

PENNSYLVANIA GOOSEWING AXES

By Bob Garay

One of the oldest tools known to man is the axe. As said by Charles A. Heavrin, in his book, The Axe and Man, "The axe was the first, and for 2,000,000 years, the only tool of his we have. The axe is a very simple tool, but shows so much variation that any example can be dated within close limits." It is these many assorted variations that allow the collector to appreciate his quest for the many diverse variations that exist. It is also these many variations that bring collectors to argue about the history and provenance of the goosewing broad axe.

The broad axe is a variety of the common axe used for hewing beams from round logs. They have been in use for hundreds of years and used in this country right up to the twentieth century. The broad axe is a short handled axe of large size as compared to the felling axe. It has a beveled edge on one side only, while the other side is flat to assist the worker in keeping an accurate straight line when cutting. The axe is designed to allow for hand clearance so that the worker does not chafe his knuckles against the log while cutting. This is done by means of a bent handle or a canted eye to angle the straight handle away from the log being cut. One of the most sought after collectible axes is the Pennsylvania goosewing axe. This axe has its origins in Germany during the 16th century and was brought to America by the early German settlers of Pennsylvania and its environs.

Many of these axes were marked by their makers and give us a great record of their work. Many others were left unmarked and leave it up to the collector to discover their origin. It is by studying the known marked axes that a collector can more assuredly understand the origin of his unmarked goosewing axe. John Caroline has been a collector of axes and especially goosewing axes for many years. He has just completed an interesting booklet on goosewing axes titled, GOOSE WING AXES, THE MYTHS OR THE REALITIES. In this booklet John discusses his findings

relating to the goosewing axe. He includes beautiful color pictures with full descriptions about many of the axes in his collection. He does make many good points about the many characteristics of signed and unsigned goosewing axes. He explains in detail how many of the unsigned goosewing axes are most likely from the Pennsylvania Dutch area. Also, many of the goosewing axes that he found have the standard Pennsylvania Dutch attributes but some are made in other parts of this country. Thus, in the rest of this article I will include many of the signed axes with information he included in his booklet. This may help many of us to recognize the unsigned goosewings we have.



Early 1800's goose wing signed D. BRADY a blacksmith of Mt. Joy Pennsylvania. This is a round back goosewing similar to the goosewings found in pictures dating back to the 16th century. John Caroline points out that this axe was actually made after the Hofmann axe in plate 17 (lower left, which is of the more conventional shape).



This axe is stamped once V. HOFMANN who was a blacksmith after 1759 in Lancaster Borough Pennsylvania. It has a small eye, canted socket but a wide poll. Most American axes have a narrow poll. The metal is the more traditional grainy-rough charcoal iron of the early blacksmiths.



This is a fine example of a Pennsylvania goosewing axe. It is signed three times ROHRBACH. It is a Pennsylvania maker, of the finest quality. It exhibits a double line or rib in its forging. It also has a narrow poll and a very small eye opening. The socket for the handle is canted and it does not have any tree of life or other decoration on the iron. The iron is very smooth unlike many of the early American axes.

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Goosewing made after 1830 with the mark of either crossed keys or crossed key and dagger with the number 375, printed right in the middle of the blade. It has an extremely wide poll, and is canted quite well.



Old "skate" goosewing made in France, as it is stamped "garantie", the French word for guarantee.



This axe with the Beatty marking (insert) and a 225 MOSZ686 marking. It has a very big eye and wide poll—like most American axes. It also has a clearly defined rib and a cant to the socket.



This axe is stamped SNYDER. It has a wide poll and almost minuscule eye, a good cant and a small ridge in the center of the socket. It also has the typical charcoal rough metal.



This axe is double stamped C. Silvis, who was a Pennsylvania German blacksmith and was well known in the Lancaster area. It has a moderate poll, a very small eye, a good cant with a small ridge in the center of the socket.



An amazing very fine goosewing marked with what looks like STEYRL-STAHLE and the number 5. It also has the figure of a unicorn just adjacent to the name.

John Caroline includes a lot of information in this booklet. Reading it has enlightened me and spurred me to search out goosewing axes and their history. I hope you too will develop an interest in this great collectible.