

WHITTLING

What Is Whittling?

Some people confuse whittling and carving. Webster defines them as follows:

Carve - To cut in an artistic manner.

Whittle - To pare or cut off chips from the surface (of wood) with a knife.

Although these two terms are often used interchangeably, there is quite a difference between them. The carver uses a variety of chisels and gouges and works on a stationary object, usually held by a vise or some sort of bench clamp. The carver has both hands free to manipulate the cutting tool - one hand to hold the tool and the other hand to steady it or to tap or hammer on it with a mallet. Large pieces such as furniture and statuary are always carved.

The whittler as a rule holds the wood with one hand and does his cutting with a knife, usually a common pocket knife, held in his other hand.

Selecting Knives

Almost any good sharp pocket knife will serve as your starter, but if you're going to buy a knife, make it the three-bladed pocket type. Your knife must be sharp. A dull knife will skid on a tough piece of wood, but won't hesitate to slice into soft flesh. (OUCH!)

When choosing a knife, be sure it fits your hand comfortably. It should not be too small. Some handles have sharp edges which can cause your hand to become sore or blistered.

Using a Pocketknife

In whittling, as in any craftwork, the first thing to learn is how to hold the tools. A knife must be held firmly. Place the knife in the hand as shown in Figure 1, then close the fingers over the handle. The back of the blade should be set firmly in the crotch formed by the index finger and thumb, as shown in Figure 2. The handle should not show.

Fig. 1

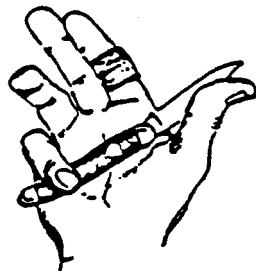


Fig. 2



Then lock the thumb over the index finger, bringing the handle of the knife tightly against the middle of the palm. The thumb should not be placed on the back of the blade for cutting during whittling, EXCEPT for special work.

Figure 3 shows the firm grip that is to be used for all rough whittling.

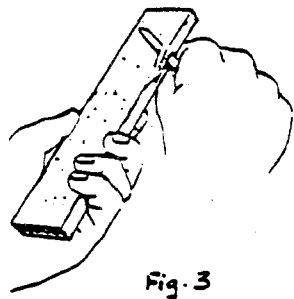


Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Figure 4 shows how a knife is held for fine cutting. Notice how the finger closes around the base of the blade. When you are holding the knife this way, there is no danger of cutting your finger, because the blade lies flat. The thumb may be used as a steady rest and help to pull the blade when you are cutting. The thumb plays an important part in whittling. Most of your whittling will be done with the knife held this way.

Sometimes the thumb acts as a pusher (Figure 5). It is placed on the back of the blade with the hand placed on the knee for added steadiness. Figure 6 shows how the thumb is used to steady the cut and at the same time to help pull the blade. For fine cutting the knife is held like a pencil (Figure 7). The fingers rest on the wood to steady the cut, as for instance when making fine V cuts.

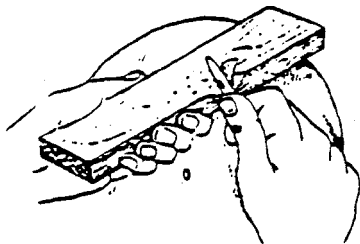


Fig. 5

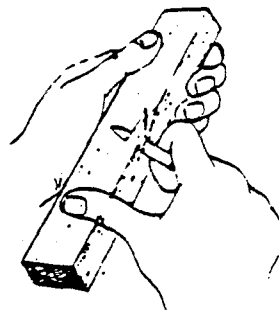


Fig. 6

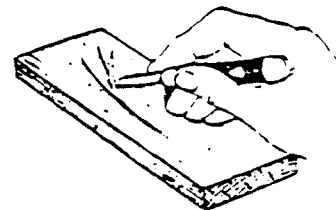


Fig. 7

It may be well to inject at this point the fact that, while most of the whittling is done WITH the grain of the wood or in that general direction, it is often necessary to cut against the grain. By using a razor sharp knife, you will find cutting against the grain is quite easy. In that case, a little extra precaution must be taken to prevent splitting off pieces. Cross-grain cutting is simple although it takes more pressure than whittling with the grain.

Selecting the Wood

Soft wood is best for whittling. Sometimes choice pieces of white pine can be salvaged from old houses that are being torn down. Other soft pines work well also. Wood for whittling should be free from pitch.

If white pine is not available, the next choice is linden, also called basswood, seasoned or green. This is harder than pine, but it has a fine texture and is quite tough. Both dry and green poplar are also very good. Cottonwood is very similar to poplar. Poplar is used for crate lumber, but it can also be obtained in planks two inches thick, or thicker.

If possible, when you are whittling round objects, use green basswood, poplar, willow, or box elder, in fact any native wood that contains no pitch or resin. These woods are easy to cut to shape, and this helps to raise the beginner's confidence.

As we have said, anyone starting to whittle, especially for the first time, will be surprised how quickly his hands tire and become sore. Therefore, the softest woods should be used at first (except for balsa wood, which is not recommended because it is too soft).

If you're in a hurry to see results from your handiwork, then start with a pre-out block. Blocks usually come with an instruction sheet showing you the steps for whittling out the finished piece. A "block" is actually the rough shape of the object you're going to whittle. It has been cut and drilled by power tools down to the point where nothing more can be done except by the hands of the whittler.

After you've handled wood successfully, try whittling other materials, including smooth bark, horn, and bone, even fruit stones such as peach and plum pits.

Other Necessary Equipment

Band-Aids - Because no matter how careful you are, some day you'll be absorbed with whittling your creation only to begin wondering how a piece of soft pine got stained blood red.