

Lewis and Clark War Axes By Eddie Rainey

The Lewis and Clark expedition was the first federally funded scientific expedition in the United States. Prior to their departure in 1804 Lewis and Clark spent almost one full year planning and gathering supplies for their journey across America. They had to be sure they had extra supplies and gifts to trade with the Indians they expected to encounter.

The first leg of the journey took them north to Bismarck, North Dakota. They reached the fort just in time to prepare for the worst winter on record. The fort was equipped with a blacksmith shop where the first trade axes were made to trade with the Mandan Indians. Because of a late run of the Buffalo the Core of Discovery found that trading with the Indians was their best source for food. The Mandan Indians were experienced farmers and were willing to trade food for metal objects. The Mandan village was located just outside the fort along the river and was the hub of trading activity. The population was the same as Washington, D.C.

These trade axes became the status symbol for Indian chiefs. Almost all photographs of Indian Chiefs shows the trade axe or tomahawk held across the chest. Below is the details of the construction of an authentic Lewis and Clark trade axe.

- The length of the axe is 9"
- The cutting edge is 6"
- The eye for the handle has a diameter of 1" - 1 1/4"

—Start with 3/16" plate 9" in length and 6" in height tapered to 1 1/4"

The eye is made from 1/4" x 1" flat bar 5 3/4" in length. First find the center of the bar and measure 2" from center both directions and mark with a center punch. This gives you 4" for the eye and approximately 3/4" for the scarf.

From the center of the bar forge the bar to 1 1/4" in width. As you widen the bar to 1 1/4" leave a ridge line in the center between the center punch marks.

Now form the scarf by forging the ends into a fish tail. Your piece should now resemble a bow tie. Heat and bend over the horn until your scarfed ends almost meet. Insert the 3/16" plate between the scarfs and line the plate up with the center punch marks. Now forge weld the 2 pieces together. Now you are ready to drift the eye. You want an hour glass shape to the eye. You should drift the eye round using a drift with a diameter of 1 1/4"

You may have some clean up around the eye to do from the forge weld.. Hammer dress the edges and the taper to the eye making a smooth transition from eye to the body of the axe. Use borax to clean by heating until dull red and wire brushing. Forge the cutting edge to 1/2 inch taper. You can decorate the axe by punching round holes into the body of the axe. Some had weeping hearts which was a favorite for some tribes.

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New Jersey Blacksmiths Newsletter

Apply a good coat of wax and your authentic reproduction of a Lewis and Clark trade axe is ready for a handle. *The* handle can be decorated as well, Good forging a let your creativity soar

Thanks to The OBG for sponsoring the scholarship that made this learning experience possible. Thanks to Jim Batson who taught the class on this unique and fun forging experience.

