

The Crosscut Saw:

Handy Tool and Resounding Symbol

BY THOMAS ZENTMYER

This Summer, Thomas spent five days in the backcountry working on the Sierra National Forest Wilderness Project. He and the crew worked to restore campsites and log out fallen trees.

I held in my gloved hands a long, slender piece of metal that stretched out almost two feet on either side of my body. Beneath the plastic guard laid one long row of alternating razor-sharp teeth. I stared down at this saw entrusted to me, watching as it wobbled in my grip. The clean and burnished metal hid the tool's true age of a century or more. I was in the middle of my third volunteer stewardship trip in the National Forest, and this time I had been offered the honor of carrying the crosscut saw. The Forest Service ranger with our party, Mickey, had told us that these saws were ancient. She explained that over the years some of them had developed personalities, and even earned names such as "Houston." That fact failed to hold any significance with me until the saw was in my grip, and I noticed an engraving on one of the two handles. Burned into the worn wood were the letters "CCC", which I figured stood for the Civilian Conservation Corps of the early 20th century. Created as a New Deal measure to combat the Great Depression, the Civilian Conservation Corps employed a massive number of young workers to plant trees, create trails, and develop other infrastructure across the country. It was then that I understood the implications of this saw's history. Our group of amateur

volunteers was performing the very same work that had been going on for generations. Even the techniques we utilized were age-old, mainly because their elegant simplicity left no need for change. Whether it was finding potential binding locations in a prospective cut job or using thick branches to roll heavy logs down the trail, we were mirroring the work of countless before us. The ancient saw symbolized all this work, and the spirit of it, through its age alone. When I glanced down at the metal again, I realized that my hands held the saw where so many others had over the past century. The last two times I volunteered for Friends of the Inyo on backcountry stewardship projects, I unearthed a strong sense of purpose and a deep connection with nature. This time, however, I felt myself making a connection with a rich past. The Forest Service is required to use crosscut saws due to environmental concerns that arise from working in a designated wilderness environment. However, as Ranger Mickey explained, production of high-quality crosscut saws practically ceased once the world moved on to the chainsaw. Usually I would mourn for

a lost art or technology, but in this case I felt thankful. This saw that I held was nameless-Mickey didn't recognize it as from her division of the Forest Service- but it lent me a perspective on my efforts; I was not the first to do this work and enjoy it, and I will be far from the last. At the end of the day, I understood how these saws gain a personality over time. The one I worked with seemed quite stubborn at times and would sometimes stop moving entirely. However, when I recognized its age and what it represented, I was honored to hold it in my hands. It almost radiated the very spirit of stewardship that it was born into a century ago. I held in my gloved hands not just a long, slender piece of metal with razor-sharp teeth, but a symbol of conservation passed down for generations. I only hope that it will continue its journey from generation to generation, person to person, hand to hand.



The crew of the 2019 Sierra National Forest Wilderness Project. PHOTO: Ken Miller



Thomas, with the help of Felix, the Friends of the Inyo sponsored intern with the US Forest Service, cuts through a large log. PHOTO: Ken Miller



A well-kept crosscut saw cuts efficiently with every push and pull. PHOTO: Ken Miller



Thomas holds the crosscut saw in his hands. PHOTO: Ken Miller