



olympic
national forest

what is **WILDERNESS** *A Wilderness Song*

Can a tool that fells trees and slices through massive logs sing? Can it be tuned to provide a soundtrack worthy of Wilderness, indeed be kept alive by Wilderness?



Old time sawyers

The crosscut saw, once a symbol for conquering the wild forests of the west in order to provide lumber for America's cities, now endures as a symbol of wilderness preservation in our national forests. The crosscut saw reached prominence in the United States between 1880 and 1930, but quickly became obsolete when power saws started being mass produced. The passage of the Wilderness Act in 1964 has helped restore the dying art of primitive tool use by effectively requiring their use in wilderness trail maintenance.

In order to protect the wilderness character of our special places, the Wilderness Act limits the types of activities that are permitted within designated Wilderness areas. With few exceptions, mechanical transport and motorized equipment are two categories of use that were deemed contrary to the nature of Wilderness when the Act was written. Such restrictions create unique challenges for managers and volunteers charged with maintaining Wilderness trails, who must rely on primitive skills in order to accomplish their goals. All heavy equipment must be hauled in by hand or packed in using stock, all log bridges must be set in place with sheer strength or man-powered rigging, and all log cutting must be performed without the aid of power saws, typically using a crosscut saw.



The finely wrought blade of a crosscut saw

In contrast to the cacophony produced by a chainsaw, a well-tuned crosscut saw operated by experienced sawyers creates a harmony that is more attuned to

a Wilderness setting. The sound a crosscut saw produces when slicing through a piece of timber is akin to a metallic hum, which is why crosscut saws are often referred to as the "saws that sing". This is no accident, and depends just as much on a well-maintained saw as it does on the training of the sawyers who operate it.



for the greatest good

Saw sharpening and maintenance is an art—so specialized that only a handful of individuals exist on the Olympic Peninsula that are capable of properly tuning the old saws that keep Wilderness trails open and safe for all users. One such individual, Tom Mix, a volunteer with the Backcountry Horsemen, trains and certifies sawyers (including Forest Service employees).

The local group of saw filers is so exclusive that Mix says, “I can look at a saw and tell who filed it”.

He is also one of those few skilled tuners, keeping alive the practice that is a vital aspect of maintaining these 4 to 10 foot saws.



Making a challenging cut to help clear a trail

Unlike chainsaws that require ear protection during use, crosscut saws allow sawyers the ability to communicate while sawing to ensure the saw runs smoothly. Good communication and planning, combined with a properly tuned saw, work in concert to create a clean cut. **And when it's really running smoothly the blade sings against the grain.**

The type of material that the original crosscut saws were made of—high carbon tempered steel—is no longer manufactured. This makes it even more important to maintain the old saws that still exist.



Olympic National Forest trail volunteers learning to “sing”

“It’s a lost art”, Mix says. But he is doing his best to train others in the venerable art of crosscut saw use and maintenance, a primitive craft that continues to reverberate within the boundaries of your Olympic National Forest Wilderness areas.

This Wilderness protects our special wild places and it protects a piece of our cultural heritage, those skills that frontiersmen and women used to shape their home on this wild peninsula. And it protects an old voice, the one that sings of history and hard labor in these woods.



-Alex Weinberg, Recreation Specialist, Olympic National Forest
Lisa Romano, Public Affairs Officer, Olympic National Forest