From Curlers to Chainsaws

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Published by Michigan State University Press

Walls, Elizabeth MacLeod, et al.
From Curlers to Chainsaws: Women and Their Machines.
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More Than Noise

Author with Stihl 026 chainsaw. Photo by Mike Barnhart.
A distant chainsaw sounds like a woman screaming for help, but as you move closer, it sounds more like a full-throated tenor. To a bystander, a chainsaw stinks like gas fumes, but to the operator, it smells like pungent wood: cedar or pine or cottonwood or fir. The weight of a saw in your hands—a familiar saw, say a Stihl 026—feels like a toddler, and you hold it like a toddler too: firm but not tight, cautious and attentive and sometimes playful, always in motion; you must triangulate your own body movement with that of the power head and the tree you will cut. The generic image of the chainsaw is big and loud and dangerous, a tool for destruction, but up close it’s more intimate.

For much of my adult life, I ran a chainsaw daily as a backcountry trails worker in national parks and forests—clearing downed trees from hiking trails and building bridges and shelters and picnic tables. Sometimes, but not always, I was the only woman on the crew. A woman running a chainsaw might surprise hikers or strangers at picnic-table dinner parties who only associated women-and-chainsaws with the sexy models in early Stihl catalogs—women straddling saws, women on swings with saws. But after fifteen years, my gender made little difference. I loved my job, and I did it well, although I don’t do it anymore. I miss it—not just the satisfaction of so-called honest work or the astonishing alpine beauty or the achy buzz of being hyper physically fit, but the saw itself.

That sound. The scream, the song, yes, or often a high-pitched whine—louder, harsher, teeth-gnashingly so—dulled by my yellow foam earplugs to a jet-plane roar. Then an octave drop. The sound of the saw bogging down, losing power, the air filter or the muffler clogged, or more likely the tension in the log shifting, threatening to pinch your bar. Or worse. Once a friend sawed a log that had fallen across the trail from the downhill side—never
saw from the downhill side—and the cut round rolled toward her. She hit the ground flat and fast, and the log bounced right over. Luckily she wore a hard hat. I never did. No hard hat, no safety glasses, no chaps. What was I thinking? Three people I know cut into their own legs. Ragged flesh, lots of blood, stitches, a chip of bone.

In all those years, I never got injured—unless you count the walnut-sized bulge along my spine at the bra line, not from running the saw but from carrying it on one shoulder—the right, always the right—for hours every day, for miles, with the chain brake on, the steel teeth in my leather-gloved hand. I know. I know. I should have switched shoulders, and I should’ve used a plastic sheath or wrapped protective chaps around the bar, but the chaps were bulky and the sheath would slip, and I felt more in control holding the teeth in my glove, even if they sat there on my shoulder, day after day, inches from my carotid artery. Once I watched a friend saw barefoot—balanced on a log across a creek. Once I stood sock-footed on a tall friend’s shoulders to cut a high limb. We took crazy risks and laughed about them later, but we never bragged about them, ever. I’m not bragging now, but trying to remember—the way you try to remember a friend who’s left or died, a friend you didn’t know you cared about so much.

We felled live trees, sure, but rarely. Usually the trees we bucked had already fallen; they were just in the way. Sometimes the logs were suspended, wedged between standing trees, and the resulting tension could cause a log to spring back or drop down or even stand straight up, Lazarus-like, if the weight of the dirt clinging to the roots was enough to pull it upright. (Sometimes weekend volunteers would tell stories of this happening as if it were rare, magical, shocking. We’d never correct them. We’d never say: that happens all the time. Better, always, to let stand a belief in a marvelous phenomenon than to insist it’s mundane.) Fresh-cut chips—white, yellow, and orange—lay in the dirt long past when the tree was gone, like piles of hamster bedding, like fat lines of cocaine. I could walk a trail on my days off and tell how recently it’d been worked by the brightness of those chips on the ground.
The guys always wanted to run the 044—the bigger, heavier saw that cut faster and burned through gas like a hummingbird through sugar water. The guys liked the power. They liked the fact that they did not have to bend so far to cut a log lying on the ground. They did not mind schlepping the extra weight, but I did. The 026 was my size (10.7 pound power head, 2.97 cubic inches displacement, 20 inch bar, ⅜ inch pitch chain). After a while, after a few years and a few hundred trees, the 026 began to feel like an appendage.

The only machines I’ve known as well as chainsaws are cars and computers. I can fix neither of those to save my life, but I could repair the 026. I could change the filters, air or fuel; replace a sprocket, careful not to lose the c-clip when releasing it with needle-nose pliers; replace a pull cord or muffler. I could adjust a carburetor. And I could sharpen. I sharpened the chain many times a day, at a workbench or, more often, on my knees in the dirt, counting the strokes—you must file each tooth the same number of times or, well, you are screwed—in the sun, in the bugs, while the crew talked, or actually didn’t talk; they knew better than to talk or I’d lose count. We used the saws so hard and sharpened the chains so often that in a month, a tooth the length of a pencil eraser could be reduced to a fingernail snip. If you let it get to that, the tooth will break. You have to know when to give up on a chain.

Long before I ever ran a chainsaw, I used a crosscut saw. The Forest Service, unlike the Park Service, allows nothing motorized, nothing mechanized, in the wilderness. A crosscut requires more patience and care; if you get the saw stuck, you’ll have to chop it out with an axe. The cuts take longer, so you make fewer of them, and as a result, the rounds you cut are bigger, so you want to think about where they’ll drop and roll. There’s a hint of historic reenactment—two sawyers on either side of a log taking turns pulling; you may as well wear a pair of suspenders—and there’s commitment to an ideal, a rejection of the screaming, whining roar of modernity, especially modernity in the woods. But even those who love the crosscut most, even those who use it best, will admit: the crosscut is nonsense. If you want to get work done, you need a chainsaw.
Here’s how you start: you pull until you feel the resistance, then drop the saw fast to break the compression. Sometimes, when the saw won’t start, on a hot day there might be vapor lock or too much soot on the muffler. Or you might’ve flooded it. So you wait, then pull some more. Back when I was learning, a friend gave me a used copy of *Barnacle Parp’s Chainsaw Guide* by Walter Hall, copyright 1977, that covered the basics of operation and maintenance. Barnacle Parp was an alter ego for the author, a faux-wise woodsman, and the campiness put me off. I flipped through the ragged-cover copy as necessary, usually only when something was broken. Mostly I sawed. Learning to start I bloodied my fingers, and I never looked back.

The chainsaw has wreaked havoc, undeniably, in Pacific Northwest forests even more than in Texas massacre films. But it’s not so simple, not all one thing. On trail crew, we built things, too: benches and bridges and shelters that would last decades—not as long as the trees would stand, not even close, but still. We’d scribe the logs, then notch them—make parallel cuts and chip the chunks out with an axe—then run the saw across the grain quickly at half throttle, working it like a sander. When the notch was deep and smooth as a salad bowl, you could start the next one. That way you could fit the logs together snug and right as bodies entwined in sleep to make something sturdy and functional, sometimes beautiful. Everyday acts of creation to balance the destruction.

Part of me knows I’ll never be that close to the chainsaw again, inside the roar, right inside of it, where the worst we humans do meets the best we do, and one wrongly timed move can hurt you so badly, or hurt others. Hell, a car can do the same. Ditto a ballot or a dollar or a series of mouse-clicks all in a row. The chainsaw may be louder and sharper, but at least you know what you’re up against; you know what you’re capable of, what you’re responsible for, and anyway, we all know the truth: it’s not, in the end, what tool you use but how you use it.

Once, outside a cabin, I spur-climbed a Douglas fir and hung from my lanyard, limbing the tree with a very small saw while, without my knowledge, a woman inside the cabin was getting a massage. Bad timing.
Later, the massage therapist, a friend, told me her client did not mind, that she'd said she could hear no aggression in the noise. The client could not have known that a woman was at work, not a man, but I wondered: was that the difference? God knows testosterone plus a chainsaw sometimes equals aggression. (Ditto for the car, ballot, and dollar, you might say.) But it's not all gender. Even if you've never run a saw, you can hear when someone is forcing the issue, fighting the wood, revving past the time for an undercut. The grain is tightening, and the sawyer doesn't know enough or is not paying enough attention to pull out the bar and saw upwards to meet the downward cut. It's rare to cut in only one direction and make it work.

A decade ago, I decided to put down the chainsaw. It would be easy to say I'd had it, that I wanted to live a life less dirty, less loud, less smelly. That is not true. Nor was it my biological clock ticking, though that is the reason many women stop. In my early twenties, I'd hitched myself to another woman, Laurie, who also worked in the woods, and we'd long since decided our seasonal lifestyles and our lousy paychecks and our conservative rural town would not make it easy to raise children. The truth was that I was tired and restless, eager to try a new path, a more conventional path in a way: writing and teaching. But I never regretted the hard labor I did because of the rich life it opened.

The chainsaw allowed Laurie and me to make men's wages, which outpace women's work in our rural town by at least threefold. The chainsaw gave us the confidence to build a house, to use other tools. By the time our house was complete, Laurie kept a bandsaw in the living room. She used it to make cabinet handles from apple prunings and to cut frozen bacon for soup, much to the amusement of houseguests.

The chainsaw gave us entry into a club of sorts. We know a guy who ran a two-person chainsaw, one of the first chainsaws ever made, an original from back in the 1940s when they needed a mule to carry the thing. It was worth it, he says, with a grin: to do something the hard way to prove it could be easier. Another neighbor, Wally, a generous curmudgeon, kept a collection of saws, the cheap American ones you could buy at Kmart. The
best saws are German (the Stihl) or Swedish (the Husqvarna), but Wally had neither. He had Homelites from the 1960s and McCulloughs from the 1970s. When he died, his brother cleaned them and lined them in a row in the attic of Wally’s shop, organized by the year of manufacture. A crowd gathered with beer by a campfire, and we took turns climbing the ladder to admire them. We nodded approvingly, whistling through our teeth as at a museum display. Or maybe a wake.

Mostly the chainsaw got us—Laurie and me and so many other suburban refugees—out there. Bar oil stained my pants, and gasoline soaked my pack, and many nights in camp I picked wood chips from my eyes with a Q-tip and a handheld mirror. I slept tentless in the dirt and stared up at the sky where tree limbs crisscrossed my view of the stars.

From the outside, this is the irony that rankled most: how can you love this tool that kills what you love best? There’s no easy answer, not for me, not for Wally, not even for Barnacle Parp. Not long ago, I picked up Parp’s chainsaw guide, outdated now by four decades. I’d forgotten about his last chapter—or maybe I never read it. There Parp rails against clear-cuts and derides corporations and argues for better communication and tolerance between loggers and hippies. Barnacle Parp says what I have tried to say many times but could not for fear of sounding girly or sentimental. “This is a tool that can either take us further away from ourselves by increasing each individual’s circle of destruction, or can help bring some of us back, close enough to relearn the language of the trees.” He also says this: remember to take a break.

Maybe, in the end, that’s all I’ve done. I’ve taken a break. It’s not that I can’t run a chainsaw anymore. If I want to start a saw right now, there’s a 026 in the woodshed waiting, Sharpie-labeled with my name. But these days, I only use it for firewood, and I have lost some strength. After cutting firewood, the next day my spine walnut will swell to a softball, but it’s worth it when the muscle memory kicks in, and the concentration, the Zen-like mindlessness, paying attention without paying attention. The chips still fly, but I wear safety glasses now. There’s no danger except my own weakness
or fear or carelessness. The bucked rounds pile up around me, heartwood exposed.

And when I shut off the saw, I don’t hear silence. I hear the absence of noise. I’m aware of every gentle sound in the air: a squirrel taunting a housecat, a pickup rumbling down the dirt road, water in the river. After a while I hear only the wind in the still-standing trees like voices conversing, close and familiar and just out of reach, barely indecipherable. If I sit long enough, sipping water, stretching my back, I might make sense of them.