



He has a number of rare and high-end axes in his collection and continues to watch for more.

Washington Collector Owns 1,000 Axes

Larry McPhail started out collecting old logging tools but somewhere along the line he developed a reputation as an “ax expert.” He says his 1,000-piece ax collection is not as big as other huge collections in the Northwest. But because of a book he recently published and an appearance on the History channel, people call him all the time with ax-related questions.

“My interest mostly came from my grandfather’s tools. He gave me a few, and I liked them so well that I started watching for other tools at sales in the mid-80’s,” the Blaine, Washington, collector explains. “Nobody was collecting them then so you could buy a nice ax for \$5.”

“There were hundreds of ax manufacturers from the Civil War to 1950,” he says. Now there are only one or two U.S. ax makers left.

As a member of a tool club, McPhail became good friends with Allan Klenman of Victoria, B.C., Canada, who had been collecting since the 1950’s and had 2,000 axes. Klenman wrote a history of ax-making companies.

In 2003, McPhail purchased Klenman’s 5-ton, 2,000-ax collection. He didn’t have room to display them all so he sold the duplicates and less valuable axes on eBay.

“I sold axes for two years straight,” McPhail says, averaging between \$80 and \$100 from buyers all over the world. One, a G. White double bit falling ax, sold for \$1,100. It had never been used, had a 14 1/2-in. long bite, and was made circa 1920.

McPhail puts a light coating of motor oil on the steel ax heads. About 10 to 20 percent of his axes have their original handles, usually made of hickory or ash.

Tool collectors often visit to see his axes. He realized there was a lot of interest in the history of ax manufacturing. Klenman gave him the rights to his book and an additional 15 years of research to publish. “Ax Makers of North America: Antique Old Logging” was published in 2006. It’s available on eBay and from McPhail (\$29.95 including postage).

The stories about ax makers give more meaning to his collection, McPhail says. He recalls a woman who purchased a Rixford ax for her 100-year-old grandmother. Her father had started the Rixford Ax Company in Maine.

McPhail believes one ax in his collection is more than 200 years old. It was made in New York State. He purchased it from an elderly widow.

“After I bought it, I could see how it was made in four pieces by a blacksmith,” he says. Later a relative of the neighbor, who had researched the family’s history, verified that the family had lived around New York state 200 years ago and later traveled west by covered wagon.

Another unique ax is a 6-lb., double-bit sniping ax. It was used to bevel the front edge of logs to skid easier when they were pulled out with horses and oxen.

McPhail also found an undercutter ax in Klenman’s collection. It’s one of 50 prototypes made by the Walters Ax Company for Vancouver area loggers. It was specifically designed to knock out the notch left by the first Stihl chainsaws imported to the area in 1938.

“It was a short production ax, made from 1938 to 1955,” McPhail says. “I feel really lucky to have one of the original 50.”

As a collector he continues to watch for rare and high-end axes - White, Winchester, Black Raven, and Marble, for example.

To others interested in pricing their axes, he suggests using eBay as a good measuring stick, though prices are down right now. There are also a couple of price guides available.

It’s hard to explain the attraction, McPhail notes, but there is something enduring and solid about axes. He recently measured an ax he has been using to split firewood since 1974. After years of work and sharpening, it has only lost 1/16 in. of steel.

McPhail is willing to answer questions, talk about his book, provide tours and visit with other collectors.

Contact: FARM SHOW Followup, Larry McPhail, 2855 H. Street Road, Blaine, Wash. 98230 (ph 360 366-5548; loggar56@aol.com).



Tool collectors often show up at Larry McPhail’s place to see his ax collection.