materials and shingle our shelter, regardless of whether or not there is a cloud in the sky, or whether or not it has rained at all in a month.

Part of the reason we act this way stems from our cultural upbringing. Another part of it is simply because it is easier for those of us who are instructors to teach something rather than to teach nothing. It is much easier to teach how to make something than to teach how not to need to make anything. The do-something approach to primitive skills is to make everything you need, while the do-nothing method is to find everything.

For example, the do-nothing method of shelter is to find shelter, rather than to build it. Two hours spent searching for a partial shelter that can be improved upon can easily save you two hours of hard-working construction time, and you will usually get a better shelter this way. More so, the do-nothing method of shelter is to look first at the incoming weather, and to build only what is needed. If it is not going to rain then you may be able to do-nothing to rain-proof your shelter. Then perhaps you will only need to put your efforts into a shelter that will keep you warm, instead of both warm and dry.

There are many things, both small and large, that a person can do, or not do, to better the art of doing nothing. This can be as simple as cupping one's hands to drink from the stream, instead of making and carrying a cup, to breaking sticks to find a sharpened point, rather than using a knife to methodically carve out a digging stick. Hand carved wooden spoons and forks are do-something utensils that you have to manufacture, carry, and worst, that you have to clean. But chopsticks (twigs) are do-nothing utensils that do not need to be manufactured or carried, and you can toss them in the fire when you are done.

Henry David Thoreau wrote of having a rock for a paperweight at his cabin by Walden pond. He threw it out when he discovered he had to dust it. This is the very essence of a do-nothing attitude.

The do-nothing approach to primitive skills is something that you do. Doing nothing is a way of saving time and energy, so that you can finish your daily work more effectively. One thing that I have found through the years of experimental research into primitive skills, is that there is rarely enough hours in a day to complete all of a day's tasks. It is difficult to go out and build a shelter, make a working bowdrill set, set traps, dig roots, make bowls and spoons, and cook dinner. Hunter-gatherer societies succeeded in working only two to three hours per day, yet in our efforts to reproduce their lifestyle we end up working all day.

Doing nothing is an approach to research; it is a way of thinking and doing. For instance, I do a lot of timed studies of various primitive skills: i.e.: how long does it take to construct a particular shelter? How much of a particular food resource can I harvest per hour? Can I increase the harvest using different gathering techniques? One thing I have noted is that it is only marginally economical to manufacture common primitive deadfall traps. It is time intensive; it adds weight to carry, and the traps often have short life-spans. The do-nothing alternative is to use whatever is at hand, to pick up sticks and assemble them into a trap, without even using a knife. Preliminary tests of this "no-method" have produced results equal to conventional, carved and manufactured traps, but with a much smaller investment of time.

Primitive hunter-gatherer type cultures were very good at doing nothing. Exactly how well they did this is difficult to determine, however, because doing nothing leaves nothing behind for the archaeological record. Every time we find an artifact we have documentation of something they did; yet the most important part of their skills may have been what they did not, and there is no way to discover what that was by studying what they did.

Nevertheless, what you will discover for yourself, as you learn the art of doing nothing is that you are much more at home in the wilderness. No longer will you be so dependent on a lot of tools and gadgets; no longer will you need to shape the elements of nature to fit our western definitions. You will find you need less and less, until one day you find you need nothing at all. Then you will have the time on your hands so that you can choose to do nothing, or even to go do something.

Thomas J. Elpel is the director of Hollowtop Outdoor Primitive School in Pony Montana, the author of four books, including Participating in Nature: Thomas J. Elpel's Field Guide to Primitive Living Skills, and the Art of Nothing Wilderness Survival Video Series. www.hollowtop.com

The Try Stick

by Mors Kochanski

The purpose behind the try stick is to practice and demonstrate the skilful use of the knife as a wood carving tool, as well as to learn some of the practical operations that may be used in wilderness living. Some of the carving operations may be of very practical application, others are meant to tax the skill of the carver and some may be used for decorative purposes.

Suitable carving wood:

Any straight-grained, knot free wood will do for the stick with one of the better woods being a straight piece of willow (Salix). Although it may be used green the willow will be at its best if it is peeled and dried. A stick two to three centimetres in diameter and armpit to fingertip long may accommodate most of the carving operations.

Knife sharpening mandatory:

Implicit in the making of the try stick is a knife sharpened to the minimal degree of sharpness for working with wood. Also, the safe use of the knife should be reviewed.

Keeping the work clean:

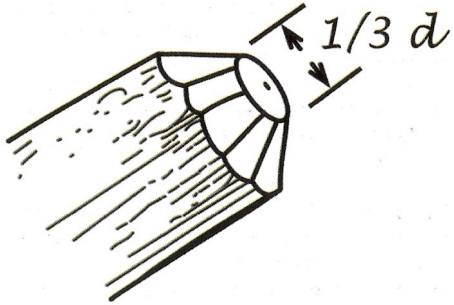
A properly executed try stick should be free of grime. Wash the hands before each carving session and leave the operations slightly unfinished until all are done and then carry out the finishing touches to clean wood.

Efficient design:

Although the imagination may run rampant as to what might be carved on the try stick, it may be wise to learn how to carve the useful operations efficiently and quickly. It should take less than a minute to carve a pot hook, for instance. The hook should also be so well made that there is little chance that the bail of a pot will slip out of it or the hook split off as might happen if it is made too near the end of the stick.

Cutting through the stick:

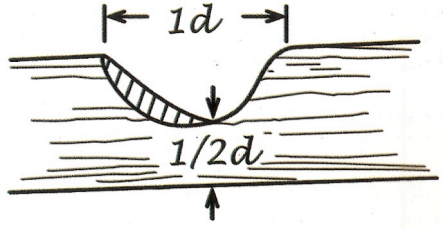
One of the more basic operations is cutting through a stick. Small cuts at about a 45 degree angle are made completely around the stick and repeated if the stick is quite thick. If your wrist is weak then this step may be repeated as many times as necessary until about one third of the stick is left. The stick is then broken over the knee or by giving it a sharp rap on a log. The remaining fracture is trimmed off neatly.



Trimmed end of stick

The round notch:

This notch may be used in building the Roycraft 'A' packframe. It is one of the simplest common notches in round log buildings. The notch should be the same diameter as the stick, going half way through he stick and be perfectly round.



The round notch

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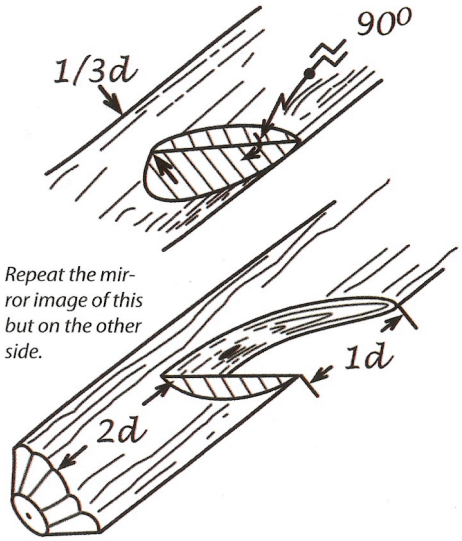
The pot hook:

The hook should not be carved any closer to the end than 3 or 4 centimetres or it may split off in use. The throat of the hook should take up about two thirds of the stick.



Repeat the mirror image of this but on the other side.

Pot hook

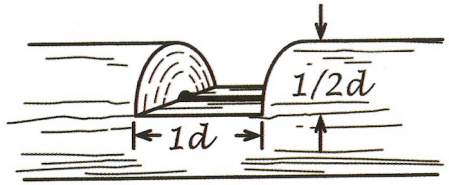
The saddle notch:

This notch is commonly used in log building. It is easily expedited with an axe as no curved cuts have to be made.

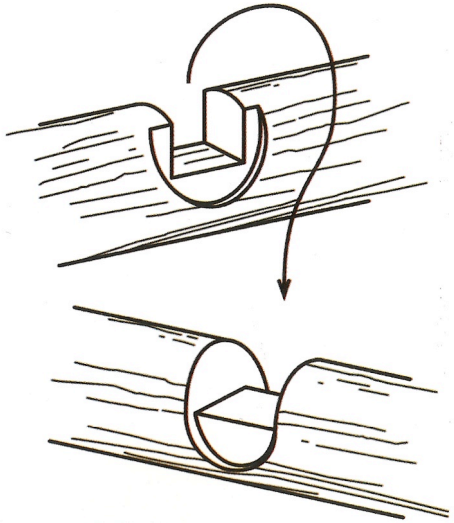
The saddle notch

The square notch:

This notch is used in a special sense in log building. It might be used for the first logs laid down and for the last logs to complete the walls as it resists moving or rolling. In log construction the notch may be made as shown to achieve a natural appearing fit. For the purposes of the try stick the notch may be simply rendered as shown. It should go half way through the stick and all angles should be 90 degrees.



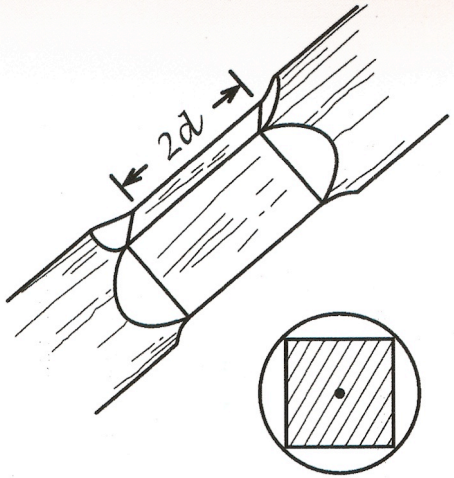
The square notch in log construction



The ordinary square notch

The Mitered lapped notch:

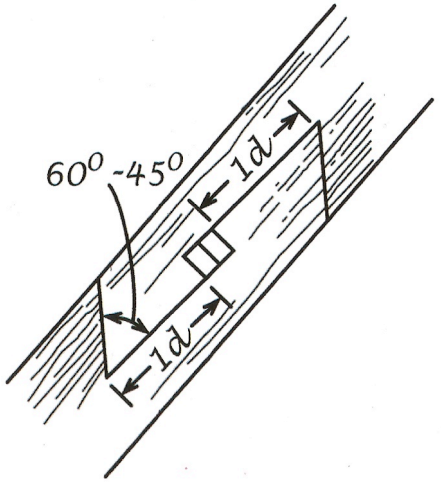
This notch is used in decorative and detailed work in log construction. It can also be used with the upright stick of the figure 4 deadfall trigger. The notch is nothing more than squaring the round stick. The flattened faces of the notch may be multiples of the diameter of the stick.



The mitred lapped notch

The Jogged and wedged splice:

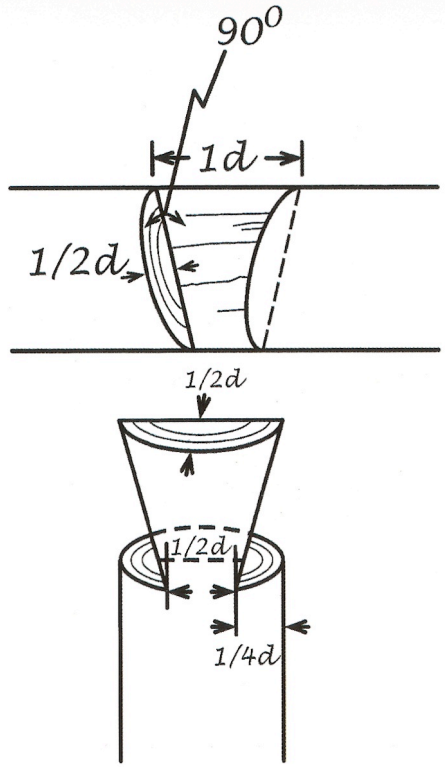
This operation exemplifies the splicing of logs end to end. There is considerable latitude to the angles used. 60 to 45 degrees is recommended for the purpose of this carving.



The jogged and wedged splice

The dovetail pin and socket:

This is a method of joining one stick to another at 90 degrees for a variety of applications.



The dovetail pin and socket

The dovetail notch:

This notch should go half way through the stick. You may carve the notch first and then fit the pin to suit. It is more difficult doing it the other way around. Start by cutting a narrow 'V' notch and then extend it into the dovetail. (see next page for diagram)

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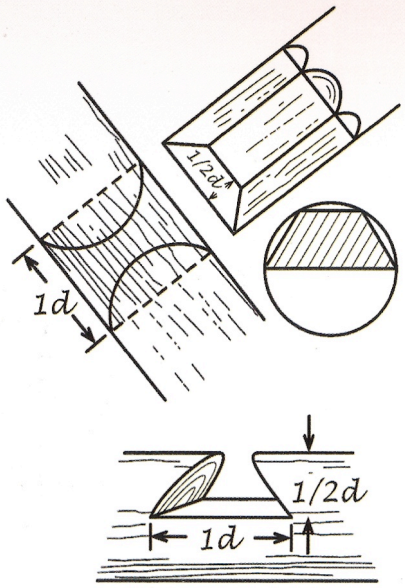
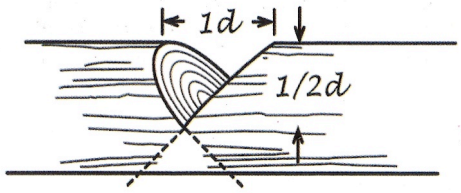


The dovetail notch

The 'V' notch:

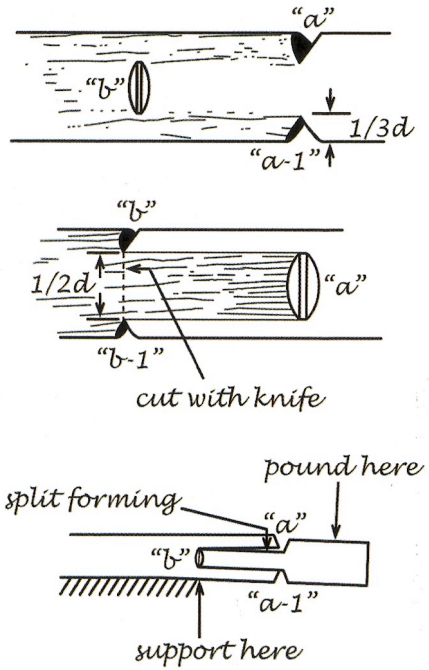
The opening of the 'V' should be the same diameter of the stick and the notch should go halfway through the stick.



The 'V' notch

The spear notch:

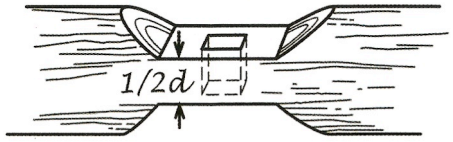
This notch is used for fitting an arrow head or spear point on a shaft, for making the Bow String notch on an arrow, for making a netting needle (use a green willow and tie the notch shut until it is dry) and many other applications. 'V' notches 'a' and 'a-1' opposite each other should not be any deeper than one third of the diameter of the stick or the stick will break from 'a' to 'a-1'. The shallow notches 'b' and 'b-1' should be made to a depth of about one quarter of the stick. With the knife tip cut out the fibres 90 degrees to their grain and as deep as possible. The stick is then laid on a flat surface supported at the general region of points 'b' and 'b-1' as shown in the figure and given sharp blows with the hand or a stick, gradually increasing the force until a snap is heard. The stick is turned over and the process is repeated to break out the other side of the notch. The stick is then worked back and forth to further loosen it and the notch is then broken out.



The spear notch

The knife tip mortice:

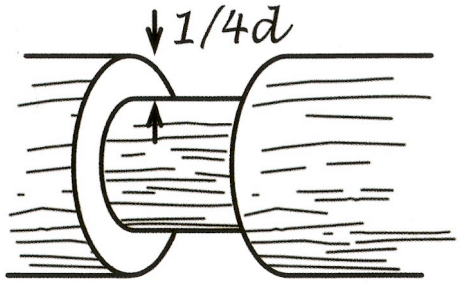
(Hole through stick). Whenever a hole through a stick is wanted and the knife is the only available tool to make it with, the following procedure is used. The stick first has to be thinned down. If you do not thin the stick down enough you will have difficulty in making a hole through it with a knife and if you make it too thin the stick may be too weak for your purposes. The easiest way to make the hole is to make it square or rectangular by cutting the fibres at 90 degrees from both sides and prying the chips out. Trying to drill a round hole with a knife tip usually results in a fuzzy mess. The hole through the stick is used in the bow for a fire drill, for choke bars in some snares and for construction the ojibway bird snare.



The knife tip mortice

Diameter reduction:

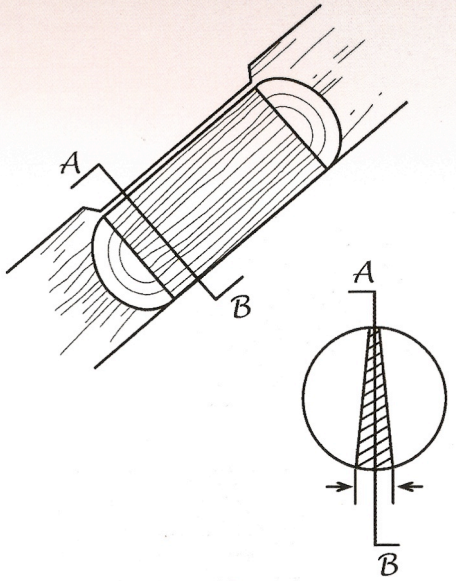
This operation is simply reducing the diameter of the stick. Leave one half of the diameter of the stick remaining or it may be unduly weakened. The width of the reduction should be about the diameter of the stick. One direct application of the reduction is for the central portion of a toggle.



Diameter reduction

The knife edge:

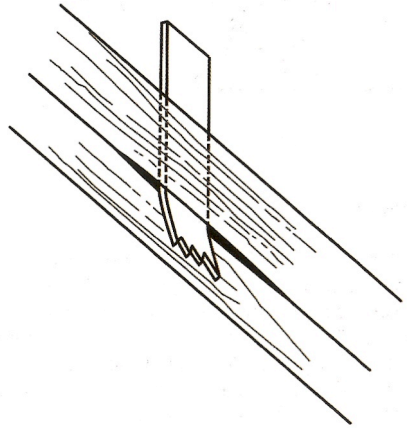
This operation, in combination with the split end of a stick, does away with the necessity of using a forked stick in cooking cranes and certain deadfall traps. The thickness remaining is about one quarter the diameter of the stick.



The knife edge

The split:

This operation is simply splitting the stick in its central portion by driving a knife through it. A chip or piece of bark is put in the split to prove it has been done. This operation has a variety of applications such as in basket weaving, fletching primitive arrows and making pot hooks.



The split

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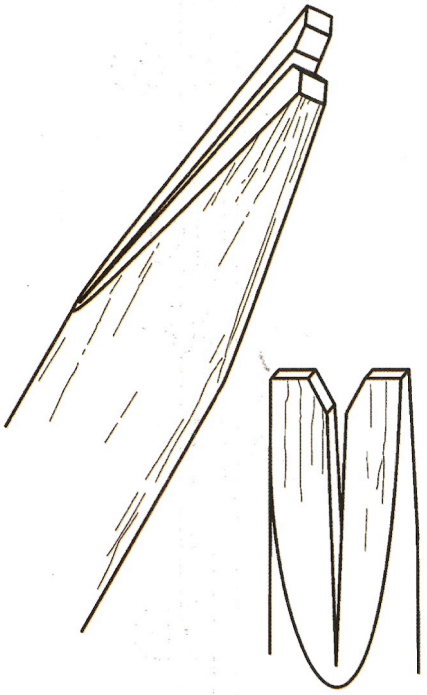
Root stripper:

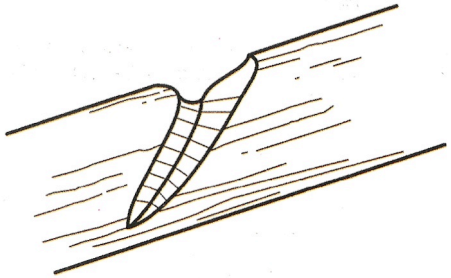
The root stripper is a tool used to remove the bark from spruce roots. It is simply a sophisticated split that allows easy insertion of the root to be stripped.



The root stripper

The bow notch:

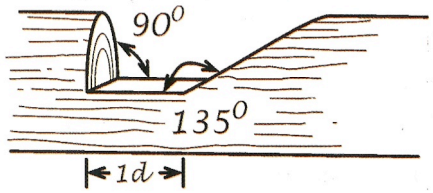
This is the notch used in connection with attaching a bow string to the limbs of a bow. This notch is a shallow form of pot hook.



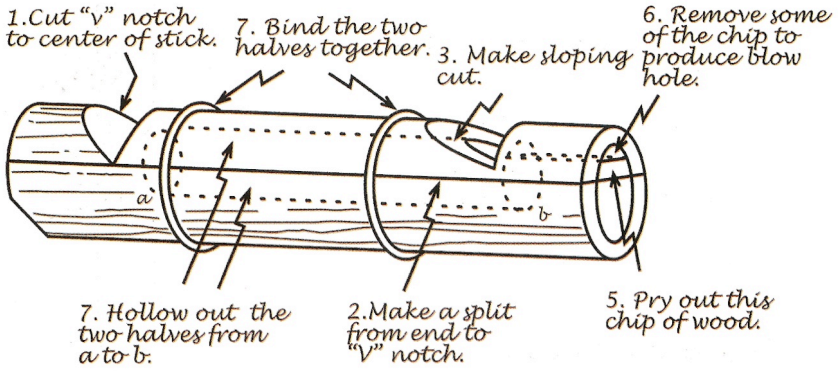
The bow notch

The latch notch:

This notch is used in conjunction with some of the deadfall trigger mechanisms. The notch should go about half way through the stick.



The latch notch



The whistle

The sample stick

The purpose of the try stick is to practice and demonstrate the skilful use of you knife. The operations either represent some useful application, or in themselves require skill to carve with the knife.

The work has to be done with a sharp knife and the carved wood should not be grubby after you are done.

1. End neatly trimmed
2. Reduction – for toggles, packframe construction
3. Pot hook notch
4. Saddle notch – packframe construction
5. Dovetail notch – packframe, cooking crane, deadfall trigger mechanism
6. 90 degree latch – deadfall trigger
7. Planes 90 degrees to each other – deadfall trigger
8. Split
9. Piece of bark inserted in split
10. Notch for spearpoint
11. Flute or Whistle
12. Bow nock
13. Hole through stick – Bow drill, Ojibway bird snare
14. Stripper to remove bark from roots
15. If the stick used is willow the bark may first be peeled off, scraped and twisted into cord.

Diagrams redrawn from originals by James