

TOMAHAWK AND KNIFE

The Woodsrunner's Duo

by Paul “Many Rifles” Laster

“Enough extra clothing had been available among the Greathouse party to outfit Simon and Strader again and Grills gave his young friend a good knife, which was matched by a gift tomahawk from Greathouse, but they had no gun available.”

- The Frontiersman, Allan W. Eckert

Beyond a long rifle, Hawken, or your flintlock trade gun, there is nothing that says woodsrunner like a good knife and ‘hawk. What could be more iconic than the buckskin-clad wilderness wanderer, kneeling to check the trail for tracks and sign, his trusty tomahawk shoved into the sash around his waist, his long knife always at the ready?

Your knife is the central item of your woodsrunner kit. With a good knife, you can build a shelter, skin or process game, make traps, build a spear for hunting or camp defense, create the elements to start a fire, and accomplish all the basics of wilderness living. A knife can do some of what a tomahawk or hatchet can do. Adding a tomahawk or hatchet can really create more efficiency around other tasks like processing larger game animals, building and driving stakes, help with shelter building, and more.



Musket, Knife, & Hawk combo

THE WOODS KNIFE

A discussion around the “best overall” woods knife or some other hypothetical is beyond the scope of this article (or any reasonable article-length discussion), so for the sake of brevity, we’re going to focus on a larger knife (blade length over 4-6”), and in the general style that would have been carried by a woodsrunner, mountain man, long hunter, or a backwoodsman of the general frontier period.

The most common mountain man knife would have been a simple butcher knife, something along the lines of the Old Hickory or Ontario butcher knives we are so familiar with today. These can still be bought today in a design that’s pretty close to the original – blade profiles and handles being close to original specs, but the modern versions usually have riveted handles, whereas the originals would have been pinned. There’s a ton of research out there on the original trade knives, butchers and scalpers, and the reader is encouraged to wade into the water to his or her preferred depth.

The sheer amount of available woods-worthy knives is astounding, both from the standpoint of custom or production knives, so where to even begin? The mountain man or coureur des bois from years gone by would have been blown away by the concept of even having so many of the options that are available to the modern woodsrunner. Find a knife that effectively accomplishes the tasks set before it, and it’s perfectly fine to also be enamored by its beauty and lines. Like many things in life,