



# MAKING CROOKED KNIVES

A handmade tool offers simplicity and satisfaction

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY DOUG STOWE

Crooked knives are small knives with bent blades, handy for hollowing spoons or other small wooden items. I first became familiar with crooked knives when I attended a yurt-building workshop taught by Bill Coperthwaite from Maine. Bill, who is head of the Yurt Foundation, has a Doctorate in Education from Harvard and has been actively involved in education for many years, teaching yurt building but also sharing a philosophy of life based on voluntary simplicity, profound respect for human cultures, and passionate regard for nature.

I noticed during the workshop that whenever Bill wasn't busy sawing or actively instructing the work of others, and whenever there was a pause for conversation, Bill was busy carving something in his hands.

When I asked what he was doing, he showed me a small spoon he was carving from a persimmon branch and the small crooked knife he was using to carefully hollow its bowl. He explained that many native cultures had a version of the crooked knife and that his travels and studies had led him to the far North, where he learned the making of crooked knives from an Eskimo boatmaker.

Inspired by Bill's crooked knives, I brought the project back to my students at Clear Spring School in Arkansas, but we made them out of scrap blanks of tool steel given to me by a planemaker friend. They turned out well, but they were time-consuming and complicated to make. Then, in the fall of 2004, I attended a New England Association of Woodworking Teachers meeting at Moses Brown School in

Providence, Rhode Island, and among the activities planned for the meeting was making crooked knives. Having some prior experience in making and using the knives, I looked forward to the chance to see how another teacher would approach this project.

Ironically, Bob Elliot, middle school shop teacher at Moses Brown, had also learned about crooked knives from Bill Coperthwaite, but he had obviously paid more attention to his lessons. The simplicity of Bob's approach allowed all the teachers to make knives and begin carving in less than an hour. This inspired me to once again involve my students in the making of knives, but using the additional knowledge gained from Bob. While Bob Elliot used an old handsaw as a source for the blade stock,