

Tools for Trails

Part 3

“McLeod”

By: Bob Johnson

Note: This is Part 3 of a series of articles providing a brief history of the tools used today on the trail.



McLeod, No - not the detective series - McCloud (a TV Series 1970–1977) [Sam McCloud is a rustic country sheriff from a rural part of the United States. He travels to the big city and joins the police force, using his country ways and laid-back approach to nab the bad guys.] ~ rather this is a peculiar tool used for firefighting or trail building and repairs. Origins on trail tool inventions are relevantly sketchy. This tool like many wild land firefighting tools bears the name of the inventor – Malcolm McLeod, a US Forest Ranger in the Sierra National Forest who thought of combining two tools around the turn of the 19th century. The McLeod is designed “with a large hoe-like blade on one side and tined blade on the other. It is commonly used in the mountains of the American west.”¹

The McLeod has other sobriquet names such as ‘Rake Hoe’ from Australia and ‘Streif’ in the American Southwest.² Rakes and hoes were separate tools and Malcolm McLeod had the inspiration to combine the two into an efficient tool for raking fire lines {exposing mineral soil} with the teeth (tines) and hacking small plants, shrubs, and sod. Another forest ranger named Ed Pulaski followed McLeod’s lead decades later with his combo tool named the Pulaski.



Early production models of this tool allowed the handle to be separated

¹ From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

This combination heavy duty rake and hoe tool is named after Ranger Malcolm McLeod. Firefighters use this tool to cut through matted litter and duff and clearing loose surface materials.

² Ibid.

from the head for transport. In later revisions, the head was welded to the wooden handle assembly. Most modern versions of the McLeod – the head are bolted to the handle. The bolt sticks out and does not give a smooth tamping impression.

TODAY:

The McLeod is still used widely as a woodland firefighting tool and trail organizations use the tool to make new trails or repairs vice quick fire lines. “No fire box should be without one.”³ For trail building purposes, the McLeod is a very versatile tool and every project should provide crews with several McLeod’s. McLeod’s (or giant ‘earth combs’ as I like to call them) provide a crew a tool everyone can use at various times during work project. If your trail needs clearing of duff {organic materials or loose ground rubble} after the corridor has been sufficiently trimmed, the McLeod can be employed and used to rake the back slope and bench area. This tool is great for chopping small roots, plants and hoeing or pulling together the pile of disposal materials to the center of the newly constructed tread. A McLeod person working together with a cutter and shoveller – makes the chore of dispersing trail cuttings a lot easier.



The McLeod helps greatly in shaping the bench/tread after cutting in the back edge. The ‘McLeoder’ is extremely important in keeping everyone in the trail crew focused on the tread design and out slope.

The McLeod is also used in defining the critical edge to the new trail, trimming up the back slope and pulling up the down slope (when necessary). In essence, the McLeod is used later as the ‘finishing tool’. McLeod’s can be worked with the discipline of raking the infield on a ball field – they smooth and angle the tread, sometimes packing/tamping holes in the tread, the back slope or down slope as needed.

Another useful practice for this tool is measuring the angle of the out slope (slight angle across the bench/tread to allowed water drainage). The tool laid on its head has the handle straight up & down and parallel with the handler. If the tread is constructed properly, the



³ http://www.nationalfirefighter.com/product_info.php?products_id=93

McLeod should list slightly towards the downhill side, thus validating sloping trail to provide water sheeting action across the tread.

Essentially, any time there is cutting and disturbance of rocks and soils, in construction or maintenance of trails, a McLeod should be present.

I particularly like to assign a crew member as a finisher with a McLeod to work the trail in rear of the advancing crew to 'pretty-up' the trail. That process includes some minor cutting, smoothing, tamping, defining, and filling in divots.

“Because of its shape, the McLeod is an awkward tool to transport and store. Ideally it is carried with the tines pointing toward the ground for safety, with a sheath over the cutting edge. However, the mass distribution makes it difficult to carry in this orientation consistently.”⁴

As with all trail tools, the McLeod serves certain functions as described above and should not be used for anything other purpose. The McLeod also happens to be the most expensive tool to replace once someone has decided to use it for chopping out rocks or use it for a pry bar. Snapped off heads are not easy to fix, in fact, once the handle is broken – the tool is rendered useless.



Storing the McLeod is easy. The tines (rake part) should be masked into the ground on the up slope of tread/bench and the handle perpendicular to the tread. Never leave a tool on the tread or construction area.

Please use the McLeod as it has been described here in this article. If you still have questions about its use, consult your well trained Crew Leader – they will be glad to demonstrate how the use this wonderful tool properly.

<http://www.terratech.net/product.asp?specific=iqmoigr4>

<http://www.americantrails.org/resources/info/tools5.html>

[http://www.servinghistory.com/topics/McLeod_\(tool\)](http://www.servinghistory.com/topics/McLeod_(tool))

<http://answers.yahoo.com/question/index?qid=20060812142050AA8252A>

http://www.nationalfirefighter.com/product_info.php?products_id=93

<http://www.wildlandfire.com/docs/imwtk.htm>

⁴ <http://www.wildlandfire.com/docs/wlfterms.htm>