



✻ ✻ ✻ A Journal of Tool Collecting published by CRAFTS of New Jersey ✻ ✻ ✻

## Pennsylvania Goosewing Axes

by Jim Bode, Ken Hopfel, John Henson & Bob Garay

Goosewing Broad Axes are named for the unique shape of the axe head, which resembles the wing of a goose in flight. The goosewing broad axes brought to Pennsylvania by German settlers were the earliest hewing axes commonly used in this country. This hewing axe, already fully developed in Germany, was used for squaring up of a log. It's a fine edge tool that creates a finished product. It's not like an early felling axe, which is basically a sledge hammer with a wedge shaped end. It didn't matter how much you spent on a felling axe. It was a three and a half pound soft piece of steel on a handle. A file would cut it like butter and this is meant to be so. These tools needed to be sharpened while in use, several times a day. A hewing axe, with its laid-on hardened steel edge however would take a keen sharpening. A file wouldn't cut it; it would just skid off with nary a scratch. They needed to be sharpened with sharpening stones, just like your plane irons and chisels. The edges are an average of 13" long and the average goosewing weighs 7 lbs.

The advantage of the Pennsylvania goosewing axe is that it is easier to wield with the weight center being closer to the hands. It also has

a canted socket, thus it has no need for an offset or bent handle. The main disadvantage of this goosewing axe is, since the socket is offset you need two axes for right and left work. A regular broad axe has a symmetrical blade in which the offset handle can be installed top or bottom.

When the goosewing axe was used for hewing,

it was usually done right where the tree fell. This removed 30% of the weight making the log easier to move. The goosewing axe came in both right and left hand configuration, and a good percentage

of left handed goosewing axes are found. A much higher percentage than the 10% of people who are left handed. As you know, now or then, tools made for left handed people are non-existent. These axes were not made for left handed people but for hewing the other side of the log. Logs were typically worked from the top toward the stump where the grain flares outward. It is much easier to work left handed than to flip an 800 pound timber.

The earliest, albeit crude goosewing type broad axe, appeared around the 9th century. Although, the

*(Continued on pg. 3)*

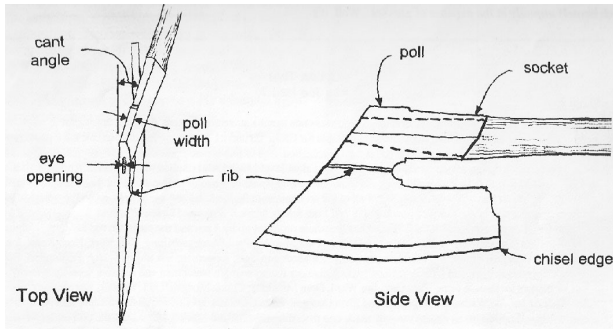


Above - Rohrbach goosewing axe. Left - Triple maker's mark and initial stamp.

### December Issue Contents

Pennsylvania Goosewing Axes -  
Jim Bode, Ken Hopfel, John Henson & Bob Garay.....1, 3-5





Goosewing ax nomenclature. This is a left handed axe. It is used on the left side of the log, with the left hand forward.

traditional version, actually shaped like a geese's wing appeared about the 16th century. The symmetrical broad axe that replaced the goosewing was well in favor and standard by the 1830s.

Maker's marks on goosewing axes we have in our collections:

A right handed G.ROHRBACH is spelled with a variation I am not familiar with. The axe is stamped

Hess	I.Brva	Philip His	G.Rohrbach
G.Sener	G.Shau	D.Lichty	
H.H.Stricker	S.Lenhart	S.Wil	
Brady	J.Weber	F.Roth	
Peters	W.Addam	C.Gilbert	

three times: G.ROHRA and with quite an elaborate spur decoration. My guess it is an early mark. Bill Phillips mentioned seeing spellings of, "G.ROHBA & ROHRBA"

In the article by Bill Phillips in the No.82 Tool Shed of June 1994, he lists these makers that have their names stamped on his axes.

More makers' stamps on axes reported by John Caroline during the Tool Shed's No.119 Nov. 2001 Pennsylvania Goosewing Axes article.

Beatty	S. Cleaver	Dubs	D.Miller
George Miller	M.Seiger	T.Bever	H.Stahler
Wood	J.Bauer	J.A.Seager	J.D.Seidel

American and Continental goosewing axes both get their name from the graphic form of the blade but that is where the similarities end.

D.Ligute	D.Brady	Stohler
C.Kriler	V.Adams	D.Ermold
Bever	A.Hook	V.Hofmann



Above - Rohrbach axe showing the canted socket that angles the handle away from the wood being worked.

**Following is a list of differences between Continental axes and Pennsylvania goosewing axes:**

1. The top edge of the blade as it protrudes from the top of the hammer poll to the tip of the blade is usually straight and seldom curved as on continental axes.
2. A longer handle socket is a characteristic of Pennsylvania goosewing axes.
3. The Pennsylvania goosewing axe socket is more flat than round as in the Continental axe.
4. Pennsylvania axe socket has a defined ridge that runs the length of the axe.
5. Pennsylvania axe poll is thin. Same length as the continental axe but not as fat.
6. Pennsylvania axe eye is thin, small or almost none existent.
7. The Socket is always canted away from the plane of the blade and bit on the Pennsylvania goosewing axe.
8. The area under the socket is a well-defined and a very calculated form, usually embellished with a distinct design as an ovolo.
9. The bottom or heel of the axe blade on a Pennsylvania goosewing appears to be straight and seldom has a curve or cut out.
10. The back upper corner of the blade body can have an ogee or other design as a quarter round. Most have a 45 degree clip. This feature is often regional and a characteristic of the individual smith, such as a signature. Philip His is recognized by his ogee embellishment.
11. The upper region of the blade between the socket and main body of the blade can be plain, have one small rib or two thin ribs together on Pennsylvania axes.
12. Most Pennsylvania axes are signed; when signed it can be done 1 - 4 times. The maker's marks on Continental axes are almost always in the form of a symbol and seldom the maker's name, as on Pennsylvania axes.
13. The Pennsylvania blade is usually void of designs and decorations, and if they are, it is in the form of parallel ridges.
14. The entire Pennsylvania goosewing axe can have chamfering on all extremities.
15. The thickness of the blade and socket on Pennsylvania axes are seldom as heavy as on Continental axes.
16. The Pennsylvania axes often have rough iron that is a result of the charcoal iron they used in fabrication.
17. The bottom of the handle socket on Pennsylvania goosewings is more often than not at an angle, unlike Continental axes which are always straight.
18. On Pennsylvania goosewing axes the bottom corner closest to the handle is more often clipped or molded as compared to Continental axes.

Continued on next page

**Below are examples of Pennsylvania goosewing axes and their maker's marks.**



Above is C.GILBERT axe. Inset right is his maker's mark.



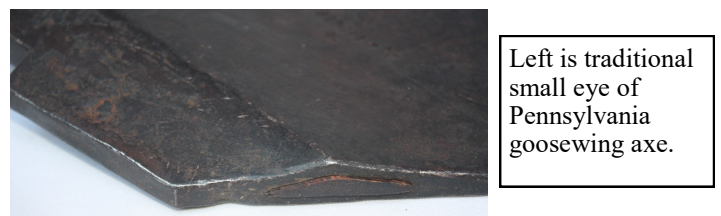
Above is D.LICHTY axe. Inset right is maker's mark.



Above is J.WEBER axe. Left is the maker's mark.



Above is S.LENHART axe, inset right is maker's mark.



Left is traditional small eye of Pennsylvania goosewing axe.



Set of L&R handed Rohrbach axes. left is G.ROHRA maker's mark.



Above is set of L & R handed W.ADDAMS axes. Left is the maker's mark.



Goosewing axe made by I.BRVA. Left is maker's mark.



Above is PETERS axe, inset is the maker's mark.



A pair of Philip His axes. Top is goosewing; bottom is Cooper's axe.



Above is axe by G.SHAU. To right is maker's mark stamped many times, but to the left it is stamped clearly.



Above is axe by F.ROTH. To left is double maker's stamp.

As you looked over the photos of the preceding axes you should have noticed some of the features of Pennsylvania goosewing axes. Of course, many of these early Pennsylvania makers learned their axe making craft in their homelands on the continent before coming to America. They brought with them a tradition that was literally hammered into them as apprentices. Yet they forged ahead to develop an individual style that can be recognized today. The Pennsylvania Dutch area of Lancaster and its surrounding counties were bursting with blacksmiths. In a small booklet titled "A Directory of Lancaster County, Pennsylvania, Blacksmiths" There are pages filled with names of known blacksmiths. Many never put their names on the products they made. Often the only mark they included on a piece is a stamping of their initials. The booklet lists over 100 blacksmiths that did mark their names on their work, and the authors acknowledge that this list is incomplete. And this is only from Lancaster County. As journeymen spread out to practice their craft in new towns they took with them the learnings and stylings they inherited from their masters. Thus it is easy to understand why an axe that has all the characteristics of a Pennsylvania goosewing would turn up being made by a blacksmith in Ohio.

Thus, break out those goosewing axes in your collection and look them over. They may have some of the features listed here that "may" make them a Pennsylvania goosewing axe. But of course as tool collectors know, nothing is written in stone. As many of the axes we find follow the characteristics we listed here, there are many more made here in America that do not have most of these characteristics. Yet that is half the fun. As one can often hear collectors gathered at any auction, debating the provenance of any given tool.



The late great Bill Phillips with his wall of rare Pennsylvania goosewings.