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Making Pitch Sticks

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Collect a batch of pitch from conifer trees and heat it near a fire in a small can or pot. As it is melting add up to 1/2 its volume of finely ground wood ash and stir until the mixture is melted and well mixed.

Take several small twigs (3 - 4 inches long) and begin dipping them in the hot mixture, and setting them aside to cool. Re-dip them several times like dipping candles, until a small hot dog shaped blob of pitch is on each stick. As each stick is dipped it can be dipped into cold water to help cool it faster if desired. When sufficient pitch coats each stick and it has partially cooled it can be rolled back and forth in the palms to help shape the pitch stick.

Store a few of these sticks in your possibles bag or pack for ready use in the field. To use the pitch stick, in hafting for example, heat the end of the pitch stick over a small flame and either let the melted pitch drip into the notch of the handle or daub it in with the pitch stick. When the desired amount of pitch lines the notch (reheat the pitch in notch over the flame if needed) insert the blade and wrap with cordage or sinew.

Another method described by Charles Robbins of the Anasazi Post is to melt the pitch, mix in the ground charcoal, and let the mixture begin to cool. When it begins to firm up, pour it onto a flat surface and roll it into a long coil about the diameter of a pencil. After it has completely cooled break it into pieces several inches long for convenient storage and use.

Jim Woods of the Herrett Museum, Twin Falls, Idaho describes the Australian aboriginal method of making pitch sticks as follows:

Collect pitch (in our case use conifer pitch) and heat in a container until it melts. While it is heating take some charcoal out of the fire and grind into a fine powder and place this in a small cone shaped depression in the ground. When the pitch is melted pour it in the depression with the charcoal. When it begins to cool, start mixing the pitch and charcoal together by hand. Pull out small blobs and mix it similar to pulling taffy. Then roll between hands to

make small cigar shaped pitch sticks, set aside and make another until all the pitch is used. The ratio is roughly 1/2 charcoal to 1/2 pitch. The pitch sticks are used as described above.

Mr. Woods suggests that primitive Americans may have added ground up dried grass fibers to their pitch to give it strength. He also suggests that there are several unanswered questions regarding the preparation of pitch adhesives. How long should the material be heated for best results? Should it be boiled or just heated up? Can it be overcooked and become too brittle? Can the pitch be reheated several times and still be effective? What were the additives, and how much were used by the primitives?

Trying to find the answers to these and other questions about pitch adhesive would be a beneficial research project says Woods. Any takers?



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