive in two or three fence staples instead of ordinary metal wedges. These do not wedge any better than the conventional type but are much easier to get out when handle is broken.

When the axe is properly used one hand slides down and up the handle with each chop. To facilitate this, thoroughly sand-paper the handle removing the factory finish if any and give it a coat or two of raw linseed oil. This waterproofs and toughens handle and will produce a high polish with use.

Next and last is the sharpening procedure. Then you will be ready to try out this woodsman's friend and companion and learn to respect and care for it as he does.

I prefer a six-inch flat mill file for sharpening an axe in camp. It will do a better job than a larger file, it takes up less space in your duffel, it weighs less, and costs less than a larger file. Lean axe against peg or rock, then kneel down on one knee and put the other foot on the axe handle or helve to hold it solid. Hold your file in the right hand and support the front end with first two fingers of left hand. This puts your hand to one side so you can see what you are doing.

A cardboard or leather guard is handy in case the file slips, and always use a handle on your file. Hold your file at a fairly flat angle so that it cuts an inch or less back from the bit. The direction of the stroke is at right angles to the cutting edge or bit of the axe. Each stroke should drift about file width and overlap the preceding stroke. Lift up the file or bring

it back in light contact with axe — never attempt to file on return stroke. Bringing the file back in light contact with the axe serves two purposes; it acts as a guide for your next stroke and also sweeps out chips that did not fall out on the forward stroke. Gradually increase angle of file until it is cutting on the bit. If you watch closely you can see a change of color on the side of the axe due to variation in light reflection. You can tell in that way exactly where you are filing. When one side is done, go all over it again taking light strokes. This polishes and takes out file marks. Turn it over and file the other side as near as possible like the first side. There are several ways you can hold it. The easiest way is to alternate the knee and foot position and file down under your leg. It looks uncomfortable but it isn't. An axe filed in this manner with a six-inch file does not need stoning for practical use around camp. However, at times it is good procedure. For the same reason that I like the six-inch flat mill file best, I like this pocket stone because it is small, light in weight and it is cheap, but a little harder to hold than a larger one. I have been using this one seven or eight years. I've used it a lot, always keeping it clean and dry. You should not put oil, spit or water on it. A clean dry stone stays sharp as new till it is worn in two with use. There are several different ways of holding this size stone, but between the thumb and second finger with index finger for support is the easiest and safest. With axe in left hand, elbows at sides, use about a one-inch circular motion. If you make too large a circle the stone slips off the bit and then you get a cut finger.

Keeping elbows at sides helps prevent this. Do both sides the same. Here again the stone scratches produce changes in light reflection and you can tell exactly where stone is cutting.

We have talked a lot about sharpening an axe but how do we know when it is sharp? Look at it. If where the two sides meet, you can see a fine dark, hair-like line, it is sharp. If a silvery streak shows up at any place it is caused by light reflecting from a dull spot and it should be stoned or filed till silvery streak disappears. All nicks should not be taken out at each sharpening as the bit would be worn away too fast.

Now, we will sharpen the knife. Hold the whetrock the same way to sharpen the pocket knife as you do the axe, only change hands, and the knife is moved instead of the whetrock. Lay the blade down flat on the whetrock and tip it up just enough so that the whetrock does not scratch the side of the blade. Too much tip up will produce a blunt edge. Here again both elbows should be down by your sides. Blade down flat, tip it up and use circular motion — over flat, up a little bit, circular motion. When it is nearly sharp, use a whittling stroke three or four times on each side and repeat several times. It looks as though your knife was taking a shaving off the whetrock but instead the whetrock is taking a shaving off of the knife. The same test goes for the knife. Look at it and see if there is light reflection any place. CAUTION! Before using whetstone on knife or axe, be sure the blade or bit is free of grease, pitch or other foreign material.

Now we will cut some wood, build a fire, and bake some bread right here

in a jiffy. It is not the mark of a novice to reach out with axe and measure your distance from the chopping block or anything you are going to chop. It is very good procedure. Know that you are going to hit the chopping block if you miss or go through the wood.

A good slogan for your knife and axe program and for your shooting program is "ALWAYS KNOW WHAT YOU ARE GOING TO HIT WHEN YOU MISS WHAT YOU ARE LOOKING AT." Always use a chopping block when cutting small fire wood. Cut through the wood at an angle. If the limb is big and heavy, chop through from both sides. Now notice the way I handle the axe, take my measure, this hand slips down and picks it up and slips back as I take a free easy swing downward at about a 45 degree angle for one side of the cut and next the overhand stroke for the other side. You are all familiar with the contact method of cutting your kindling. The important thing is that the hand holding the wood and hand holding the axe are in contact as well as the wood and axe. Now, if your axe is sharp, you can save wear and tear on your pocket knife by making a fuzz stick with your axe. It isn't necessary to make a whittling project out of it. Fuzz it up a little bit and you are ready to lay your fire. I want you to pay particular attention to this fire laying. It is likely different than anything you have used. Lean the fuzz sticks or small starting wood against a larger piece about 2 inches in diameter. That provides a place to get the match directly under the kindling along about its middle. Be sure the match is burning well before you attempt to light the fire. As soon as the kindling is burning good add a little more fire wood where the flame is hottest and then of wood split to about broom handle size or larger, lay a crisscross fire. This wood does not have to be put on there at right angles. Just so it lays in there crisscross so that it will get plenty of air and burn down to coals by the time the bread and dutch oven are ready. Green wood of some kind is the best for fire logs.

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Now, form a semicircle around the chuck box and I will show you how to make biscuits. When you learn to make bread out of flour, baking powder and water, etc., you won't ever have to use the prepared mixtures again. I will start with the recipe. Maybe some of you will want to take it down.

It is a good idea to get everything you need out of your chuck box and as you use it, put it back. The ingredients doubled will make 25 to 30 biscuits or fill a fourteen-inch oven. This will be what I call drop biscuits, not the rolled kind — they are too messy for camp:

- 1 Cup Flour
- 1 Rounding tsp. Baking Powder (lower altitudes use more)
- ¼ tsp. Salt (about)
- 1 tbsp. (rounding) Shortening
- 1 tbsp. (rounding) Sugar

Melt the shortening. In place of sifting the dry ingredients like a lot of recipes say, just stir them up with a blender or fork or spoon to work air into it. This makes lighter biscuits. I never measure the water; put in less

than you need and keep adding until you get the right consistency. Put the melted shortening in with the water and stir it quickly so the shortening does not harden. The dough should be a lot thicker than pancake batter and not quite as thick as rolled biscuits. You can use milk instead of water, it doesn't make any difference. Milk makes them a little richer.

This basic recipe can be used to make several other things that are mighty good in camp with just a slight variation. For breakfast, you can make good coffee cake by adding sugar, butter, cinnamon and maybe raisins, to top of bread after it is in the oven. By adding an egg, and a pinch of nutmeg for each cup of flour and etc. and doubling the sugar, you can have a good cobbler dough or pancake batter. For pancakes, add more liquid making a thinner batter. You don't have to vary the flour or baking powder at all.

Your oven is about hot enough when the grease begins to spread apart and sort of draws up in ridges and smokes slightly. Now you push the dough off the spoon with one finger. The lid should be hot enough so that it gives a definite sizzle when touched with wet finger. Cover lid with hot coals and set over on a few coals after it is loaded. If coals are on a piece of tin or flat rock, they live longer. Be careful of too much heat on the bottom.

If the heat is right, they should be ready in about 15 minutes. After the biscuits have been in about five minutes, you can look at them by tipping the lid a little with lid hook to see how they are coming. If they have risen and are just starting to brown then they are about right. If they are definitely brown in five minutes, it is too hot and bread will burn before it is baked through. You had better let a little cold air in by removing lid for a couple seconds.

There are two ways that you can break dutch ovens — accidently and innocently. One is to put it on a campfire with part of the oven on the fire and part of it out where the air is cold. The unequal expansion will crack the cold side. Another way is pouring cold water in it as in making gravy. You should either use hot water or set your oven off the fire until it cools down some.

You can bake anything in a dutch oven that you can bake at home on a stove, only there is more guess work. However, you can learn by experience. A lot depends on the kind of wood and the weather. A hard wood is the best.

The lid of the dutch oven makes an excellent griddle for pancakes or broiling steak. When using more than one oven the second can be placed on top of first to avoid putting more coals on the ground.

You should never scour your dutch oven with sand or scrape it with a knife. Use a scrub brush or a cloth, then after it is wiped dry, put it on the heat again and grease so it won't rust. After bread has been removed, it only needs wiping out with a cloth to remove crumbs and smear grease evenly all over. Then it will be ready for tomorrow or a year from tomorrow.

Memo from

RAY "DOC" LOOMIS

PHILMONT SCOUT RANCH

Nov. 17, 1954

Dear Dave,-
I had to hear from a
J. L. T. No - I don't remember you as an
individual Dave, but a J. L. T. is a
J. L. T. the world over and it makes me
very happy to hear from one and to learn
that the Zastro stuff has been of
benefit to him.

Please feel free and welcome
to reproduce any or all of "On the Trail".
I am glad you like it.

I give my best regards to all the
~~gang~~ gang when you see them.

The best to you Dave in your training
work. It is great stuff.

Sincerely yours

"Doc"
Loomis