"...beat their swords into plowshares..." - Corn Knives and Sickles

By Jim Melchor and Tom Newbern

Editor's note: For an enlarged view of figures, simply zoom in on your computer.

The quote in the title comes from Isaiah 2:4 in the Bible. In 19th century agrarian America, many discarded swords were, indeed, forged into useful farm implements such as corn knives and sickles by local blacksmiths.

The term, corn knife, is misleading. In fact, this type of implement has a stout sharp blade suitable for chopping and cutting all sorts of light woody vegetation, not just for cutting corn stalks. It is akin to the modern machete (Fig. 1, Corn knife {top}and machete marked US 1944 SWI {bottom}). The corn knife is 22 7/8" long.

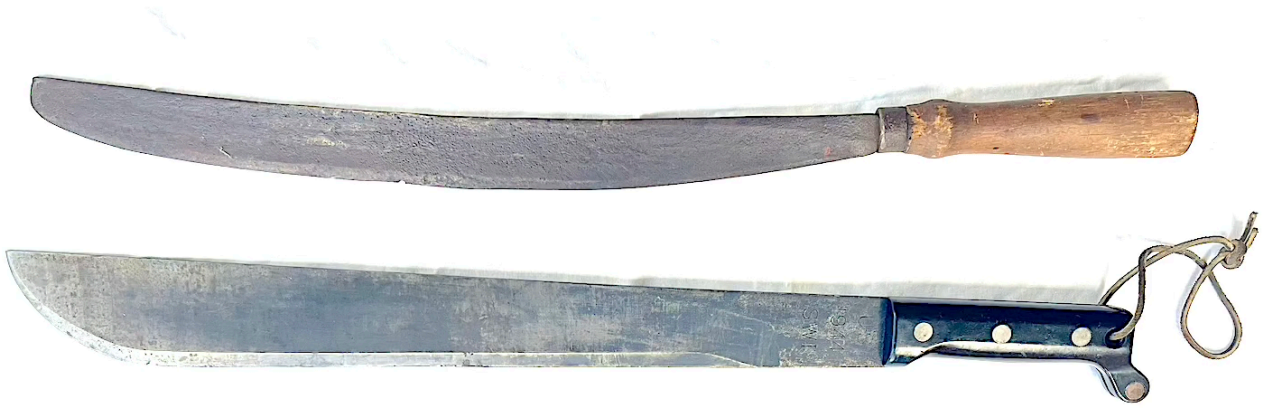

Figure 1

Sickles are sharp hand tools with semicircular blades generally used for trimming grasses and other light vegetation. The sickle form has remained essentially unchanged for centuries (Fig 2, Mid 19th century factory-made sickle, marked but unreadable). The sickles of interest in this article are individually shop made by blacksmiths.

Figure 2

Sickles are not to be confused with reaping hooks. Sickles and reaping hooks can be encountered in the antique tool marketplace, and both forms are similar in shape. However, reaping hooks are far more graceful and were purpose made by skilled tradesmen for harvesting grains. Also, they are frequently signed by the maker (Fig. 3, Two reaping hooks, both signed) (Fig. 4, Stamped signatures on reaping hooks in Fig. 3).

Figure 3

Figure 4

There usually are exceptions to most rules, and the sickle in Fig. 5 is one. While graceful in shape like a reaping hook, it is more crudely made. It is also smaller, more the size of a sickle. The top reaping hook in Fig. 3 is 26 1/2" across from its blade tip to the tang at the butt of the grip or handle. The sickle in Fig. 2 is 17" from tip to tang, and this sickle in Fig. 5 is 14 1/2" from tip to tang (Fig. 5, Sickle with reaping hook shape).

Figure 5

It should be noted that machetes, sickles, and reaping hooks were available commercially from sources such as the various Sheffield manufactories in England and were illustrated in their catalogs in the early 19th century (Figs. 6 & 7, Sheffield catalog pages, *Smith's Key*).[1] The focus of this article, however, is on American, shop-made corn knives and sickles.

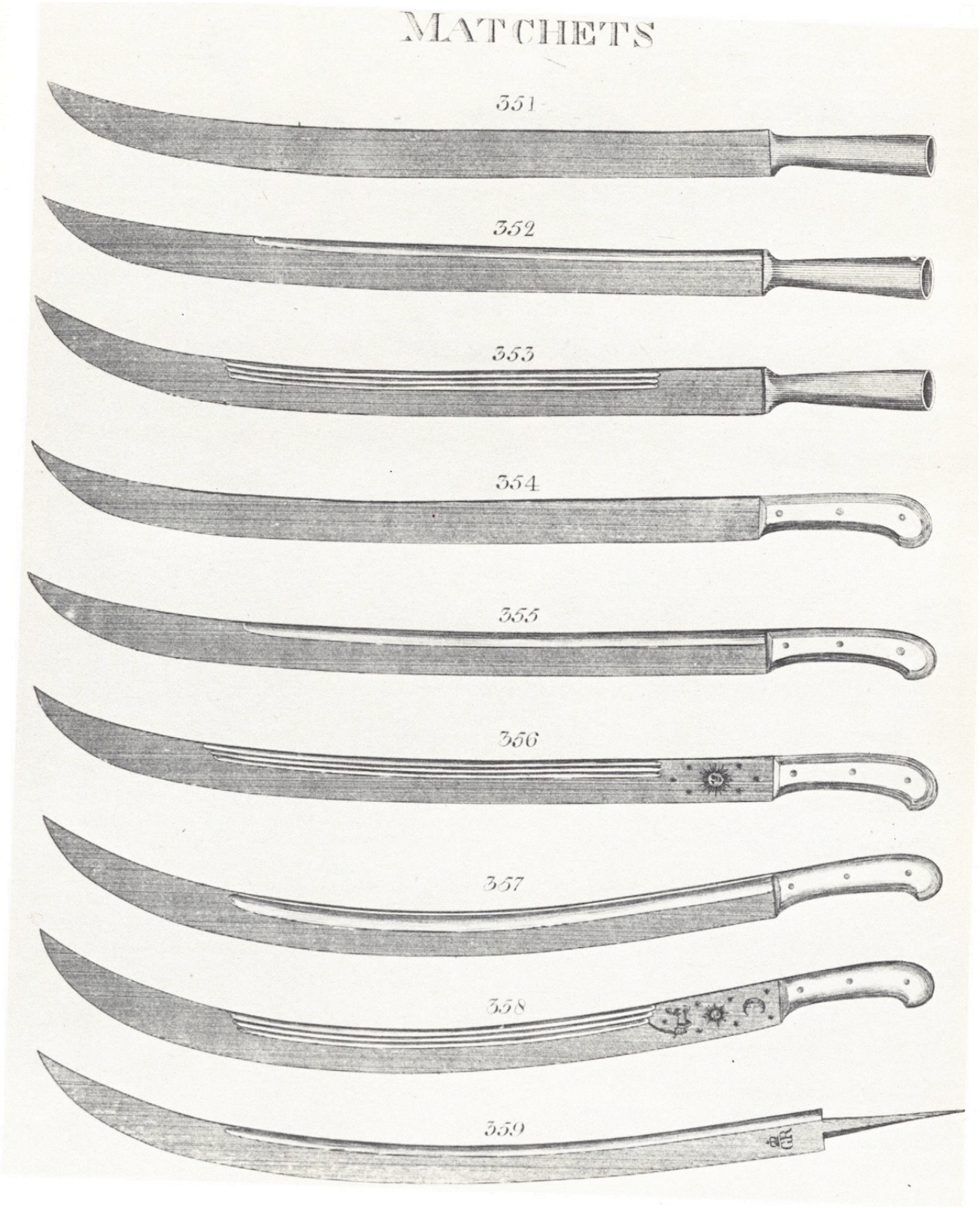

Figure 6

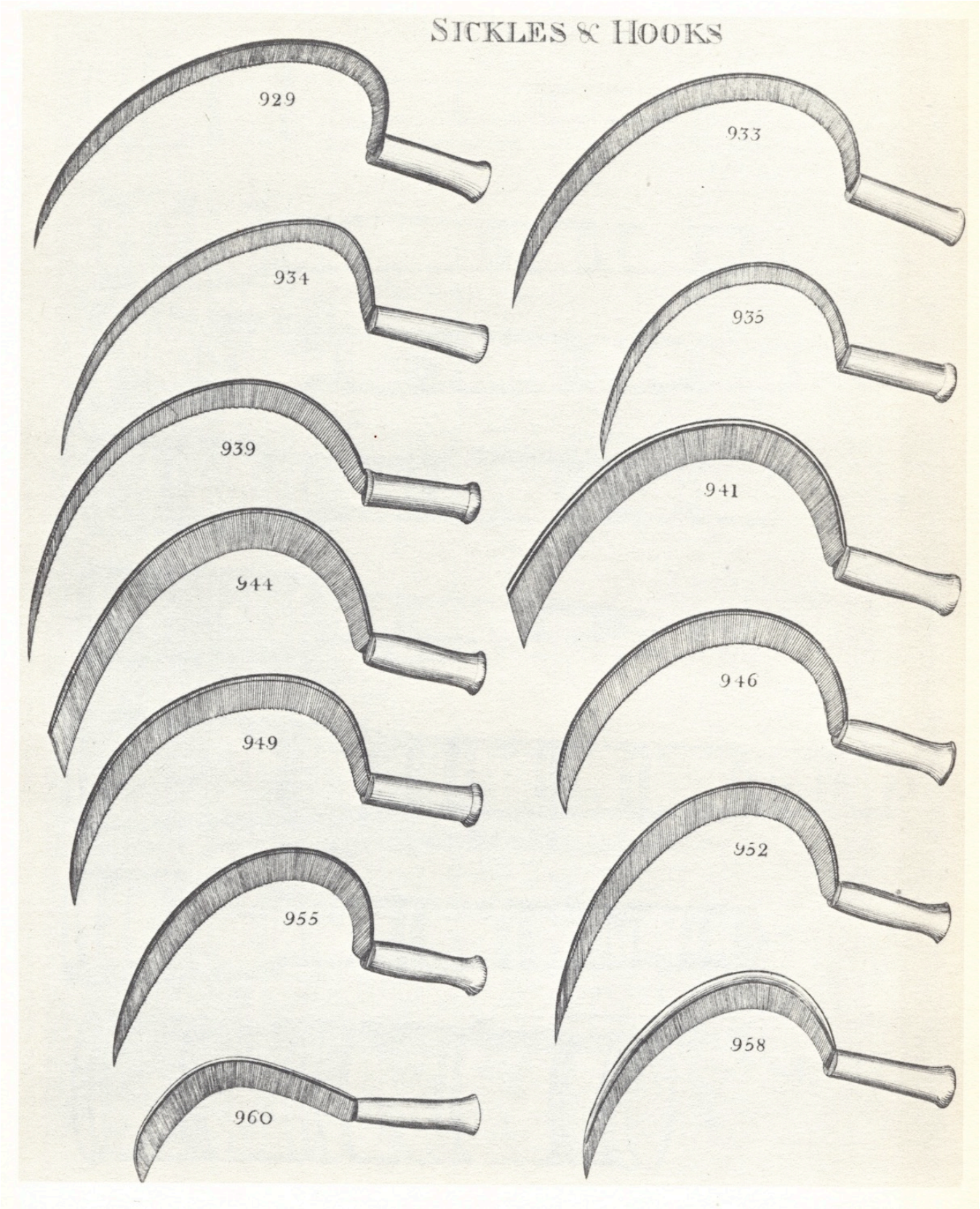
SICKLES & HOOKS
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Figure 7

Most blacksmith-made corn knives were forged from steel stock or from iron stock with a forge-welded steel bit or edge. From the appearance of the finished products, the metal was likely shop scrap. Corn knives were not things of beauty but were utilitarian tools intended for hard use, often in the hands of enslaved people. Scrap sword blades were another source of good steel for making cutting tools were. The turned wooden grips or handles were likely purchased by the smith from commercial sources or from wood turners in cabinet or chair making shops. The metal ferrules fitted on the grips could have been made by the blacksmith or acquired commercially.

The corn knives in Figs. 8 & 9 are representative examples of ones forged from steel stock. The overall length of Fig. 8 is 23" and Fig. 9 is 22" (Figs. 8 & 9, Steel corn knives).

Figure 8

Figure 9

The blade of the corn knife in Fig. 10 is fashioned in iron with a forge-welded steel bit or edge. The weld line is clearly visible in Fig. 11 (Fig. 10, Iron knife with steel bit) (Fig. 11, View of weld line on Fig. 10). This corn knife is 23" long.

Figure 10

Figure 11

Figure 12 is an excellent example of a corn knife made from the high-quality steel of a scrapped sword blade. It is stout and retains a fine cutting edge. The obvious fuller or "blood groove" extending along the upper edge of the blade leaves little doubt that it is a farm tool (e.g. "plowshare") forged from a sword. It is 21 1/4" overall.

Figure 12

An aspect of the corn knives illustrated thus far is that their points are clipped or blunted. This is the case on most corn knives encountered. Tradition or lore indicates that the points were blunted to keep slaves from using them as weapons. While this concept might have some basis in truth, it really does not make sense. All corn knives have sharp edges; consequently, they could serve as formidable weapons, if desired, with or without a point. Furthermore, the commercial machetes of the period (see Fig. 6) all have sharp points as do the commercial and shop-made sickles and reaping hooks (see Figs. 3, 5, & 7). More than likely, American farmers and blacksmiths realized that points on corn knives used for chopping served no practical purpose and could occasionally injure the user.

That said, similar shop-made cutting tools with points are encountered. Are these corn knives for agricultural use, or are they actually short swords, weapons? There are compelling arguments both for and against. Figure 13 argues for it being a weapon rather than a corn knife. It is 22 3/4" long overall.

This sword has a thin, narrow blade forged in steel with a sharp edge and point, excellent for stabbing and light slicing. However, it is not suited for chopping through brush. It was probably crafted as a hunting sword in the European tradition (Fig. 13, Hunting sword).

Figure 13

Arguably, Fig. 14 could be a short sword or a corn knife. It has a pointed, forged-steel blade and has the heft and balance of a proper short sword. It is 23 1/2" long (Fig. 14, Short sword).

Figure 14

Without doubt, some corn knives were, indeed, used as weapons. Possible evidence of this secondary use is seen in the nicks on some blades. Obviously, blade nicks can be caused by striking other metal objects or rocks. Nicks also can be caused by striking other blades. Such a clear nick remains in the blade of Fig. 9 (Fig. 15, Nick in blade of Fig. 9 caused by contact with another blade).

Figure 15

Not in the swords-to-plowshares vein, scrapped swords were, on occasion, repurposed into other weapons such as fighting knives. The knife in Fig. 16 was fashioned from a third model Virginia Manufactory of Arms cavalry saber. It is 14 1/2" long and retains the sword's original grip and pommel (Fig. 16, Knife from a VA Mfg. saber).

Figure 16

The next example is also a knife made from a scrapped sword. It is 14" long and retains a cut-down portion of the original brass guard (Fig. 17, Knife made from scrapped sword).

Figure 17

The shop-made sickle in Fig. 18 is quite similar to the factory-made sickle #960 in Fig. 7. However, this sickle was made from a file (Fig. 18, Sickle forged from a file). It measures 12 1/4" tip to tang. Traces of file teeth remain on both sides of the blade adjacent to the ferrule (zoom in). On this example, the ferrule is cast iron and would have been sourced commercially by the smith.

Figure 18

The sickle in Fig. 19 was forged from a saw blade. It is fitted with a cow horn grip and is 10 3/4" tip to tang (Fig. 19, Sickle from saw blade).

Figure 19

The next two sickles fit the swords-to-plowshares theme. Both were forged from discarded swords as evidenced by the obvious fullers or "blood grooves" (Figs. 20 & 21, Sickles made from swords). Fig. 20 measures 16 1/4" tip to tang, Fig. 21 is 17 1/4".

Figure 20

Figure 21

The final sickle, Fig. 22, while found in Virginia, is early European in style and was likely an imported item (Fig. 22, European sickle). It is 12" from tip to the butt of the grip. The shank and blade are forged steel and are decorated with ten stamped stars on the obverse side (zoom in).

Figure 22

All the corn knives, reaping hooks, sickles, short and hunting swords, and fighting knives shown in this article were found in Virginia and North Carolina but were not necessarily made in these two states. However, surely some were made by local blacksmiths. Following the American Civil War, numerous salvagers scoured the country purchasing literally tons of military surplus to repurpose and sell to the public. Notable among these entrepreneurs was Francis Bannerman IV and his family of New York. It is not unreasonable to assume that at least some of these surplus dealers unknowingly followed

Isaiah's "...beat their swords into plowshares..." and converted swords, weapons of war, into corn knives and sickles, agricultural tools.

Endnotes:

1. Kebabian, John S., Ed., 1975, *Joseph Smith Explanation or Key, to the Various Manufactories of Sheffield, with Engravings of each Article (Smith's Key)*: South Burlington, VT, The Early American Industries Association.