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Crooked knives

OldJimbo

- Gear reviews and tests - Edged tools -



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Description :

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Crooked knives

A crooked knife is just a knife with the blade bent up at the end along the flat surface. This lets you whittle concave surfaces into wood. The theory is that you can do lots of woodworking using just an axe, fixed blade knife, and crooked knife. No chisels, planes, or other woodworking tools necessary! This tool is held with the blade coming out of the bottom of the fist, and pulled toward you. Some people make an L shaped handle with the short arm of the L being a thumb rest. There is a second type of crooked knife, which has the L shaped handle but a straight blade coming out of the bottom at 90 degrees. This type is used in splitting for basket making since it gives more leverage and control in splitting the wood used in the basket, because the design makes it easy to tilt. This design is only of use in making baskets.

I first came across crooked knives back in the 70's when I had the chance to buy a bunch of Hudson Bay Company crooked knife blanks. These arrived at the main store and no one knew what to make of them - so I got them for only a couple of dollars each. I then had to find out just what they were used for! After I came to Kitimat I gave them away to students who were getting into woodcarving. These were marked with HBC logo and the Sheffield maker. They weren't so great with a fairly straight blade and curved tip. The steel was soft. Unless you are a collector a \$10 hoof knife as described below will be a vastly better tool. Lots of detailed useless stuff below - but it sort of shows my struggles with getting a crooked knife. All you really need to know is to get a cheap Mora hoof knife, hold it in your fist with the blade coming out of the bottom. Mark the position of your thumb along the back of the handle and cut the handle along the mark with a coping saw, and sand. It'll take a while to re-profile the blade to a single bevel and get it razor sharp - just use a Dremel tool carefully. All done except for a nice sheath and getting to whittling.. Once you've used one of these tools for a while you'll know what to look for in terms of the expensive stuff. The hoof knives come in left and right-handed versions because of the curve of the blade, so just remember to ask for the one that matches the hand you want to use. Happy whittling!

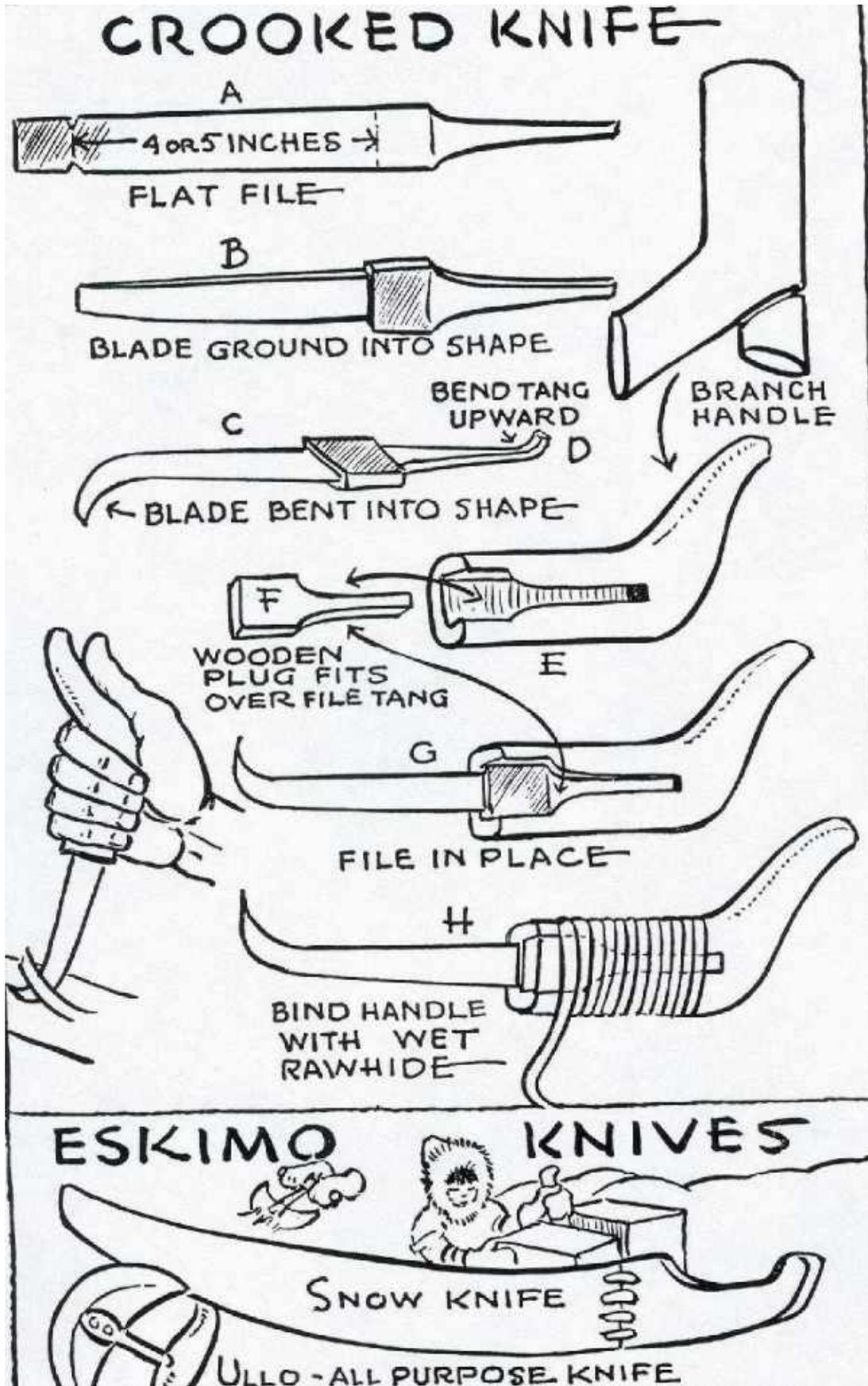
Here's a scan of a page from "Wildwood Wisdom" by Ellsworth Jaeger which shows construction and use. This book is now available from:

Shelter Publications, Inc. Shelterpub.com

415 868-0280

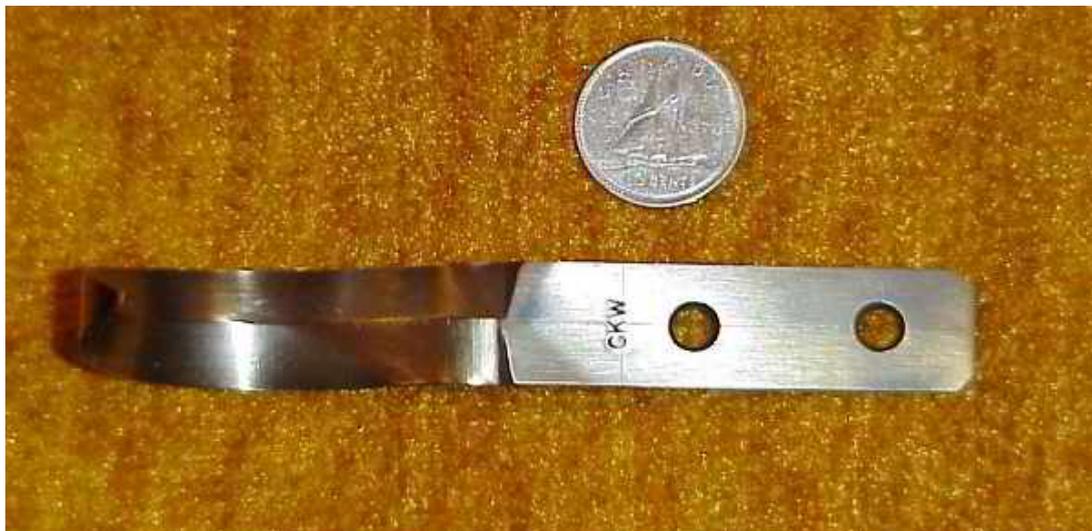
415 868-9053 fax

The really good news is that they not only have the Ellsworth Jaeger book back in print, but they also have the Dan Beard book, "Shelters Shacks and Shanties" and a newer shelters book. It's good to see these old books back in circulation, because while they're old, the information is very applicable today.



Here's what you get when you try to order a crooked knife now:

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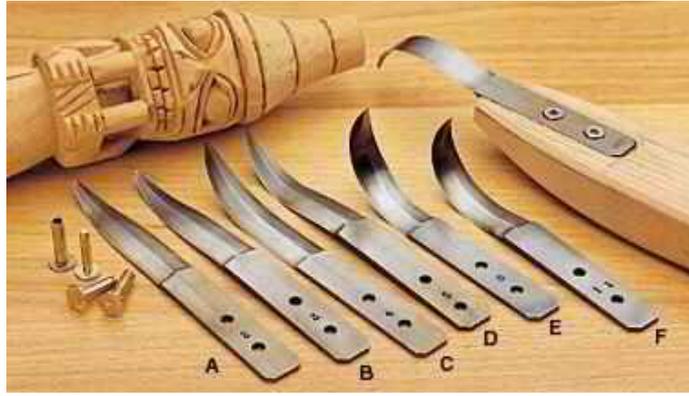
This one is the Haida carving tool #11. You can see the whole set here:

[LeeValley Tools](#)

Just do a search on Haida.

I don't think that they'll mind me showing their stock... - but get the correct prices and info on their page. Their catalogue is super too!

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My first thought on getting mine was, "This is small!" My second and third thoughts were about how thin and fragile looking it is. It is small compared to the only other crooked knife I'd owned which was the original HBC design made in England. I'll make a model of what I remember of that one from aluminium foil and post it here soon. The Lee Valley knife is a carving tool, which is what they sell it as - rather than a "roughing out" tool. It is thin and springy but it sure isn't fragile! The picture below is the blade set up in a handle made from a branch. It's set up wrongly as the blade should be turned over and screwed back in so it's attached to the bottom of the handle closest to the wood being carved. I just wanted to try this one right handed.. You'd fill in the mortise with wood shavings and whip with waxed string to make everything comfortable and tight.



A Frost's of Sweden model looks about the same except with the bevel on the outside of the bend. It's cheaper being \$18 CAN with handle. There are two designs, one like the one shown here. The other has just a little less curve:

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Side view and bottom view.

As you can see the blades are almost identical between the Haida blade and the Frosts. It's just that the Frost's has the bevel on the outside. Apparently the Kestrel Tools does too - and the blank has the same form as the other two.

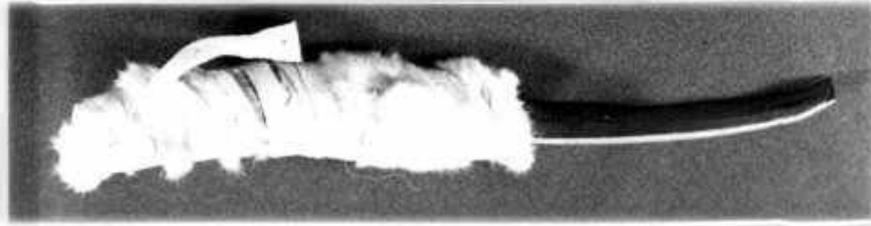
I'm pretty impressed with the heat treatment on the Lee Valley Haida. I'd imagine that the Frost's would be about as good, and Kestrel are high quality. If you want to make your own you can get blanks either ground or unground from Kestrel. Bend to your favourites curve, temper, grind and go.

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The HBC crooked knife was heavier and longer but MUCH softer steel. Usually in the bush you are using green wood, which you then harden and dry over a fire. In contrast these tools are used for carvings with already dried wood.

Here's a picture I "borrowed" from Uncle Wallace's page - showing his knife. I wanted an extra copy around in case that page is ever removed. To read his information go to:

[Uncle Wallace](#)



And here he is showing how the crooked knife is held and used.



Your first thought will be that if he makes his blades, why doesn't he bother making a proper handle? There's lots of wood in Canada. Usually you carried the blade wrapped up in rag or hide. When you needed it you whittled a handle on the spot, slotted in the blade and whipped it with string, wire, or sinew. So - that's just tradition. Works well too! Being high tech now you carry the blade in whatever's handy, and in the case of the Haida or Kestrel, attach to your handle with two wood screws and your trusty multitool. Wrapping is optional. It works very well. I just made a handle

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with the worst wood I could find - cottonwood, and it works just fine. Naturally I would normally use birch, and fireharden after setting up!

You can get one that looks just like it called an Austrian Carver's Hook from Lee Valley. It comes with a neatly turned up tip and handle for about \$30 CAN. I finally got around to picking up one of these and using it. Be prepared for a major sharpening session! It's best to have some diamond rods for the initial setting of the bevels because the tool comes with crude secondary bevels. You could use a Dremel tool, but these are tough to sharpen with, tending to overheat the metal without extreme care. It took me quite a few hours to get things into shape, but now I'm very happy with the tool. Besides setting the bevels and honing the edges, you also have to sand the varnish off the handle and refinish with oil. If you don't, you'll get blisters with a tool where the hand moves on the handle so much. You'll also have to make a sheath, or do as many do and wrap up tightly in cloth to carry.

I'm very happy with this tool. It's got good steel though not tempered to the hardness of many woodworking tools: the problem is that the steel has to remain springy, so I guess that it's about as hard as it could be. Remember that it won't really work until properly sharpened so don't be too anxious to get it and start carving wood right away. Once it is sharpened though, it slices wood very cleanly and with little effort due to the grip and method of holding it. It doesn't have the thumb rest common to home made crooked knives but the handle is great. This one can be held with the blade coming out of the top or bottom of the fist as the blade is pulled towards you and gives a lot of flexibility of use.

I believe that the Austrian Carver's hook is the crooked knife to start with. Eventually you'll want a bunch and then can get the Frost tools and the Haida. The former are cheap and good, the latter is a work of art. For general woods use though - or just sitting whittling the hours away around a camp fire - the ACH is about as good as you could want. While the tightly bent tip is tough to sharpen, it's a very practical design, and offers a lot of advantages. Here is a picture from the Lee Valley site until I get my own pictures up.



Naturally as soon as I recommend the Austrian Carver's Hook, I find that it's just what is sold cheaper elsewhere as a hoof knife. These come in many varieties, so here's a Frost compared to the ACH:

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And then there's the narrow variety. These pics are from Hoodoo - I just got my narrow bladed knives as I waited to get them at a good price on my travels. The top knife is one he bought as a crooked knife - and the second he got in his town at half price:



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All shapes and sizes, left and right handed - from Frosts at \$10 US to custom hand forged jobs - all available at a good price.. Strange that it took so long for me to find this out!!!! I just got the narrow bladed Frost's and at the same time I saw a double-edged narrow bladed no-name hoof knife for \$7 CAN. I picked that one up too as the blade shape is almost perfect except for not being curved quite enough on the main part. I figured the steel would be some cheap junk, but that I could bend the blade slightly and use as a model for what I would like a crooked knife to be. After putting a diamond rod to it, I naturally find the steel to be as good as the ACH..



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Here's four, with ACH on top, then double edged wide Mora, cheap no-name and last but not least the narrow Mora Hoof knife. Notice the different blade curves in the second picture. Also notice that the wide Mora has met the coping saw. That angle is the best for me - much better than the handle profile on Hoodoo's crooked knife. The cheap hoof knife will have to be re-handled because the handle is too narrow to be re-profiled properly. Rivets are cheap at Lee Valley.. Most probably though I'll carry just the blade and a couple of wood screws - using branches for handle.



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So is this a necessary tool as the writings of Calvin Rustrum imply - or just a novelty? It sure is fun to play with, whittling around the campfire! Just carry the blade in your little tin of survival stuff with a couple of screws - maybe an ounce and a half.. You never know! I do know that any knife lover will like the Haida or Kestrel blade - so chance the loot and try! Or you can get a Mora for cheap, remove the handle and do the same.

You will see all kinds of crooked knives on ebay - usually at high cost. Remember that the HBC ones were all marked as such - and were worth only a couple of dollars. The others will be home made and may have been made yesterday instead of the last century as advertised. They will have no markings. For use go with new - they're cheap enough and nice enough!

I was thinking of making a crooked knife - but I doubt it would be worth it. Just buy a bunch of \$10 hoof knives and spend your time re-profiling and making neat handles and sheaths. For the true survivalists who have to have the biggest thickest blades - carry an adze head. You carry the head and tie it onto a suitably forked branch when needed to chop out a dugout canoe etc.. Here's a picture from the Kestrel page. You can get them finished, or as blanks to make your own!



Sharpening The Crooked Knife

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I read your mind! You are thinking of the difficulty of sharpening a crooked knife. Well the knife fanatics with a Lee Valley catalogue are wishing away the kids shoe money on a full set of slipstones! This is not the way it's done. You will need a piece of broom handle, some abrasive compound and some time. The Kestrel knives will come honed. The Lee Valley won't - and will take some initial time to set up since you have to even the edge before you can get good sharpness:

1. Sand the broom handle if it's painted (or you can use dowel - even a branch). You'll need a chunk about a foot long.
2. Smear aluminium oxide abrasive over it - the green stuff sold as buffing compound - and holding it on the inside bevel push away from edge being sharpened with a twisting motion. Lift from blade and repeat. Do not pull back against edge as you would with a stone. Keep it up until you see bevel getting polished. If you want to speed things up screw a woodscrew into end of broom handle, and chuck it in a drill.
3. Now for the flat convex surface. Smear abrasive onto paper or hard cardboard on a flat surface (don't use your leather strop this way - the edge might slice in!). Press the blade onto this and hone by moving in a direction parallel to edge. Keep the strokes smooth. You'll see the polish beginning after a few sweeps.
4. Things start shaping up after 15 minutes, and the blade will be useable but figure on at least another 30 minutes to align the edge. That's it. Yep it'll slice a cigarette paper just fine.
5. For the narrow curved tip knives, the best tool to sharpen with is the narrow diamond rod. Wrap with fine emery cloth to finish. It's probably best to re-profile the blades with a Dremel tool, as they have a large secondary bevel. Just go easy and slow to prevent over heating.

Using:

You hold the knife as shown by uncle Wallace. As you pull the knife toward you, move your fist from 45 degrees (with a full hook blade) to vertical so that you slice into the wood. Goes fast with a sharp blade and green wood doesn't it. Practise on soft green wood until you get into the hang of things since seasoned wood takes more force and that blade is sharp! If you hold the wood being carved on your lap, a few newspapers or a piece of leather might be in order!

I hope that I've helped you learn a little about the crooked knife. I sure am no expert so feel free to add suggestions! Basically I wanted to put some information together in one place to make things easier for people to choose one. Please be sure to have a look at the page with the Mora draw knife so you can complete your woodworking set.

Post-scriptum :Original article at [OldJimbo's site](#).