

IMAGES

... *then and now*

From The Indian Hill Historical Society



Buckingham Lodge
1861

The Scythe: A Farmer's Implement

Before the advent of mowing and harvesting machines, the scythe was the main tool used for harvesting hay and grain, and for mowing grass. A versatile piece of equipment, it was ranked by Forbes Magazine as the sixth most important tool of all time in terms of its impact on civilization.

The word scythe evolved from the Old English *sithe*, whose root is *sek*, as in saw, sword, or sickle. All derivations go back to splitting one thing from another. In some places, the word is pronounced **sigh**, reminiscent of the sound of a blade cutting through grass.

Before scythes were developed, sickles (small curved hand held blades) were used to harvest small patches of land. They date back 5000 years. In the Middle Ages, a slightly longer iron blade was attached to a pole almost as high as the user. It was an ergonomic tool, and when teams of reapers (usually 6 men) worked together, they were able to cover larger acreage at a significantly faster rate. This early European scythe was commonly used for centuries.



The components of a scythe are (1) the blade (2) an iron ring which hooks the blade to (3) a long wooden shaft, called a snead or snath, which has (4) grips, nips, or handles. There have been many variations of the basic instrument. Early on, they were hand forged, and later factories produced machine made blades. Some were shaped differently, some were hammered, while others were stamped; and handles ranged in length. Willow, ash, and hickory were the most common woods used. Some were straight and others were bent, and the weight varied.

Two grips – usually adjustable – were attached to the shaft. The rings were of assorted sizes and settings, limited by the size of the heel of the blade.

The cutting edge of the scythe needs to be sharp. It can be dented by rocks or stumps in fields. Blades can be sharpened on a circular grindstone by peening – hammering the edge with a cross peen hammer to pound out dents. While using a scythe, reapers whet the blade at frequent intervals to assure razor sharpness. Whetstones of all types are used for this honing procedure.

Using a scythe, a person stands and twists, drawing the blade from right to left in an arc. The mower determines his own pace, and the blade stays low to the ground in the cutting and return strokes. The mower shifts his weight from side to side, as the scythe makes a swath, and the mower steps and swings as he walks through a field. It is rhythmic in nature, a sweeping motion often compared to a dance. It does not require great physical strength, but is excellent exercise.

The scythe has been associated with the Grim Reaper and Father Time, perhaps drawing a parallel between the laying down of grass and the laying down of one's life. Literary references to the scythe are abundant - from the Bible to William Shakespeare, Alfred, Lord Tennyson, Leo Tolstoy, Robert Frost, and Wendell Berry.

When the mechanical reaper was invented in 1831, use of scythes began to dwindle. In the 1900s, lawnmowers and combines further reduced scythe usage. Still some enthusiasts prefer this tool to power engines. It is quiet, uses no fossil fuel, is environmentally friendly, and provides a connection with the earth. A person with a scythe can cover ground which would be too steep for a lawnmower, and the edges of fields are easier to cut. Additionally there is a health benefit, as the mower gets outdoor exercise.

A recent donation to the Indian Hill Historical Society was an antique American scythe. This unique and beautifully designed implement was commonly used on southern Ohio fields long ago.