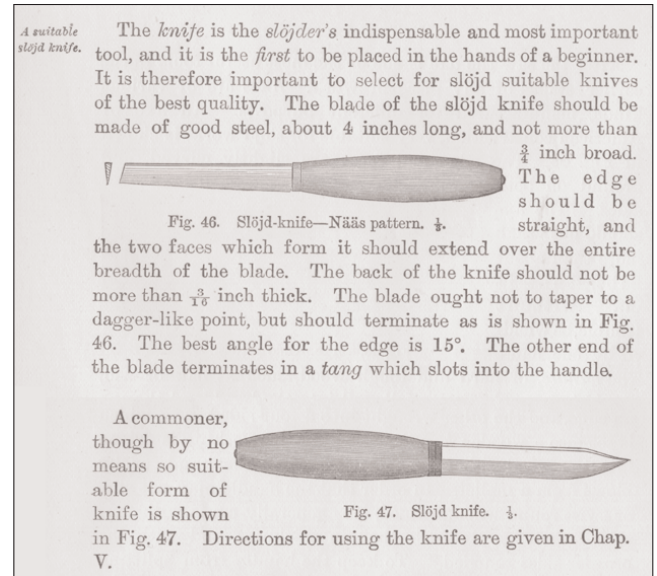
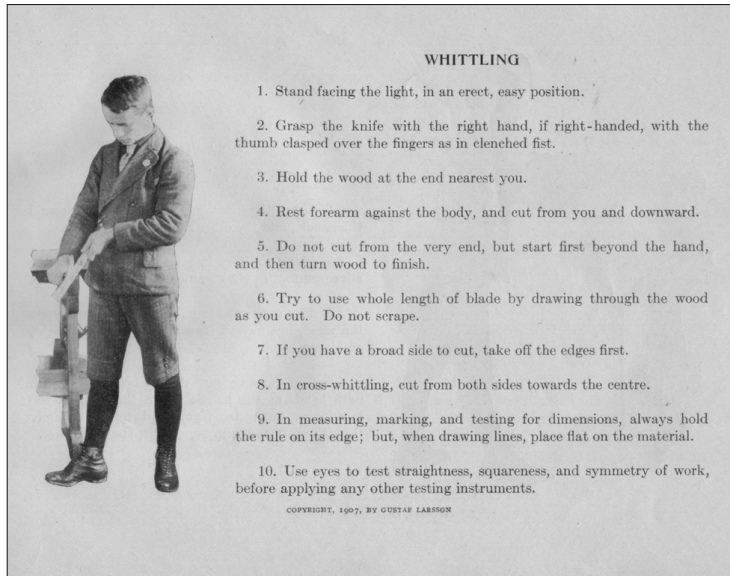


The Sloyd Knife

BY DOUG STOWE



A blind man stands at the rear of an elephant and, while holding the tail, proclaims, "It's a rope!" It is ironic that the simple Sloyd knife, one of "half a hundred tools" used in Sloyd training, came to be its strongest symbol; the very slender tail of a complex educational system. In fact, the use of the knife was controversial even before the dawn of the 20th century, and the knife we associate with Sloyd today is not even the one most recommended by its founder.

S. Barter, in *Woodwork, The English Sloyd* (Macmillan & Co., 1892) disparaged the knife in explaining the differences between the course of study in England and its Swedish origins. "One of the most important tools used in the Slöjd course, and certainly the most unique, is the Slöjd knife. The advantages of this knife are not clearly brought out, though the importance of it is so strongly insisted upon; and moreover, it has been found that in this country that all work done with the knife can be more efficiently performed with a chisel. Under these circumstances, there seems to be no adequate reason for adopting an 'unfamiliar' knife in preference to a tool which is in such common use by all classes of workmen."

But according to Otto Salomon in *The Theory of Educational Sloyd*, "Every boy has many times, in a more or less elegant way,

At left, the proper stance for Sloyd whittling is shown in *Sloyd for the Upper Grammar Grades*, by Gustaf Larsson, 1911. At right, the Sloyd knife recommended by Otto Salomon in *The Teacher's Handbook of Slöjd*, 1904, was slightly different from the one still available today in woodworking catalogs.

cut a stick with a knife, and is therefore more or less acquainted with the earliest exercises. We begin, then, with the instruments and exercises best known to the child, in order that our method of procedure may be as educational as possible."

I had my own experiences with children and knives long before I learned about Sloyd. As a parent at the Clear Spring School, I went several times on the annual school camp-outs, where children are encouraged to bring pocketknives (with locking blades) and are taught whittling. The teachers keep the knives until there is a safe time for the students to carve with instruction and careful supervision. It is a primal experience to sit at a campfire as boys and girls with freshly-sharpened sticks heat-harden their points, much as our distant ancestors might have hardened their spears.

Hans Thorbjörnsson, curator of Otto Salomon's library at Nääs, reminds us that "80% of the Swedish people were living in the countryside about 1880, mostly farmers or farm workers and their families.

Almost every farmer and worker wore a knife and probably used it daily. The boys took part in the farm work, starting at 8-10 years of age, going to school a few hours a day or every other day. Even these young boys used the knife in a natural way; they could handle it and were seldom injured."

Salomon found even greater purpose in the knife, however, as reflected in the writings of one of his favorite authors whom he quoted frequently—the Norwegian Christian Jacobsen in his book *I Slöidsagen. Et Indlaeg* (Oslo, 1892):

"The knife demands total attention and permits no mechanical work. Furthermore, the knife can produce—unlike the plane, as an example—curved surfaces in form work. This makes the knife superior when it comes to the development of a sense of form and beauty." [summarized by Hans Thorbjörnsson]

I recently found a Sloyd book for sale on the Internet. In the ad were the seller's words, "As if we could trust kids with tools, now." And the great shame of it is we don't. We won't be introducing knives in schools in today's society, and sadly, it is probably for the best. But even today's children need the opportunity to work with tools under the watchful eyes of parents, grandparents, and teachers. Just think of it! Children spending time in the woodshop!