

THE POCKET BOOK OF  
*AXE BLOCKS*



The humble axe block is basecamp, the headquarters of spoon carving

All of our tools are shaped and moulded by our actions; how we sharpen them, the friction of our hands on the handles.

The axe block, more than most, swiftly becomes the sum of its scars.

This pocket book is a celebration of this unsung hero, a compendium of ideas and a manual of how to make your own.



THE POCKET BOOK OF AXE BLOCKS

EVD

LJP

EMMET VAN DRIESCHE  
&  
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BY  
EMMET VAN DRIESCHE  
&  
LEE JOHN PHILLIPS



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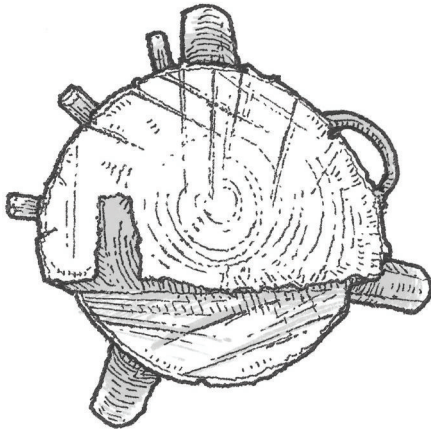
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## INTRODUCTION



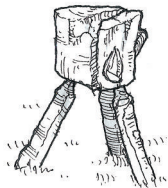
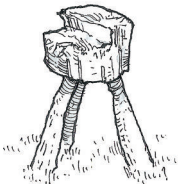
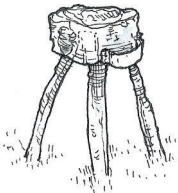
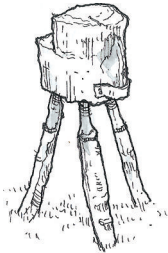
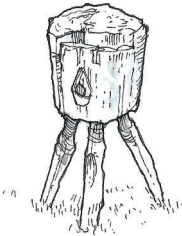
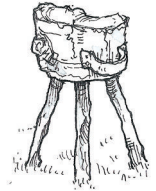
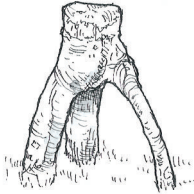
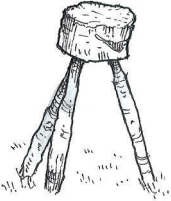
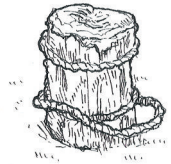
When we think about carving spoons, we think about the axe, or the knife, or the piece of wood, or the hook. But we rarely think about the axe block. That humble chunk of log is taken for granted, yet is such an integral part of the experience.

Over time, the axe block becomes shaped by our repeated actions, its form a record of every spoon ever axed out on it. All of our tools are shaped and moulded by our actions, by how we sharpen them, the friction of our hands on the handles. But the axe block, more than most, swiftly becomes the sum of its scars. So this little book is meant to be a celebration of this unsung hero, a compendium of ideas, and a manual of how to make your own.

We hope you enjoy.

Emmet & LEE





## BLOCK DESIGN:

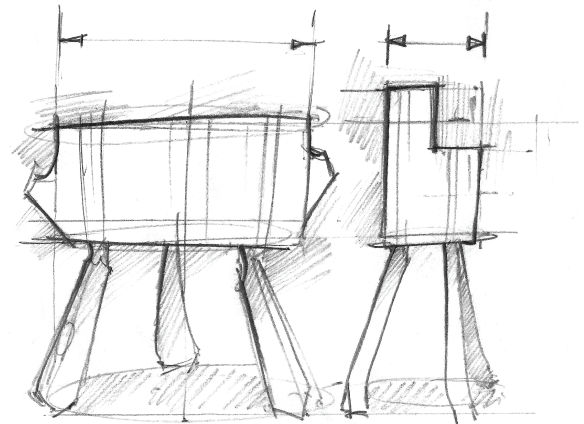
There is no such thing as the perfect axe block, because every choice is a trade-off between the pros and cons of different options. So our goal here is to present the parameters that matter, in such a way that you can think critically about what combination might work for you. In the next section we get into how to make an axe block that perfectly suits your needs.



## MASS

The first consideration is to decide whether you want a heavy axe block or a light one. A heavy block has the advantage that it walks around less, is longer wearing, and tends to do a better job absorbing and rebounding the energy of the axe back into the wood.

The lighter the block is, the more that energy gets dispersed into the ground, which has the effect of each axe blow doing less work. Lighter blocks are easier to move, however, and for some people the choice is made for them by what they can get their hands on. I prefer as big a block as I can wrangle, while Lee prefers a smaller, more portable one.



## SPECIES

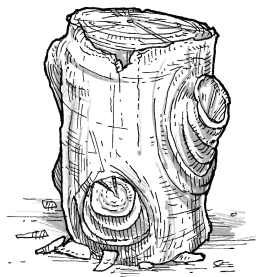
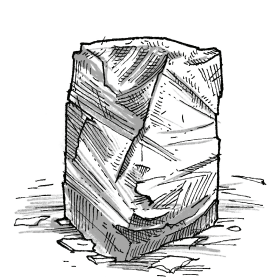
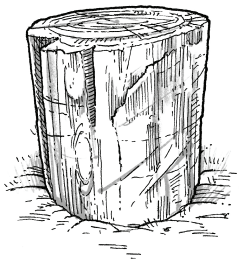
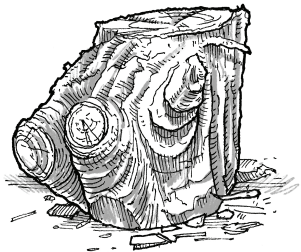
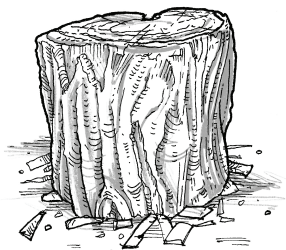
Mass is not just determined by size, however, but also by species because heavier woods have more mass in a smaller size. So a smaller hardwood stump will have a similar mass to a larger softwood stump. There is another thing to consider with species, too, which is the qualities of that wood as a rebounding surface and how it wears over time.

Some species (like cherry) have a tremendous bounciness, particularly when fresh, and this can actually be dangerous because a rebounding axe is an axe that is not under control.

Other species, especially softwoods, are like sandbags. Force goes into them and gets dissipated, which helps transfer the force to the wood you are working on. Wood generally becomes more like this as it dries and ages, as well, so a stump that feels too bouncy at first will mellow with time to become more crisp.





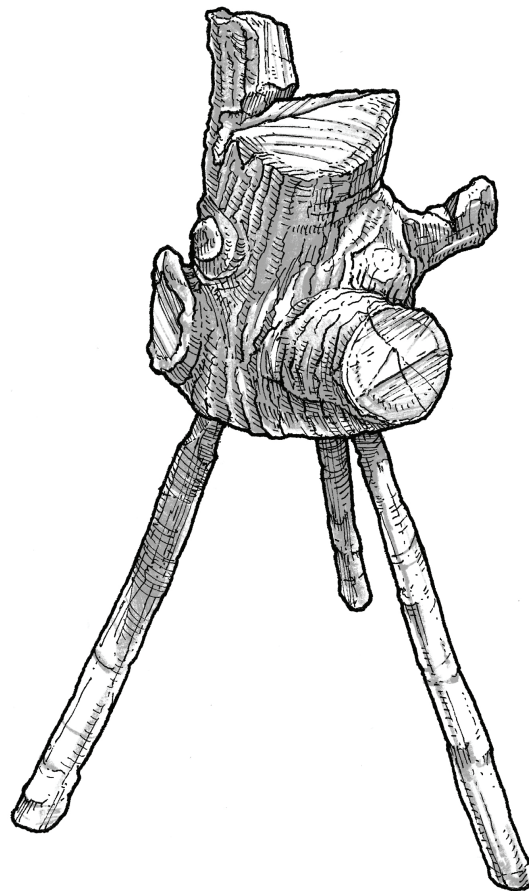


I prefer a softwood stump for this reason and also because the surface more quickly becomes rough and pitted, something we will talk about in its own right. Conifer stumps should be aged for a year, however, to allow the sap to dry out. Other people prefer the longevity and immediate use of hardwood stumps.



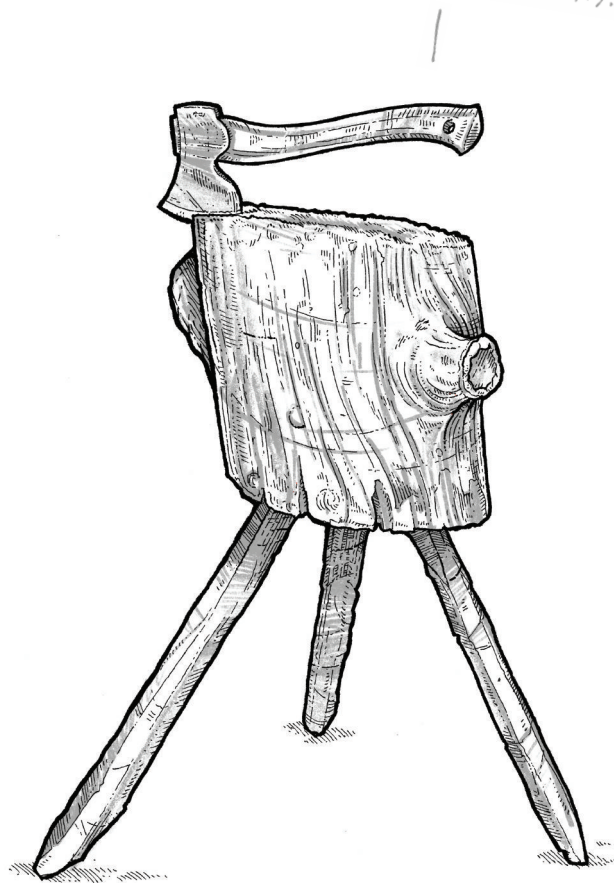
## KNOTTINESS

I make spoon blanks professionally, so each workday has me at the stump for at least four hours, and often all day. At this level of use, I go through about a stump a year (keeping in mind that this level of wear is for a conifer stump). One of the things that helps the longevity of any stump is that it be made from a section of tree where several branches exit.



The swirling grain around these branch junctions resists splitting; an important consideration when you contemplate the unending shockwaves passing through the stump with each axe blow. And this is particularly true if, like me, you store your axe buried in the stump. I once had an early stump split completely in half one day, undone by the thousands of blows it had sustained, each one inconsequential, but in the aggregate, more than enough. Because of where I sink the axe, it is important that I place the largest branch junction on the side of the stump opposite where I plan to stand, where it can do the most good.

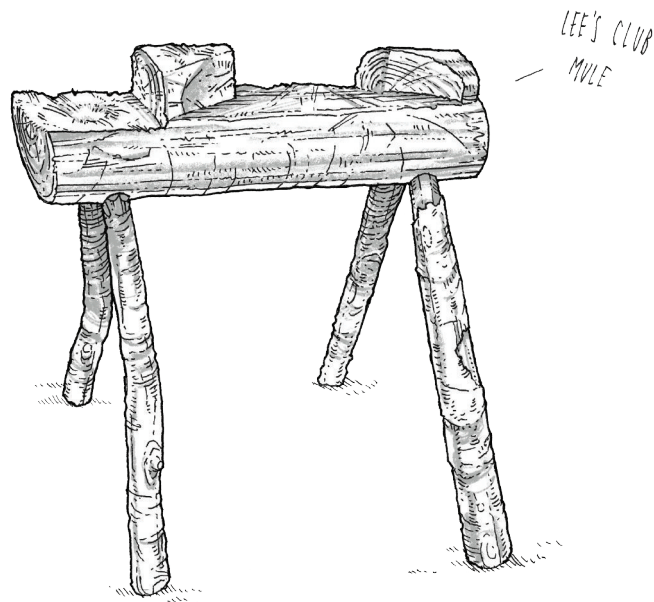
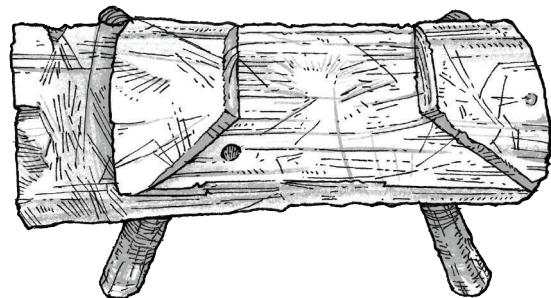
(EMMET'S BLOCK).



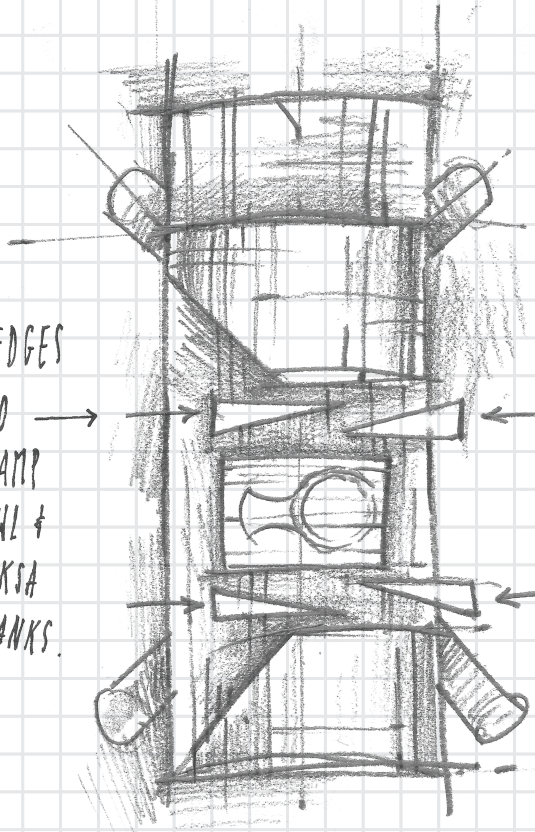


## ORIENTATION

While most axe blocks are simply stumps on legs, there is a whole other style of stump where a split stump is mounted split side up. This sideways orientation has the advantage of making a flat, and you can leave the log in the round on one or both sides of the block. This second style has the benefit of allowing you to wedge a bit of wood between these two shoulders.



WEDGES  
TO  
CLAMP  
BOWL &  
KUKSA  
BLANKS.

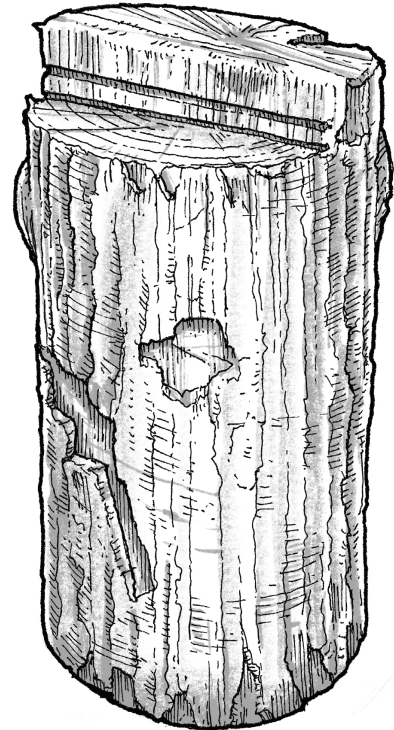


Boring the legs holes is also easier on this sideways style, because you are cutting into the side of the stump instead of into the end grain. On the other hand, this style is easier to accidentally split, because the half a stump presents much less resistance to splitting than the stump in the round, as anyone who has split firewood by hand can attest. The first split is always the hardest! Care should be taken when using this style to make sure the axe is coming down perpendicular to the grain, not parallel with it.

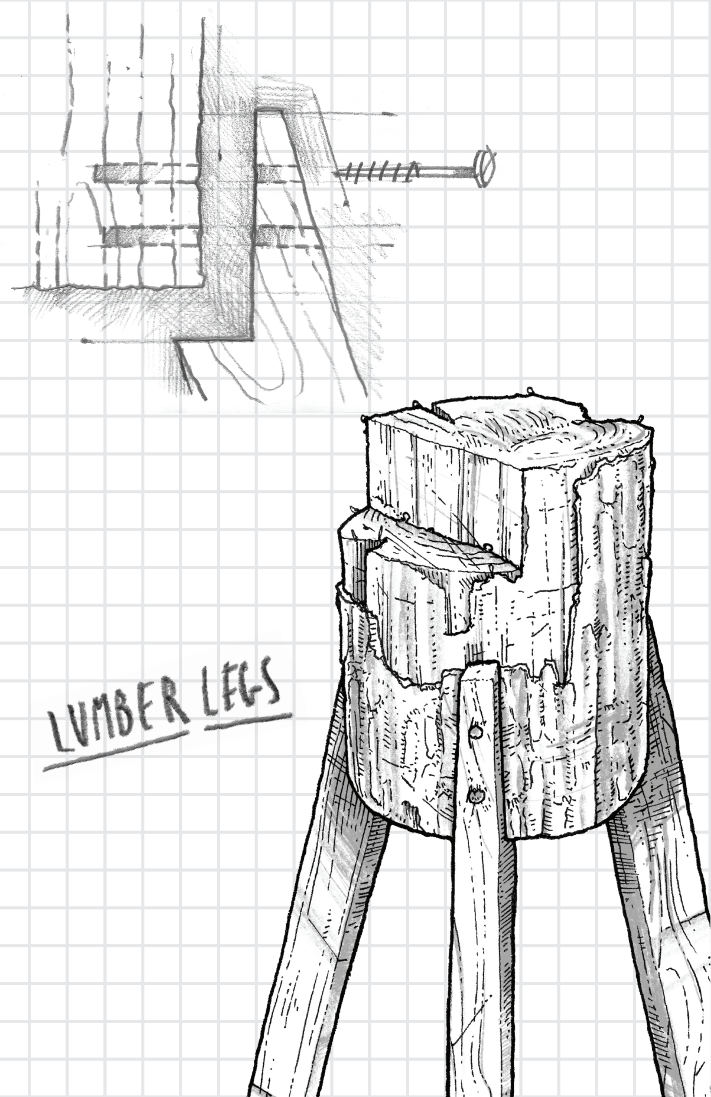


## LEG CONNECTION

The simplest axe block is just a stump resting on the ground, and especially if you are working on a concrete floor (although that carries a fair degree of risk to any tool that falls on it), and access to a long section of log, a raised axe block can be made from a tall section of trunk, chainsawed perfectly square across the bottom so it sits stably on the floor. Such a stump can be a good match for a concrete floor, in fact, because the mass of the thing helps counteract the sharpness of the concrete. This will impact to the feel of each blow, softening it somewhat.

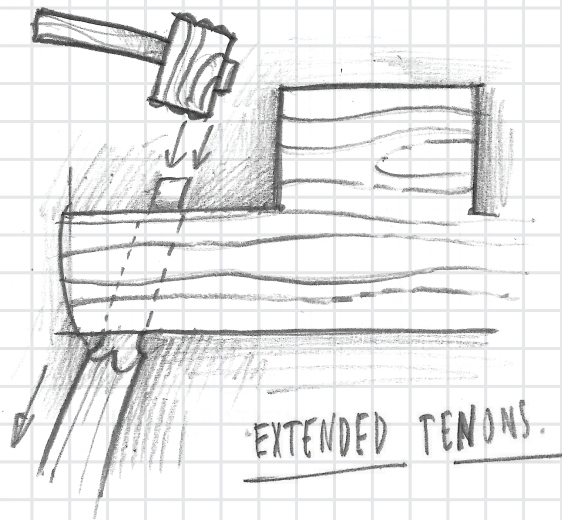
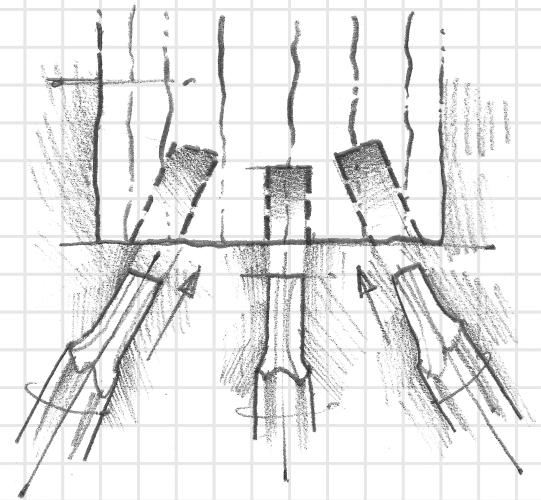


A lighter stump on concrete also tends to have more bounce. For all other axe blocks, however, legs are a crucial component, and there are several ways to attach them. The simplest way is to mortise three legs into the bottom of the stump, which if done well creates a strong, tight joint. You can also notch dimensional lumber which is then bolted to the sides of the stump and cradles it underneath as well. Although, these can eventually fall apart under continuous pounding. I have even seen legs that were attached to the stump with tapered dovetails that grew tight the more the stump was pounded on.



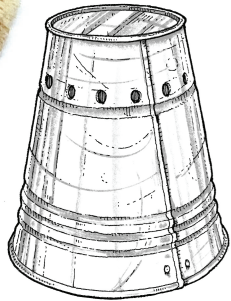


I have always gravitated towards a simple three legged mortice and tenon joint. One other thing worth mentioning is that if you do an axing bench and drill the mortice holes all the way through, you can leave long tenons that stick up proud of the hole. You can then knock these back out to remove the legs, allowing you to break down a bench for simpler transport.



EXTENDED TENONS.





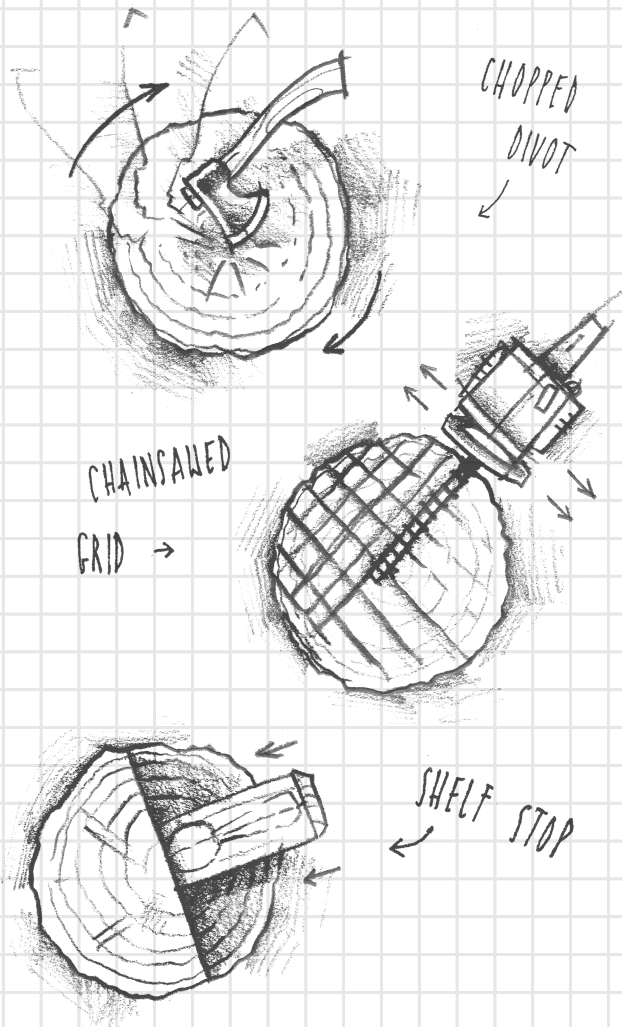
It's always a good idea to keep your block indoors, or at least covered whilst outside. This will prevent the block from deteriorating as quickly and keep contaminants from collecting on the surface and potentially damaging your axe edge. I routinely keep my block in plastic covered greenhouses and sheds for the winter; this is hard on the wood as the temperatures can get extreme.



## SURFACE

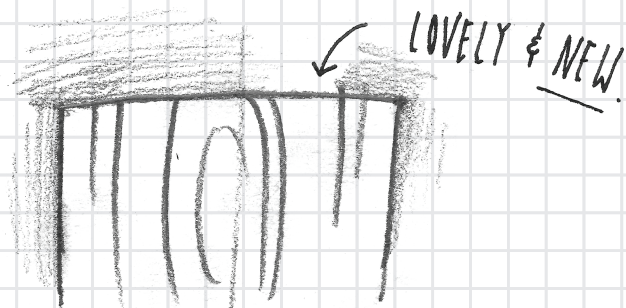
I am a huge proponent of a rough axe block surface. This helps keep your spoon blank stable, even when tipped up on one corner. The danger of a surface that is too smooth is that the blank will slip at a moment when the axe is coming down, putting your hand under its swing. So whenever I finish making an axe block, the final step is to walk around it in a circle, using the axe to chew a divot in the top surface.

This gives me a place to start, and over time, the surface will naturally become rough and pitted from the axe being sunk into it, or even just the residual motion of the axe at the end of each blow. This is one of the main reasons I prefer using conifer stumps, is that they create this rough surface quite quickly. You can also create this rough surface by using a chainsaw to etch a shallow grid, or cutting a shelf into the top of the stump, so that there is a vertical edge to push the spoon blank against.

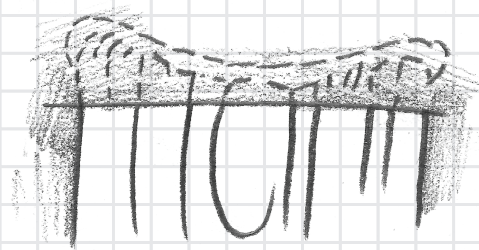
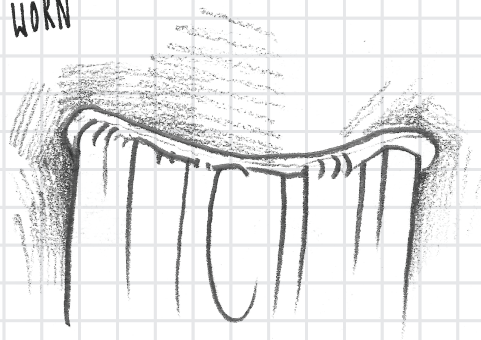




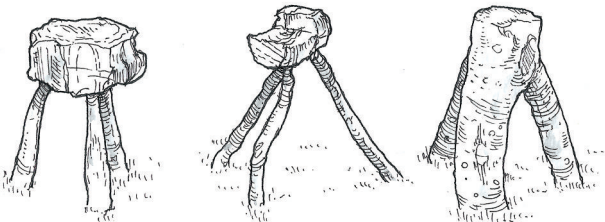
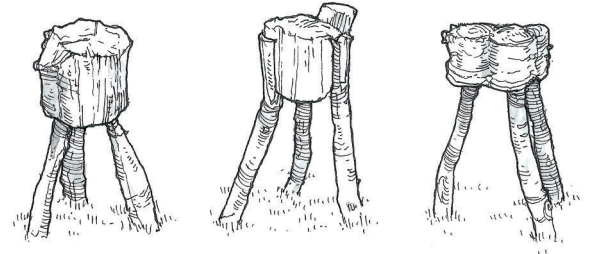
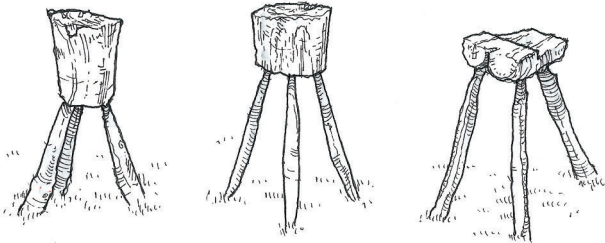
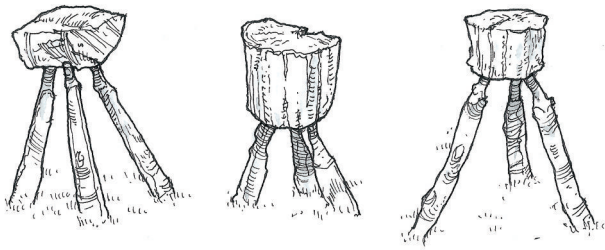
With extensive use, a block can become too dished, as it is helpful for the top of the block to be somewhat flat to support moments when you want to use a saw. When this happens, you can chainsaw off the top couple of inches and either give the block to someone shorter than you, knock out the legs and replace them with slightly longer ones, or make a new block.



USED & WORN



≡ CUT ≡  
NEW AGAIN  
|  
(BUT SHORTER).

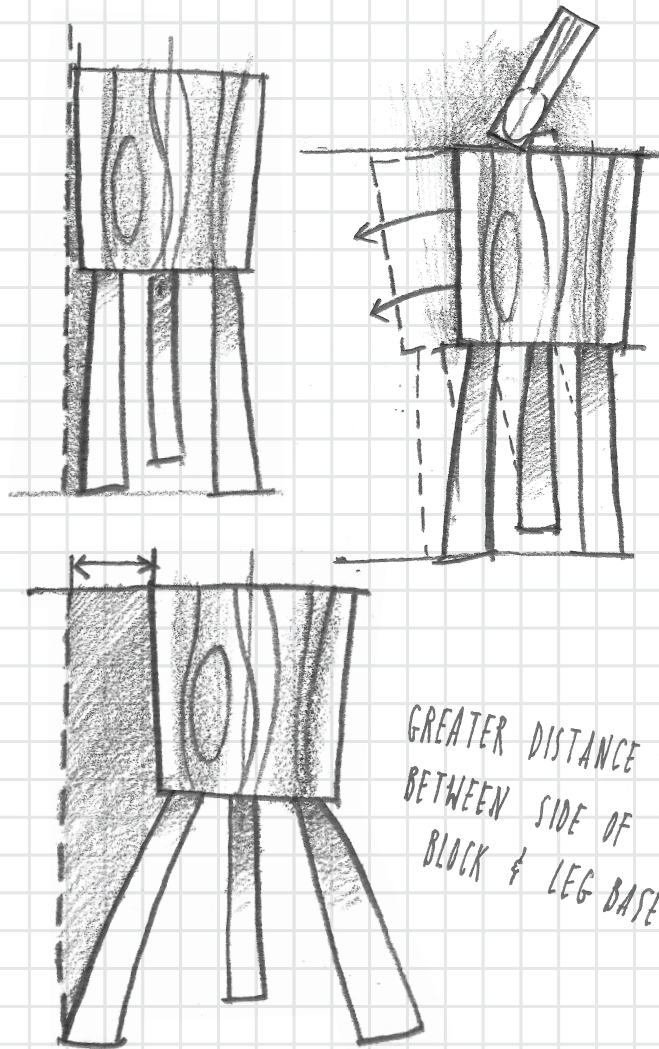


## STABILITY

The most important thing to consider when attaching your legs is to make sure they are splayed enough to give the axe block stability. It is easy to make their splay too narrow, which you will know immediately because you will always be knocking your block over. This was the case with my first block, until I finally sawed off the legs and drilled new holes, this time angled more than I would have thought. You can also have too much splay, which will eventually cause the legs to fail.

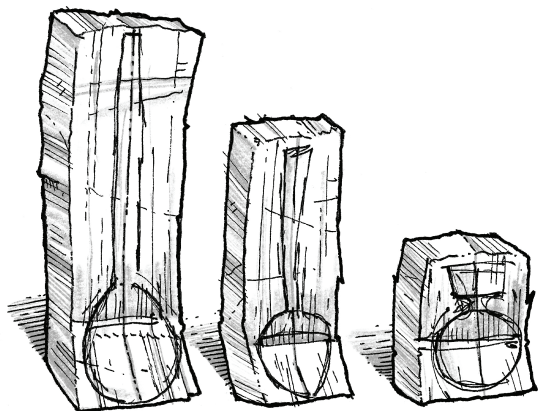


Proper stability is particularly important with smaller blocks, as you often have the spoon blanks up on a corner, exerting considerable sideways force, which can tip over a light block if the legs are not wide enough.



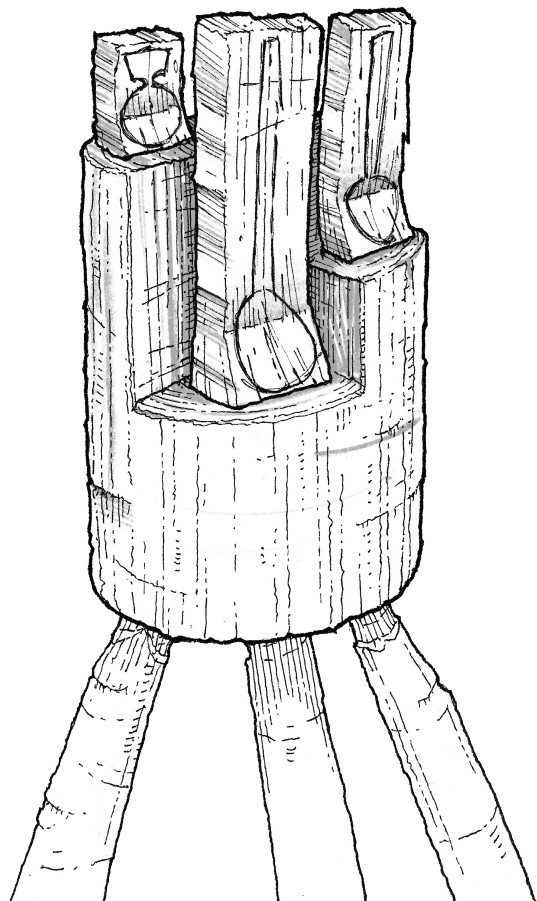
## HEIGHT

How high to make an axe block is probably the most common question I get concerning blocks, and there is not a particularly good answer; in part because spoons can be such drastically different lengths as a cooking spoon versus a tiny scoop.



With the same block, the cooking spoon can be uncomfortably high to be working on with the axe (although you can mitigate this quite a lot by tilting the blank over more, provided the surface of the block and the stability of the legs will allow you to do so safely), while the scoop will have you hunched over the block, working too low for good posture.

One workaround for this second scenario is to do a lunge to bring you down to the right level while still keeping your back straight. A good compromise height, however, is the top of your legs. That is the height I make all of my stumps, and while I have sometimes thought of coming up with something more complicated, perhaps with two or three levels for different scenarios, that comes at the expense of a flat work surface, something which is also important to my process.

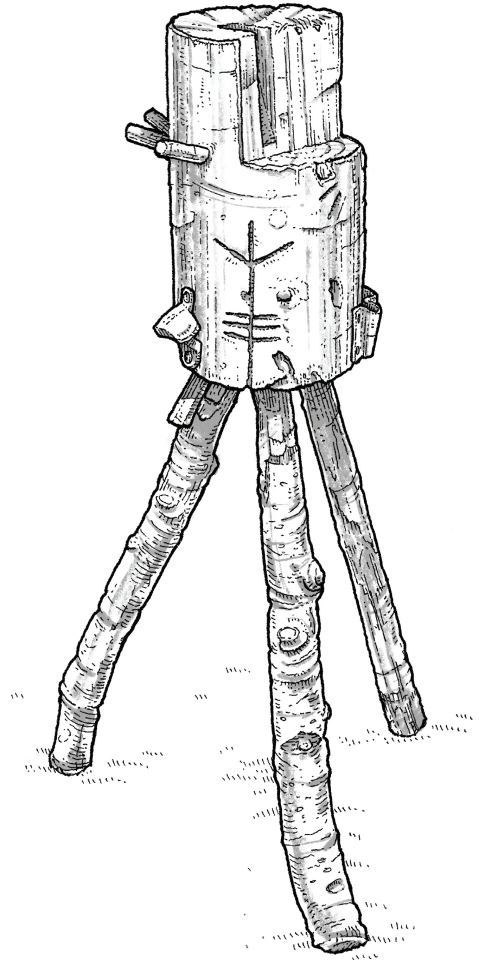


## THE BUILD:

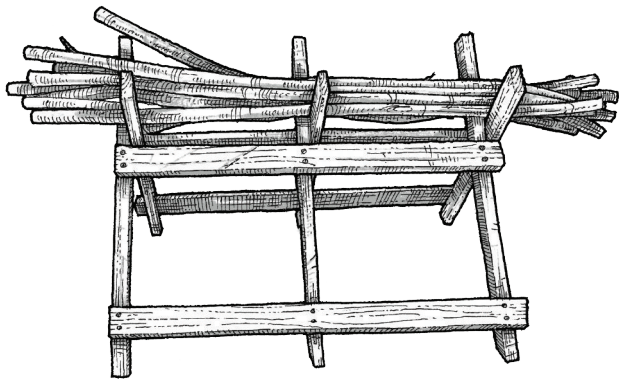


## WOOD CHOICES

The first step in building an axe block is to think through what you need out of a block, how you intend to use it and what you need it to accomplish for you. I prefer a mid-weight block that can be moved but is not easy to do so. Lee uses a block that is light enough to move easily. Others use quite massive beasts.

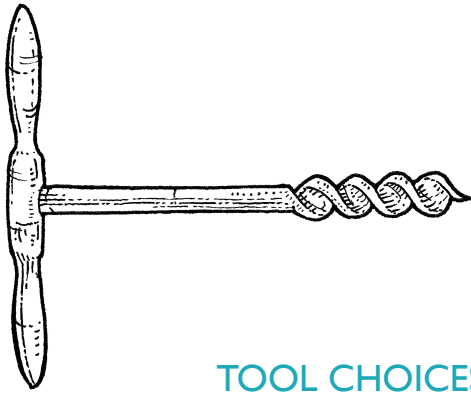






You also need to think about what wood you have access to and what tools you have. I make kindling out of pine and spruce and fir each year, and I deliberately store off to one side any stumps that have branch junctions that would make them frustrating to split for kindling but superb axe blocks. I season them for a year and then fit legs.

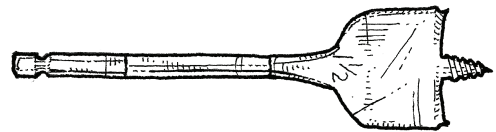
If you process your own firewood, choosing a stump from the bits that are harder to split should be easy. For others, it can be quite a challenge. The good news is that the piece you want, because of its knots, is probably a piece that someone else doesn't want for firewood. Calling up an arborist or tree surgeon and explaining what you are looking for is probably the simplest way to go. You also need to consider what material you can get for the legs. Maybe you live in the country like me, and can harvest one of any number of saplings. Or perhaps you live in the city and all you can get is lumber from a box store.



## TOOL CHOICES

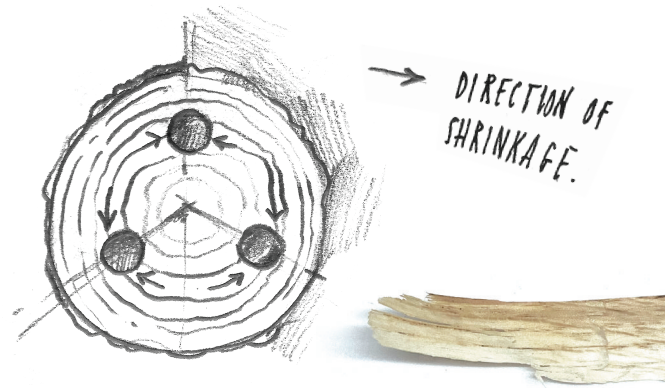
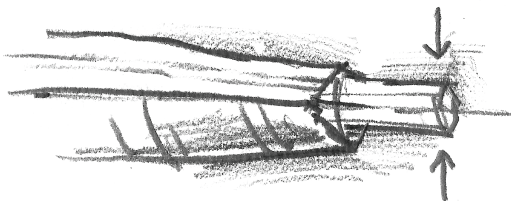
Likewise, what design you choose will likely depend on what tools you have at your disposal. If you don't have a chainsaw, don't plan on trimming a stump down. You can drill holes for mortises with a T auger (a bit of a specialist tool best bought on eBay or at a tag sale), a brace and bit (again, easiest found at a junk shop or tag sale) or using a drill gun.

If you use a cordless drill like me, plan on going through two fresh batteries to complete all three holes. If you can, using a corded drill will make it so you don't run out of torque. I use an inch and a half spade bit, but anything up to two inches would be fine. I wouldn't make the leg tenons smaller than an inch and a quarter. A fresh drill bit is nice. Educate yourself on how to sharpen augers and old-fashioned twist bits if you are going that route, or it will likely be a frustrating experience.



## MOISTURE CONTENT

Absolutely crucial to any design employing morticed legs is to get the moisture content of the legs and stump correct. The legs should be dry, seasoned at least for several months, otherwise they will shrink as they dry and loosen up in the joint. The stump can be the same dryness as the leg material, or if it is comparatively greener so much the better, as it will shrink as it dries, tightening up the mortices on the leg tenons.

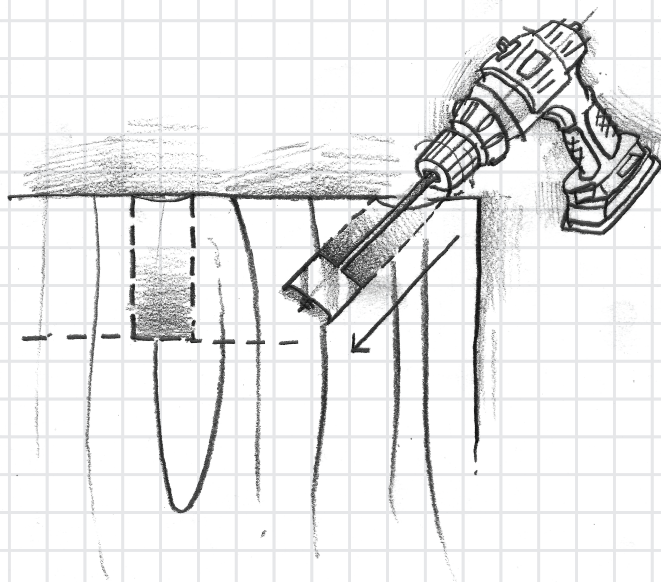
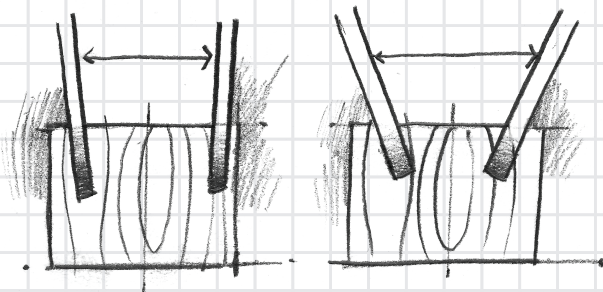


If you don't have dry leg material laid aside to season and you can't wait, get a kiln-dried stud from a lumberyard and use that. One of the best stumps I ever made had legs from a standing dead cedar tree that I split into quarters. I was able to freshly harvest the tree but it was already dry enough to use, and rot resistant to boot!

## LEG ASSEMBLY



Once you have the pieces, attach your legs to the stump. As noted, make sure to drill the holes at a greater angle than you anticipate, as it is easy to have the legs be too narrow and thus your block be tippy. Even if you have a fresh bit and are using a power drill, be prepared for drilling these holes to be hard work, and doubly so if you are doing it by hand. I aim for the mortise holes to be about three inches deep, which is about the full length of the bit down to the drill chuck.



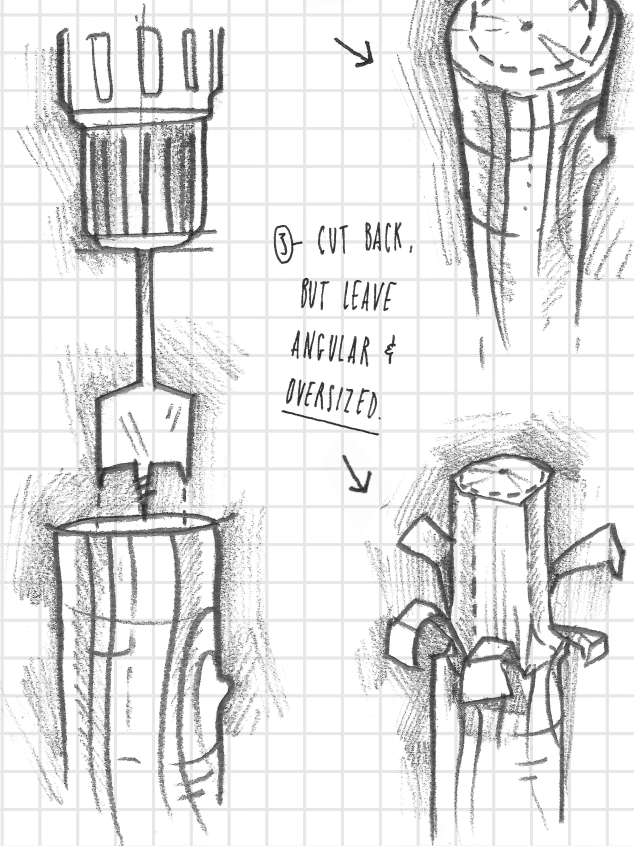


The legs themselves can be simply roughly axed to diameter, and in fact form a tighter fit if they are left angular and slightly oversized, as the stump will grip them more tightly as it shrinks down. If you are using a spade bit, you can drill down into the end grain of the leg to get a sense of the diameter you are shooting for. The cutting teeth will describe a circle that will then help you see where you need to remove more material. Leave the legs extra-long, in part so that you can have a few false starts and just cut it off and try again.

① LINE THE SPADE BIT CENTRALLY.

② SCORE FOR THE CORRECT SIZE.

③ CUT BACK, BUT LEAVE ANGULAR & OVERSIZED.



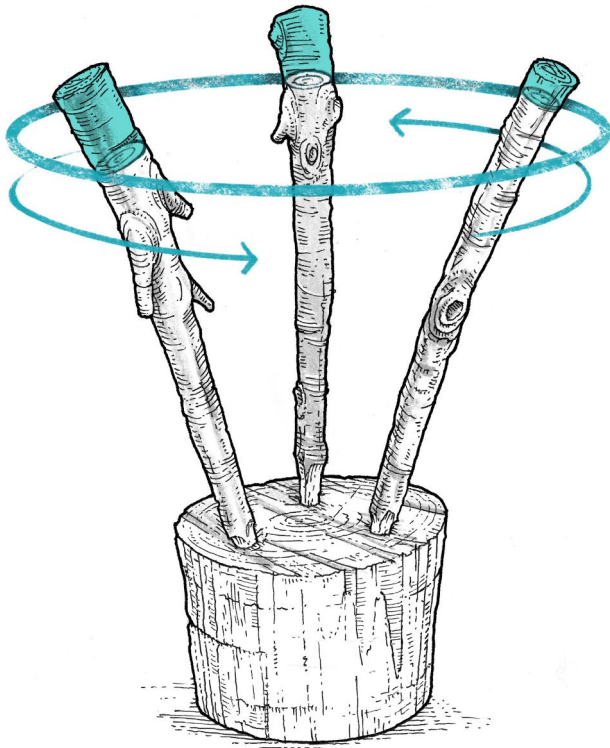


## TRIMMING THE LEGS

Test the fit of the leg tenons as you go, and when you are feeling confident that you can drive them in most of the way (but without being able to easily do so), pound them in using a sledge, club or just the back of the axe head. Keep pounding until you feel the connection seize up solid. If it fails to lock in tight, pull it out, trim off a few inches, and try again.

With the block still upside down on the ground, trim the legs to the desired height. The easiest way to do this is to walk around it with a handsaw, cutting off each leg where it hits the top of your thigh. That way when you flip the stump back upright, it will be both level and at the correct height, even though the legs might be splayed at slightly different angles and are probably different lengths.





Finally, before using the block, chop a divot in the top surface to give you a place to safely brace the spoon blank (see page 32 & 33 for options). This divot will gradually grow and roughen up the entire top of the block, but it's important to start with it at first.



## USING THE BLOCK

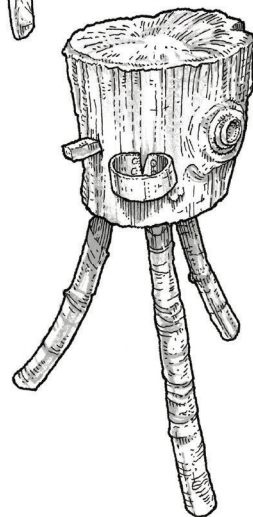
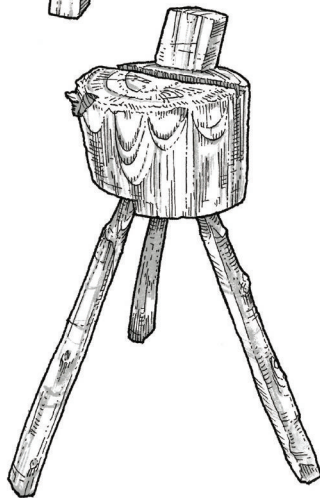
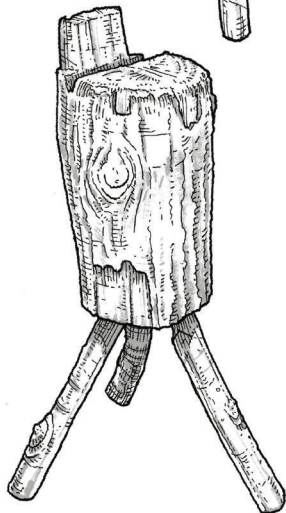
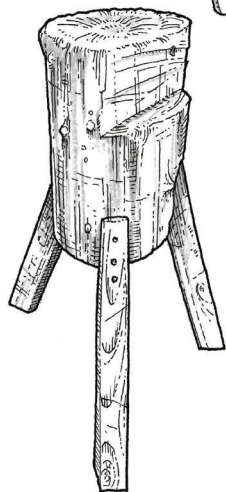
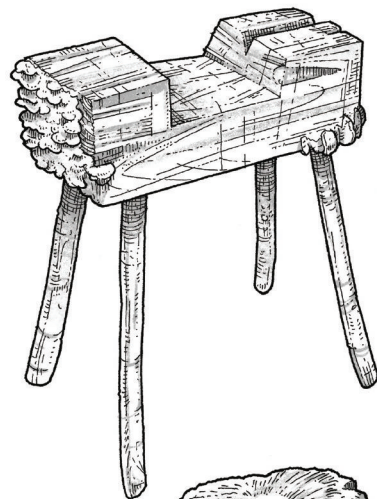
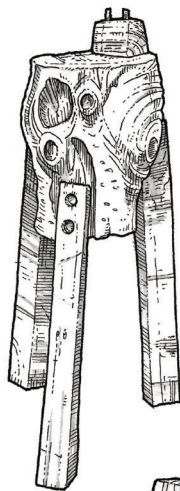
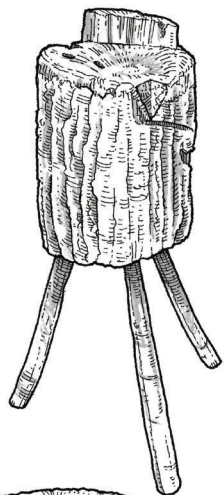
There are so many ways to use an axe block. It is a work table, a chopping block, the base of a clamp (using an axe sunk into it to act as a pivot stop when sawing), a side table, and a confidant if you are quarantined too long alone.

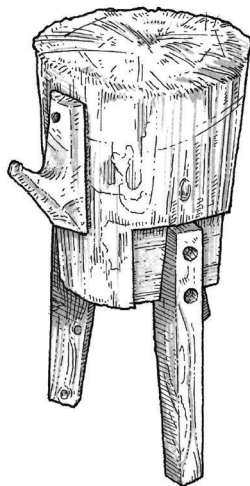
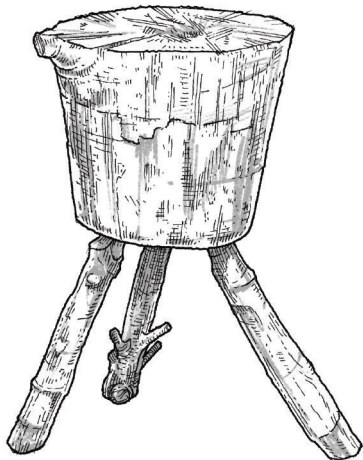
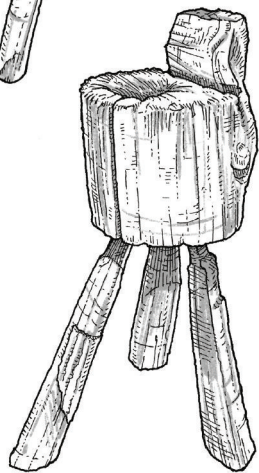
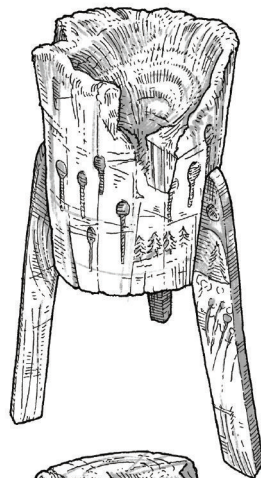
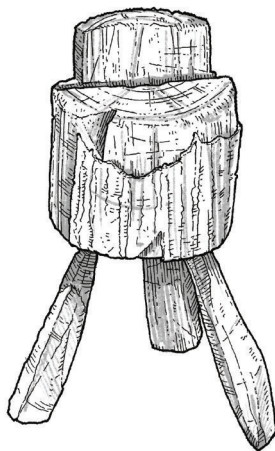
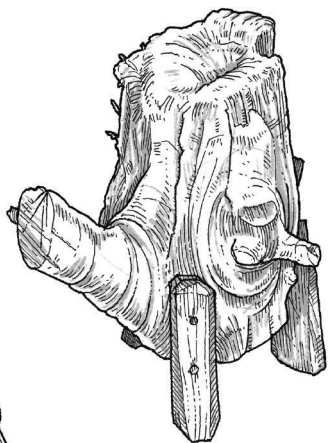
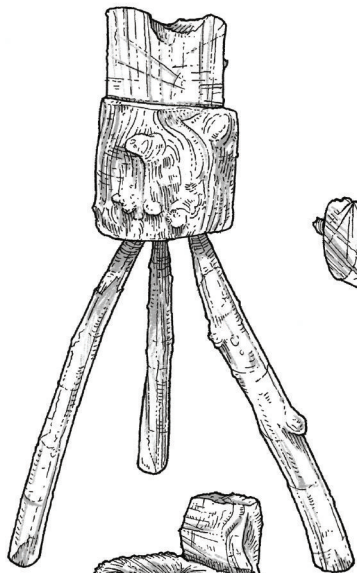
You can install pegs on your axe block to hang your tools from. Heck, you can even install a bottle opener like Lee did. You can paint it. You can add side notches, staggered to fit different spoon lengths. Or not. I keep my blocks simple and while I hold deep affection for them, I also know their time is fleeting.

AXE BLOCKS OF  
OTHER MAKERS...









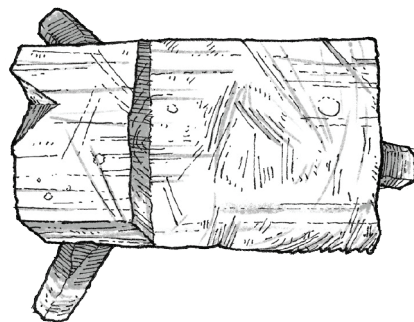
THE AXE BLOCK OF


## ADAM HAWKER

Adam is an ex tree surgeon from West Dorset England, and is a teacher of greenwood working and carver of iconic, kolrosed spoons.

“My carving addiction has grown over many years and I’ve had the privilege to learn from some of the finest spoon-makers across the globe”

“There are two reasons why I like using this across-grain axe block as opposed to an end grain block. When working into end grain I find they tend to bite your axe. Particularly when using heavy blows.”





“Biting interferes with the state of flow required for efficient axing. This is eliminated with an across grain block .

The second thing I like in a good axe block is a shoulder to rest my spoon against whilst carving. Not only does it give support it ensures all the energy from the axe blow is transferred directly into the spoon because it has nowhere to go.

Also, having a higher platform to work from when carving smaller things is handy not to mention it could be easily transformed into a kuksa carving block.”

[@adamhawker1](#)





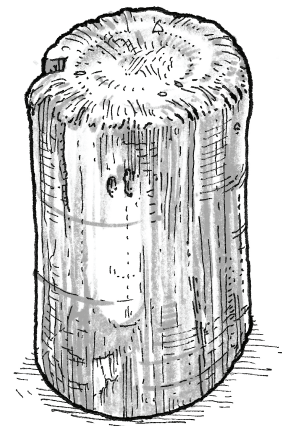
THE AXE BLOCK OF

## KLIPNOCKY WOODS

Patrick has been 'making' with wood for most of his life. From his first pocket knife at age six to a career as a builder in the United States Navy Seabees, serving for 13 years on military construction projects across the world.

In 2012 Pat hung up his tool belt opening The Klipnocky Wood Shop with a wish and a prayer. A hungry year or so later after rediscovering spoon making, Klipnocky Woods entered the carving scene as a full time, traditional spoon carver and now has thousands of spoons sold or gifted to all seven continents of the world.

“Shorter companion blocks are for sit down work or splitting billets.”

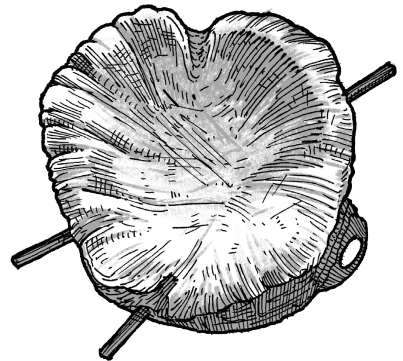




@klipnockywoods



“We use big massive stand up blocks on a concrete floor. They don't move in use and are virtually indestructible. These are both several years old.”

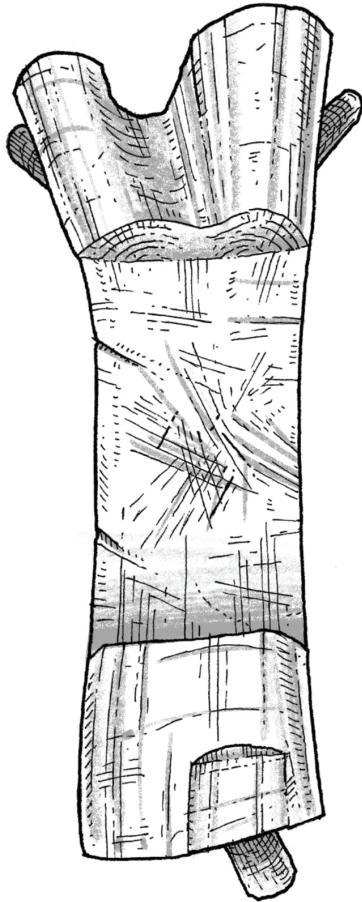


## THE AXE BLOCK OF ALEX YERKS.

Alex Yerks was born in the forest mountains of Upstate New York. He's been a professional sloyd for the last ten years with a focus on what he calls 'kitchenalia.'

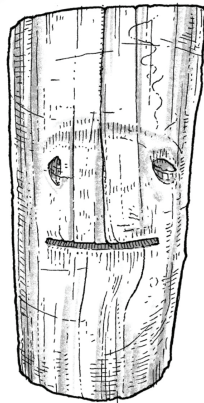
He designs drinking vessels and other wooden handcraft for the home.

Alex travels, teaches internationally, and is currently working on some green woodworking films inspired by 'Spoon Medicine.'

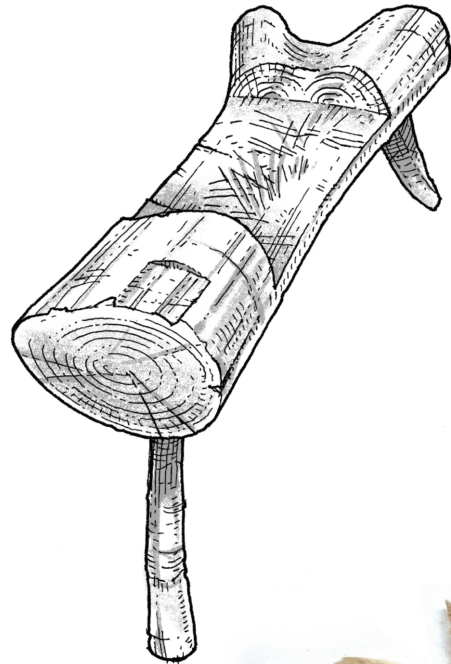




(CHEERFUL CHAP!)



(HE'S A LOW ONE!)



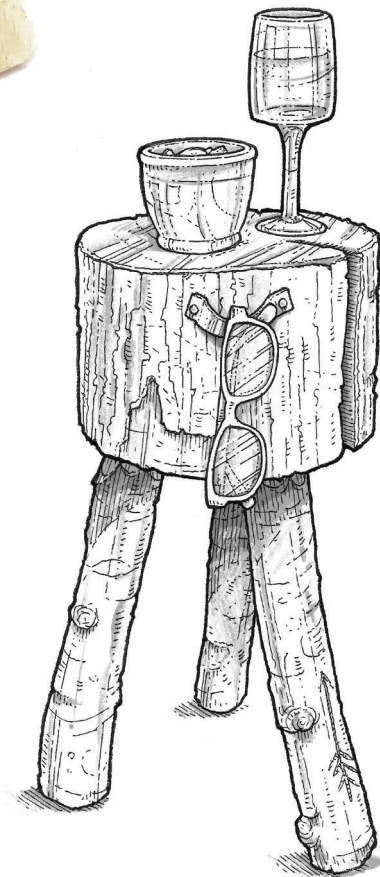
Alex uses different blocks for a variety of purposes. He uses standard, full rounds (above), but also uses this very low, knee height mule, opposite. The height allows him to use a long handled adze that makes for big, powerful swings.

[@alex\\_yerks](#)



## AT THE END...

So how do you let go of an axe block when it's no longer suitable for your work? You can give it to a friend who is in need of one. That's what I did with my last one. It lives with my old apprentice now and when I was at his place last I had the wonderful experience of reuniting with my old block. You can burn it, or toss it into the leaves to rot down. You can bring it into your home as a bedside table. Or you can do what Lee did with his last one, and turn it into spoons. What a fitting second life for an object that never gets the limelight. Until now.





## ABOUT EMMET

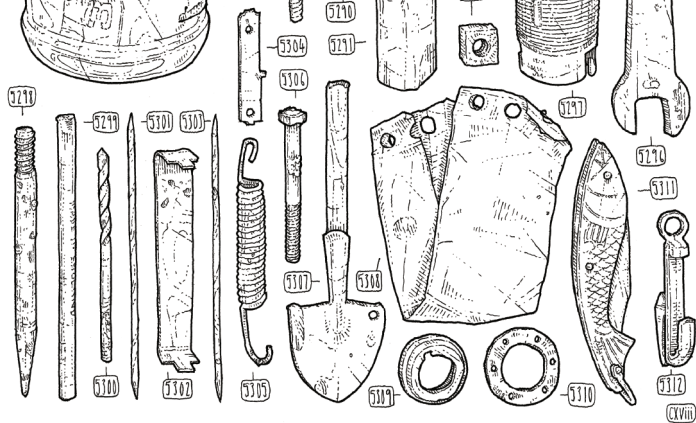
Emmet is a professional spoon-carver in New England and the publisher of Spoonesaurus Magazine, a print only zine entirely dedicated to the craft of spoon carving. The author of the book Carving Out a Living on the Land (Chelsea Green Publishing 2019), he has a wife who laughs at him, two daughters who defend him, a rooster and flock of chickens who are curious around him, two dogs who adore him and a cat who demands to go outside at three in the morning every night.

You can find more of his work on his website, on his daily podcast Emmet Audio (available all the places) or on Instagram at:

[@EMMET\\_VAN\\_DRIESCHE](#)

[WWW.EMMETVANDRIESCHE.COM](http://WWW.EMMETVANDRIESCHE.COM)





He has authored 'The Toolshed Colouring Book' and 'The Toolshed Journal' by Lawrence King Publishing.

Lee is an ex-teacher of 13 years but continues privately teaching drawing and spoon carving.

## ABOUT LEE

Lee is an award winning illustrator and avid spooncarver from Pembrokeshire, West Wales.

As well as client-based work, Lee is drawing everything in his late grandfather's tool shed. The project is in tis 6th year and to date over 7,400 items have been catalogued (including used matches and empty party poppers).

[@LEEJOHNPHILLIPS](https://www.instagram.com/leejohnphillips)

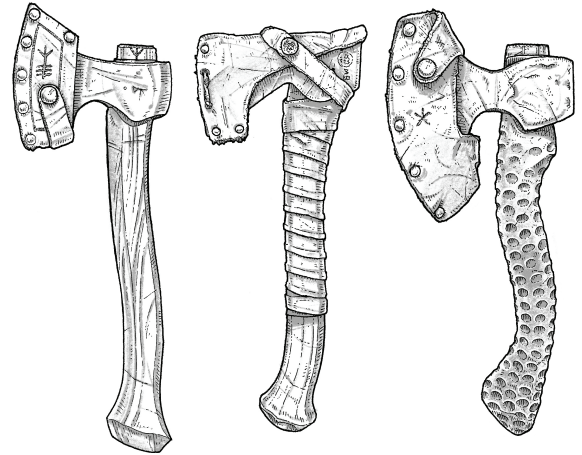
[WWW.MOA.CYMRU](http://www.moa.cymru)



The axe is perhaps the most iconic of spooncarving tools. The joy of using such a primitive thing in our modern lives gives it a prized place in the hearts of many spoon carvers.

*But what axe is right for you?*

In the next book in this series, *The Pocket Book of Axes*, we consider factors such as head weight, edge shape and handle choices that mold the experience of using this tool. Not only a celebration of the ways to personalize and bond with your axe, this book will also give instructions for modifying existing axes to improve their performance for spoon carving.



We hope you can join us.

# NOTES & PROJECTS

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Many thanks,

*Emmet & LEE*