

# Grasping the metal

In shaping his ladle with knives, **Drew Langsner** illustrates some of the ways you can hold a carving knife for control

## Sloyd knives



Sloyd knives are simple single-bladed things, generally flat and pointed, but some are curved for spoon carving. The word sloyd is derived from the Swedish word slöjd, which means skilled or crafty. Educational Sloyd was a form of teaching based on handicrafts, helping to build a child's character through handwork. Otto Salomon started a school for sloyd teachers in Nääs, Sweden in 1865, which survived active till the 1960s.

For knifework on spoons and ladles I mostly use a knife with a small blade (about 2in long by 3/8in in width) but having another knife with a longer blade is useful for working a few specialised areas. Most knifework is done while sitting, and as with hewing, knifework begins with safety considerations. I used to hear that 'a sharp tool is a safe tool'. But this old saying isn't really correct. A sharp carving knife will cut flesh much more easily than a dull one. When you grip and use a knife it is always necessary to have an understanding of the full action to be undertaken and to know that the knife will safely stop moving before there is risk of getting cut. In some cases the knife will finish a cut moving harmlessly outwards and away from your body. In other moves your hand or a part of your arm will come to a stop against your torso before the knife can get out of control.

There are two other general rules for using a carving knife. Knives cut wood much more efficiently when used with a slicing action or when held at a skew angle. Cutting at right angles to the edge is much more difficult. Also, you must always cut with the grain, as if rubbing the fur on a cat the right way. Tear-outs are caused by cutting against the 'nap'.

The carving knife is used with a variety of 'grasps.' A vocabulary of grasps is necessary because the carving will require cutting at all possible angles relative to the wood fibre. The blade can emerge between your thumb and first finger with the edge directed away from or towards yourself. There are also grasps with the knife reversed (dagger style), so that the blade emerges between the little finger and base of your palm. Again, the edge can face inwards or outwards. In addition, there are some knife grasps where the thumb or first finger of the non-grasping hand is pressed against the back of the blade to give extra



Trimming the rim of the bowl can be tricky if you are not ambidextrous. Drew uses a long-bladed knife to cut the 'far' side of the rim. Notice how he has the handle of the ladle tucked up into his sternum

pressure and control to the cut. For most grasps the knife is moved across a firmly-held (stationary) workpiece. In some specialty grasps the workpiece is rotated away from the knife which rotates in the opposite direction.

## Trimming the bowl rim

The first knifework on the ladle I hewed last issue is trimming the rim of the bowl. (The entire spoon is created relative to this plane.) This should be flat, or slightly curved upwards towards the stem. You will find that cutting through the various quadrants of grain direction leads to varying challenges in holding the knife and the spoon. Sometimes this is easy and straight forward, but there is usually a difficult section if you are not ambidextrous. For trimming some sections of the rim I support the end of the handle against my sternum, and use the long-bladed knife to cut across to the opposite side of the rim. Inspect your work by examining the spoon profile from eye level. When the rim is dressed I usually do some further hollowing of the bowl. You can do this with curved spoon-carving knives or a



The completed ladle. Drew used river birch to make the ladle, which is harder than paper birch



To remove wood fast from the outside of the bowl you hold the knife so the blade is facing away from you. Have the blade at a skew angle to the wood, then use your elbow or shoulder for power

paring gouge. Once again you will find that carving requires cutting from all directions, and rotating the spoon in different holding positions.

Spoon-carving knives are made in pairs known as 'lefts' and 'rights'. If you are right-handed the 'right' knife will be used with the blade edge facing your body (cutting towards yourself). The 'left' knife will be used with the edge facing away from your body (cutting away from yourself). Because it's easier to cut towards yourself you would probably use the 'right' knife 3/4 of the time, but the 'left' will be very much appreciated in those places where there isn't a good position to cut with the 'right'.

I generally carve over the entire spoon in several passes, working from rough form to a final, refined shape. I will often re-work the rim and take more out of the bowl as I see how the rest of the spoon takes shape. I tend to work by beginning at the bowl, then moving on to the stem and handle. But I go back and forth as the form develops. I usually put off any detail work on the end of the handle (the finial) until I'm almost finished with the spoon.

The leading portion of the exterior of the bowl is



straight forward knifework. To remove wood quickly in this area where there are no complicated curves you can hold onto the spoon handle and support the bowl on your thigh just above your knee. Hold the knife with the blade extending between your thumb and first finger, and with the blade edge facing away. (Something like holding a hammer.) Cock your wrist towards your body, so that the knife

## Paring gouges



To use a paring gouge with a hand-held spoon grasp the gouge blade with the cutting end emerging between your little finger and base of your palm. Hold the spoon between your fingers and the palm of your other hand. Extend your thumb across the bowl to the base of the palm of your gouge-holding hand. Use the gouge to scoop fine, long shaving cutting from the rim towards the bottom of the bowl. Your thumb is a pivot point that also limits the distance that the gouge can be moved in a single stroke. This is a rotating action that originates in your forearm. Avoid creating an island in the center of the bowl which will need to be removed later.

Spoon carving knives are supplied as 'lefts' or 'rights' so that you can always work with the grain, towards or away from you

## Elbow work



For aggressive cutting, hold the knife with the blade away from you, then cock your wrist so that the blade is at an angle to the cut. For medium cuts you can flex your elbow to make the cut, but for harder work you keep the elbow straight and push down with your shoulder. Make sure your knife can't hit your thigh on exit.



Here Drew is working away from his body, using his thumb to guide and push the blade

engages the wood at a skew angle. For a medium cut extend your arm. For a more aggressive cut straighten your arm before engaging the cut and then push downwards from your shoulder. When using these power grasps the knife should exit the cut and go forward into space. Adjust your body position so that it's impossible to run the knife towards your thigh.

## The scissors grasp

Another useful cut for work on the bowl and many other parts of the spoon is sometimes called a 'scissors' grasp. This grasp takes some practice, but it's very effective, safe and useful once you get the knack. Hold the knife with the blade extending from your thumb and first finger, but this time position the edge directed towards yourself. Then close your elbow and rotate your fist up and outwards so that your knuckles are supported by your chest. Now the blade edge faces away from you. Hold the spoon with your other hand in the same manner. Adjust the position of both hands until the knife blade engages the spoon in the proper place. To execute the cut rotate both of your arms backwards, rolling your knuckles across your



When working towards his body, his forearm and hand will stop the knife from doing an injury (top). For shallower cuts to the exterior Drew uses a scissoring cut

rib cage. (Maybe something like a chicken flapping its wings!) This takes some getting used to, but you will find that this grasp is very good for control and power applied simultaneously.

After shaping the bowl I move along to the transition into the stem. This is where the cross section becomes a diamond orientated 45 degrees to the original plan and profile views. Re-draw the upper and lower center-lines if they have been carved away. Also, draw the arris that defines the two side facets. This arris line originates at about 2/3 back on the rim of the bowl, curves gently downwards to the middle of the stem, and then forms a long up-swept S-curve terminating at the end of the handle. You should also sketch in the flat tablet shapes on the top and bottom of the handle. Note that the upper handle tablet is positioned aft from the lower handle tablet.

## Carving the stem

Carve the lower part of the stem beginning at the bowl working towards the center line. By working from both sides you will form facets that connect at a bottom ridge. Often the fiber direction reverses relative to the concave shape in this area. You will need to carve from two directions; from the bowl and from the wider end of the handle. This is an area where it might be helpful to get a little

more control and power by pushing with your thumb on the back of the blade with your spoon holding hand.

Carving the upper part of the stem is similar except that the neck joining the bowl and stem is cut at a tighter radius. Leave a small, almost flat triangular area just behind the bowl. When carving the stem take extra care to maintain both adequate depth and width. Beginning spoon carvers often take away too much wood at the base of the stem. Think engineering here; you want a deep diamond sectioned beam to support the bowl.

The tablets that make up the upper and lower surfaces of the handle require careful viewing and evaluation as work progresses. Both tablets are saddle shapes. In length they take long concave curves. But in section they are slightly convex. The arris that winds along the sides of the stem continues approximately along the center of the handle sides. Note also that the upper tablet continues at an upwards slope, but it's not nearly as steeply angled as the stem section. The end section of the handles thickens in depth. This looks good, but also feels right. In use, the lower part curves



When it comes to carving the end of the handle, work towards the centre, from the edge, with a slicing action achieved by rotating your wrist. The thumb acts as a pivot

downwards over your first finger while the upper part curves upwards to hook slightly behind your thumb. This same curve is common on many classical designs for silver and pewter spoons.

To carve the tablets you can make good use of the grasps that were described in the section on carving the bowl exterior. In another useful grasp you support either end of the spoon against your sternum. Hold the knife like the scissors grasp, but this time don't rotate the blade outwards. Pull the knife towards your torso. The safety element is the fact that your forearm comes to a stop long before the knife gets anywhere near your body. This is one grasp where you may wish to be wearing a good leather apron, or something similar to protect your sternum from the concentrated pressure.

## Finishing the shape

As you develop the shape remember to stop often to examine your work. Evaluate. Look for symmetry, straightness, balance, etc... Recreating the centerline is sometimes useful. I often redraw the arris along the stem and handle sides.

When the overall spoon is looking good you can begin to think about how to end the handle. For this spoon I came up with a design that utilises a slight reverse curve on the final side section of the handle tablets. This is actually a little tricky to carve. The reverse curve means that you need to carve from two directions. Also, this shape is visually prominent. Symmetry is important here, along with the necessity of developing pleasing proportions.

With the reverse curves I decided that a decorative finial wasn't necessary. Trim the end of the handle by carving a simple convex shape that emphasizes the facets created by the carving knife. This is endgrain carving. As usual, start cutting away at the arris. Work your way towards the center. Use a slicing action to make a clean cut. For this grasp hold the knife like you did when pulling towards your sternum. Brace your thumb on the opposite side of the handle end, located safely below the endgrain area that you are carving. To get the slicing action rotate your wrist upwards. Your thumb is the pivot. The knife engages the wood by slicing from the tip towards the hilt.

## Carving flats



When carving the tablets, Drew cuts with a scissoring action, working away from his body, clutching the handle in the crook of his elbow. How you hold the workpiece is as important as the holding of the knives.

*Next Issue* Drew shows how he finishes his spoons and ladles.

## Spoons

For the last three years, Norman Stevens has been assembling a collection of carved spoons, and already has 150 items, including this sculptured spoon in afzelia lay by Norm Sartorius, who lives in Parkersburg, West Virginia, USA.

Norman Stevens, who lives in Storrs, Connecticut, aims to build a collection that is representative of the state of spoon making in the early 21st Century. Most of them are hand carved, though some are turned. He has examples by Jan Harm Brugge, Zina Burliou, Dan Dustin, Ken Jones, Mark Sfirri, Bertie Somme and Del Stubbs (whose website [pinewoodforge.com](http://pinewoodforge.com) contains a wealth of information about wooden spoons). "I'm keenly interested in adding spoons from the United Kingdom," Norman tells us. Contact him at [normanstevens@mac.com](mailto:normanstevens@mac.com).

