

## Paying attention to the smaller items in your inventory goes a long way

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One of the things "old school" senior firefighters passed on to me was making sure the everyday hand tools and other items were maintained and presentable. This included our forcible entry tools, axes, pike poles, shovels, etc. Regular maintenance not only makes them look good

cosmetically (e.g., public demos), but also assures that they are not going to cause further injury when damage and defects occur from regular use and wear and tear.

Among the first items important to any fire department are axes and pike poles, ceiling hooks or whatever term your department uses. Painting them with red paint or any other preferred color paint is optional.

Some of the senior FFs did not like painting the ax or pike pole head. Instead they liked keeping them protected with an anti-rust-type thin coat of lubricant or oil.

The most important part of the ax head is the edge or blade used for cutting/chopping. This should never be painted because of the need to be sharpened on a regular basis.

As with any tool, a dull tool is unsafe. (Ask any chef about keeping their knives sharp.) A dull cutting tool will tend to slide or deflect off the surface rather than penetrate the intended object, material or surface, which can cause further injury.

An ax should not be replaced just because it is dull. FFs need to learn the necessary skill of how to sharpen an ax or any other cutting tool in their inventory. It is not that difficult. There are many videos and references (e.g., the Boy Scout Field Handbook) that show how to do it.

Most fire stations have a "shop" area where these type of maintenance tasks can be accomplished. They usually include an air compressor, vice, bench grinder with a grinding stone and wire wheel, paint, paint brushes, lacquer thinner or mineral spirits, welder, etc.

The other part of any hand tool that requires regular inspection and maintenance is the handle, pole or shaft. Nowadays the wood handles have been replaced with fiberglass handles or some other composite. This makes them less susceptible to wear and tear from the elements and pretty much maintenance-free.

However, they are still prone to splintering and other defects inherent with their use. The beauty about the wood handles or poles was their rigidity, natural beauty and ease of repair. If it started splintering, a little sandpaper then a fresh coat of varnish, lacquer or shellack did the trick.

In the old days the protective substance of choice was "Boiled Linseed

Oil." This was similar to adding oil to teak wood. There may still be some inside any fire department shop area.

There are some creative people out there who have made nifty modifications to their hand tool handles. One is adding a piece of cord or plastic tubing under some sort of wrap for a better grip. Innovation should always be encouraged. New ideas are always welcome, especially if it is going to make our job better.

For many reasons, many departments store the hand tools inside the apparatus compartments. Some departments may still have many of these items mounted on the exterior of their truck as was done in the "old school" days — all the more reason to have them looking cared for and maintained, just like the rest of the apparatus.

Also, when an apparatus and crew are called out to do a public demonstration, many times the equipment is displayed on the ground on top of a salvage cover and discussed with interested attendees. It is important that they look presentable and well-maintained.

Some of these skills have been lost or are fading away and need to be passed on to the newer, younger firefighters. Not only are they skills, but also traditions, and they form a good bond when participating in a project with your comrades.

Be sure to include some sort of a regular maintenance and inspection schedule into your department's daily, weekly or monthly apparatus tasks for smaller items and hand tools.

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#### About the Author



Frank R. Myers is a retired lieutenant with the City of Miami (Florida) Fire Rescue, where he served for 32 years. He works as a consultant for [PSTrax.com](https://www.pstrax.com), a technology service that helps fire departments across the country automate their apparatus, equipment and inventory checks.

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