

Old Measurements Aren't Forgotten

RECENTLY, W. "Mickey" Law, management consultant, asked the length of an ax handle. He had run across the term and it reminded him of his boyhood in Arkansas, where certain things were described as being so many ax handles wide or long.

All we could remember was that the fabulous Paul Bunyan's enormous blue ox "Babe" was "six ax handles between the eyes." We guessed that an ax handle is about 27 inches but a visit to a hardware store revealed that not all ax handles are the same length.

We have a complex set of standards for weights and measures but they don't have the same connotation for everyone.

The Metric Board created by Congress in 1975 to implement "voluntary compliance" with the metric system sanctioned by Congress in 1866 quietly passed out of existence earlier this year with barely measurable success in accomplishing uniformity.

Instead, the effort has muddled our transactions by superimposing

another schedule of weights and measures upon those we already had in use. Now we must struggle with both old and new.

Standards of values first were established by ancient civilizations when barter was universal. Later, money was introduced as a medium of exchange but it is not stable. Exchange rates change daily to allow for inflation and other influences.

While helping Mildred, my wife, trace her ancestors from Tennessee to Texas over a century ago we found a variety of measurements used to describe tracts of land they owned.

A Tennessee deed specified 200 acres beginning at "a spring branch Spanish oak and running south 164 poles to the hickory (tree)", etc.

A deed in Texas included this language: "Beginning at the northeast corner of the Canton survey, a rock ... thence east $26\frac{1}{2}$ varas to a rock," etc. Another in Grayson county specified measurements from "a post oak marked with an X, 57 varas to a Spanish oak marked with a JX." etc. Streams also defined boundaries.

We found in "The Answers" a handbook of measurements compiled in 1972 by Larry Wilcox, agricultural consultant, that a pole is 5.94 varas, or 16.5 feet. In Texas a vara is 33.3672 inches.

We agree with Mickey Law that many old-time measurements continue in use. The width of mule carts was derived from width of a wagon or buggy, equivalent to width of a span of mules or team of horses. Width of our highways was established by rut-gained by two horse-drawn wagons passing on a muddy road. An ox-drawn cart is described in terms of horsepower rather than harness.

We still find at 1800 time set to allow a family to do chores, pack lunch and drive for five miles in a wagon or horse. After services they would go to neighbors.

Many of us probably never will be able to convert our thinking from feet, bushels, quarts and miles to the metric system, so many centuries, meters and kilometers we may never.