

The Christmas Hatchet

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The best evidence I've been able to come up with that the human race is increasing in intelligence is that parents no longer give their kids hatchets for Christmas.

When I was a boy the hatchet was a Christmas gift commonly bestowed upon male children. In an attempt to cover up their lapse of sanity, parents would tell their offspring, "Now don't chop anything." By the time this warning was out of mouths, the kid would have already whacked two branches off the Christmas tree and be adding a second set of notches to one of his new Lincoln logs.

It was not that the kid harbored a gene compelling him to be destructive. The problem was with the hatchet, which had a will of its own. As soon as the kid activated it by grasping the handle, the hatchet took charge of his mental processes and pretty much ran the show from then on.

Shortly after Christmas the kid would be making frequent trips to the woodshed with his father, and not to chop wood either.

"The hatchet did it!" the kid would yell as he was being dragged toward the woodshed by his shirt collar. I was just walking through the gate and my hatchet leaped out and chopped the post!" Some kids were gullible enough to try the old George Washington cherry tree ploy. "I did it with my own little hatchet," they would confess.

"I know," their father would say. "Now haul your rear end out to the woodshed!"

The moral most of my friends and I drew from the cherry tree story wasn't that George Washington was so honest but that his father was a bit slow. This showed that even a kid with a dumb father could grow up to be President.

The average length of time a kid was allowed to remain in possession of his hatchet was forty-eight hours. By then the hatchet would have produced approximately sixty bushels of wood chips, eight hundred hack marks, and a bad case of hysteria for the kid's mother. The youngster would be unceremoniously stripped of his hatchet, even as its blade fell hungrily on a clothesline post or utility pole, and be told that he could have it back when he was "older" by which was meant age twenty-seven.

Kids now probably wouldn't understand the appeal hatchets held for youngsters of my generation. If a kid today received a hatchet for Christmas, he would ask, "Where do you put the batteries?" He would have no inkling of the romance of the hatchet and what it symbolized to boys of an earlier time, presumably all the way back to George Washington. In the time and place of my childhood, woodcraft still loomed large in the scheme of a man's life. A man sawed and split firewood for the home, of course, but

more important, he could take care of himself in the woods. He could build log cabins and lean-tos and foot-bridges, chop up a log to feed a campfire, fell poles to pitch a tent on or to hoist up a deer or to make a stretcher to haul out of the woods the person who wasn't that good with his ax.

One of the best things you could say about a man back then was that he was a good woodsman. Being good woodsman seemed to erase a lot of other character flaws.

"Shorty may have some faults," one man might say, "but I'll tell you this-he's a good woodsman!"

"Yep," someone else would observe. "Shorty is a fine woodsman, all right. If he made it to the mountains, I reckon it'll take the posse a month to root him out." The ax was the primary tool of the woodsman. If he wished, a woodsman could go off into the woods with an ax and provide heat and shelter for himself and live a life of freedom and independence and dignity and not be at anyone's beck and call or have to comb his hair or take baths. Not that I recall anyone ever fleeing to the woods, not even Shorty, who was nabbed sitting on a barstool at Beaky's Tavern, still a long way from the mountains. But it was the idea! If you were good with an ax and a gun, of course, and a knife, you could always fall back to the mountains. What it was all about, underneath, was the potential for freedom, not the jived-up freedom of patriotic speeches but real freedom, one-to-one-ratio freedom, where man plucks his living directly from Nature. Of course, sometimes Nature plucks back, but that's not part of this dream, this vision, as symbolized by the Christmas hatchet.

I first realized I needed a hatchet when I was five years old and my mother read me stories about the pioneers chopping out little clearings in the great forests of the land. Ah, I thought, how satisfying it would be to chop out a clearing, to chop anything, for that matter. My campaign for a hatchet began immediately and achieved fruition on my eighth Christmas. Although I wasn't allowed to touch any of the presents before Christmas Eve, I had spotted one package that bore the general shape of a hatchet. Still, I couldn't be sure, because my mother was a clever and deceptive woman, once wrapping a new pair of longjohns to look like an electric train. Was she pulling a fast one on me this time or had she truly lost her senses and bought me a hatchet?

It turned out to be a hatchet, a little red job with a hefty handle and a cutting edge dull as a licorice stick. Even as I unwrapped it, I could feel all the thousands of little chops throbbing about inside, pleading to be turned loose on the world.

"Now don't chop anything," my mother said.

Within minutes, I had honed a razor edge onto the hatchet and was overcome with a terrible compulsion to chop. Forty-eight hours later, the hatchet was

wrenched from my grasp and hidden away, presumably to be returned to me sometime after I had children of my own.

A few days after Christmas I learned that my friend Crazy Eddie Muldoon, who lived on the farm next to ours, had also received a Christmas hatchet.

"Where is it?" I asked. "Let's go chop something."

"Uh, I got it put away," Crazy Eddie said. "Let's use yours."

"Uh, I loaned mine to my cousin for a while," I replied.

"He said, 'You don't have a hatchet I can borrow, do you?' and I said, 'Sure.'"

"Sure," said Crazy Eddie, who was only crazy part of the time.

As good luck would have it, an epidemic of permissiveness swept the county the following summer and both Eddie and I regained possession of our respective hatchets. There were still plenty of chops left in the hatchets and the two of us wandered off down to our woodlot in search of a suitable recipient.

A large tamarack soared up uselessly on the edge of the woodlot, and Crazy Eddie said maybe it would be a good idea if we built an empty space in the sky where it was standing. As it happened, I had long nourished desire to yell "Timberrrrrr!" at the very moment I sent a mammoth of the forest crashing to the ground.

"Your folks can use it for firewood," Crazy Eddie said, in an attempt to explain his motive for felling the tamarack. But I knew he too yearned to hear the thunder of a great tree dashed to earth; he, as much as I, was into chopping for the pure aesthetics of the thing.

We spent all day chopping away at the tamarack, with Eddie on one side, me on the other, our hatchets sounding like slow but determined woodpeckers. At noon I went home for lunch.

"What are you boys up to?" my mother asked, with no great show of interest.

"Chopping down a big tree."

"That's nice," Mom said. "Don't fight."

After lunch, Crazy Eddie and I were back at the tree again, chipping out a huge U-shaped gouge all the way around its circumference. We were both exhausted, sweating, standing in chips up to our knees, but we could see now it was possible to accomplish the task we had set for ourselves. The tree began to moan and creak ominously as the hatchets bit into its heartwood. By late afternoon the huge tamarack stood precariously balanced on a gnawed core of wood slightly thicker than a hatchet handle.

Neither Crazy Eddie nor I had the slightest clue as to the direction in which the tree might fall, which heightened our anticipation with the added element of suspense. We took turns charging up to the tree,

whacking out a quick chip, and then dashing back to relative safety.

Suddenly we heard it: the faint, soft sigh that signaled the tree's unconditional surrender to our Christmas hatchets. A silence fell upon the land. High above us the boughs of the tamarack rustled. Crazy Eddie and I shivered happily. We had accomplished something momentous!

Crrrrrraaa ... went the tree, beginning a slow tilt. We were now able to determine the direction of its fall, which wasn't particularly good. Eddie's father, a short while before, had built a fence between our woodlot and theirs and now, even though I had not yet studied plane geometry, I was able to calculate with considerable accuracy that the tree would neatly intersect the fence at right angles.

"You better yell 'timber,'" Crazy Eddie said, his voice trembling.

"Timmmm . . ." I started to cry. Then we heard another cry. It was that of Eddie's father, who had come down to the woodlot to call him to supper.

"Eddieeeee!" his father called. "Crazy Eddieeee! It's time for suppperrrrr!"

Cr-r-r-r-a-a-a-a-A-A-A-A-ACK! went the tree.

"Eddieeee!" went Eddie's father. "EddieeEEEEEE!"

The monstrous tamarack smote the earth with a thunderous roar, rising above which was the twanging hum of barbwire. Fence posts shot into the air fifty yards away. Eddie's father shot into the air fifty feet away.

"Bleeping bleep of a bleep! screamed Eddie's father, introducing me to that quaint expression for the first time.

There is an old saying that cutting firewood warms you twice: once when you chop it and once when you burn it. Well, chopping down that tamarack warmed Eddie and me three times, and one of those warmings was a good deal hotter than when the wood burned.

I learned a good many things from felling that tamarack with my Christmas hatchet, perhaps the most interesting of which is that a barbwire fence is regarded by its builder as merely a barbwire fence until a tree falls on it. Afterward it is looked back upon as a priceless work of art, surpassed in beauty and grandeur only by the Taj Mahal.

My Christmas hatchet disappeared immediately after the great tree-felling but surfaced again a few years later when I was old enough to conduct my own camping trips. Much to my surprise, I discovered the hatchet was almost useless for cutting wood. It was as if Excalibur had been reduced to a putty knife.

The very next Christmas, I gave my little cousin Delbert the hatchet as a present.

"Wow!" he said. A real hatchet of my own! Thanks a lot!"

"You're welcome!" I shouted after him as he raced away, homing in on a stand of shrubs in his backyard. "But don't chop anything!"
By Patrick McManus, December, 2005

Start the year with a bang at the Annual Fire Extinguisher Shoot. This event will be Saturday, January 1, 2022. There will be no work day or orientation.



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