

Wood Oars

Production and characteristics of high-quality wood oars by Herm Hoops

Nothing beats the rhythmical sound of a wood oar slipping into a river's current and nothing compares with the balanced and springy-flex feel of a well-made wooden oar in a boatman's hand.

Wood oars are made from softwoods (pines, fir & spruces) and hardwoods (ash, oak & basswood). Generally softwoods are fast growing, and in comparison hardwoods like oak and ash grow very slowly. The softwoods and basswood are light but lack the strength and flexibility of ash. Fir and spruce tend to be brittle. Often the softwoods are laminated (glued and pressed) to increase their strength. Modern laminated woods are very strong, but the lamination process makes the oars very stiff. Oak is a very strong wood, but it lacks the flexibility of ash and is very heavy. White Ash (*Fraxinus americana*) is a tough, very flexible wood that is straight-grained, given the same diameter inch for inch, ash is the strongest and most flexible source for river running oars.

Good wooden oars are symmetrical, solid pieces of wood, with no glue joints, no blemishes and straight grain. They are lathed into graceful taper, with thin throats and feminine-looking blades that will hold up to the same rigors as the thicker, fatter ones. The thinness in the throat & blade creates balance and flex. The flexing of the oar in the water enhances the power of the oar-stroke.

An oar consists of a loom (the handle and shaft), the throat (a transition to the blade) and the blade. The balance of an oar, of course depends on where a boatman places the stopper for the oarlock. Oars that are made by craftsmen have a natural balance. An oar made of hardwood usually has a thinner throat than those requiring thickness for strength. A thinner throat means that end of the oar is naturally lighter. Today many river runners like wide short blades - sometimes eight inches wide or more. The flat surface area of a blade, all factors considered, is most efficient on blades that are 5-6 inches wide. A blade that is wider than 6 inches does not slip into and out of the currents as efficiently, and is hard to release when caught in the swirls common to rivers like Westwater and Cataract Canyons. A five inch blade that is three feet long gives one the same surface area as a blade that is 20 inches by 8 inches wide - the common Carlisle blade measurements.

In manufacturing a wooden oar the trees are selected, felled and skidded to trucks where they are hauled to a lumber mill. At the mill the logs are cut into 2-3 inch thick rough lumber boards. The boards are then stacked for almost a year to air dry until their moisture content is around 12%.

Planks are selected and laid or banded out in a general shape. The rough shaped oar is then clamped into a lathe where the round part, called loom or shaft is turned. Next the blade end is

clamped into a profiling machine where a steel pattern is cut with a chipping wheel. Finally the tip of the blade is equalized by cutting off a in a round dish like saw blade.

The lathes, profiling and other machines are specially made for making oars. Before their development oars were made by hand using saws, draw knives and planes.

Finished wooden oars should be sanded, dipped in sealer and coated with marine Spar varnish. On my oars I scribe a deep line, parallel to the blade, into the end of the handle, in order that my thumb can feel when the angle of the blade is correct.

Cutting and shaping timber into a graceful oar is a costly process, and manufacturing high-quality wooden oars requires time, patience, and skills of a craftsman. But in the hands of a river runner it is the relationship of wood, water and mankind that transcends time to our earliest existence

References:

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