

## **The Making of Shakes was A Vital Craft**

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One of mankind's basic problems since time immemorial has been protection against the elements. A key to solving this problem has been a roof over his head. He has used a plethora of materials for protection against rain, snow, sun and wind, not to mention hail, sleet and all the other calling cards nature has in her arsenal.

Among these materials are stone, slate, marble slabs, grasses and reeds, hides and wood.

Wood being the most available and the easiest to work was the most commonly used material for making shingles by the early settlers in the Pine Barrens.

Various types of wood were used for making shingles including red and white oak, poplar, cypress, pine and cedar. White cedar was plentiful in the swamps of South Jersey and because of its endurance and strength was used extensively.

Cedar shingles or shakes as they were called have been known to last up to a hundred years on a fairly steep roof. Oak, both red and white have a life expectancy of 50 to 60 years.

I recall an incident back in the 1930s in Pitman where we were removing wood shingles on a home. A rather elderly man came by and after watching a short while said, "I see you are finally putting a new roof on this house." He went on to say, "This house is seventy-two years old and those are the original shingles." The shingles were made of cypress and the unexposed portions could have been cut off and used again.

Straight-grained cedar logs were selected for making shakes in Jersey. The logs were cut into lengths (billets) 18 to 20 inches long. The billets were stored under cover for periods up to one year until they were ready for splitting. (Although most builders preferred the seasoned shakes there was some demand for green or unseasoned ones and these were split in the same manner).

The tools used for splitting were simple like most of those of bygone days but efficient. There were two basic tools. The froe or frow was essentially a steel blade 12 to 15 inches long and sharpened on one edge. There was an eye or socket near one end for a handle of oak or hickory which was set at right angles to the cutting edge of the blade.

The froe is an ancient tool and was actually used back in Roman times for splitting. They were usually fashioned by a local blacksmith.

The second tool was a mallet or froe log which was usually cut from the limb of an oak or maple tree. The froe log was four five inches in diameter, approximately two feet long and with a handle or handhold shaped on one end. It looked very much like a short, thick and very primitive baseball bat. It was fairly hefty but the weight was needed to drive the froe into the billet.

The seasoned billets were turned on end and the froe placed preparatory to removing the outside sapwood and slab. The froe was then struck with the mallet to start the split. Once the split was started the froe handle was pulled at right angles to the billet, thereby prying off the slab.

This was done on all three sides of the billets. The billet was then split in half with the froe. The shingle-maker then proceeded to split shakes off each half of the billet. An experienced worker could tell by looking at a cedar billet exactly how to start the split to obtain the most shakes from a piece of cedar.

I have no record of the number of shakes a splitter could produce in a day but my guess is a good man could turn out five or six hundred in a 10-hour day.

Editor's note: The author of this article is a member of the Batsto Committee. He has mastered the art of making shakes by the old method.