**Prime Cuts**

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| http://www.farmcollector.com/uploadedImages/FCM/articles/issues/2004-08-01/FC_V7_I01_Aug_2004_07-1_resized400X266.jpg | Prime cut wood but it was high maintenance |

Modern technology has made the common chainsaw a breeze to use. But it wasn't always that way. When chainsaws were first avail able, they were made of cast iron. One produced in the mid-1930s was advertised as weighing 'only 92 pounds.'

'We're spoiled by technology,' says Nyle Cox, a chainsaw collector from Centerville, Iowa. Fifty years ago, he notes, a typical 5-hp chainsaw might weigh 30 pounds with a chain drive mechanism that turned at 3,500-5,000 rpm. Crafted of sophisticated alloys, a comparable model today might weigh just 8 or 9 pounds, and turn at 14,000 rpm. But for all that improvement, the heavy old workhorse of yesteryear held plenty of appeal to the farmer and woodsman.

'If you replaced a crosscut saw with a chainsaw, it was a wonderful thing,' Nyle says. 'It was a blessing. People back then didn't know any different. Those early chainsaws were good machines for the day. They were heavy, but they were dependable.'

Nyle grew up in a family of saw millers and loggers and it was only natural that a collection should sprout from a family heirloom. 'After my granddad died, my cousin told me that they had Grandpa Cox's Titan chain saw, and you ought to have that,' Nyle recalls. 'Five dollars later, I owned it.' His father, who had sold chainsaws in the early 1950s, produced the original bill of sale and owner's manual for the 1953 Titan, and Nyle was hooked.

'My dad had sold a few of those chainsaws, and he told me who he'd sold them to,' Nyle explains. 'So I went around to the neighbors. Most of them had upgraded, but several of them had kept the old chainsaws. By the time I got home that day, I had three or four more.'

Today, Nyle's collection of intact chainsaws tops 100, and he has several more 'in bits and pieces.' Those in the core collection tend to be older, dating to the 1950s and are typical of the bigger, more bulky chainsaws of yester year.

Nyle doesn't specialize either. 'I'll buy any that I find,' Nyle says. 'I favor Titans, but they're hard to find around here. They're easier to find in the Northwest (where they were originally produced), but it's kind of surprising how many migrated to this area. I think they went from Oregon to Minnesota, and then migrated down here (to Iowa). I also like McCulloch and Homelite.'

Other brands in Nyle's collection include Clinton, which made chain saws for retailers (like Gamble's) who then put its own label on the units. He also collects Strunk; Sears, Roebuck & Co.'s David Bradley; Montgomery Ward's Mall; Skil; Mono (from Springfield, Mo.) and Tecumseh.

Nyle's smallest chainsaw is a Leonard-St. John model. 'It's an extremely unique curiosity, and I know little about it. It's very small. You run it one-handed. It's just a little bigger than a watch fob,' Nyle says with a chuckle. 'It weighs 10 to 12 pounds and has a 10-inch guide bar. It would have been extremely good at cleaning up a yard or for orchard work. And it's still quite reliable.'

At the opposite end of the size spectrum in his collection is a 62-pound, 9 hp McCulloch with a 5-foot guide bar, and his Titan Bluestreak felling saw that tops out at 'only' 92 pounds.

Chainsaws were first produced in Germany. 'Mr. Stihl began in about 1934,' Nyle says. 'The Germans and Swedes were very good at making early chainsaws.' U.S. production began in the early 1920s, but the real American manufacturing boom came in the early 1930s. After that first wave of big, commercial-use units, the chainsaw evolved into models designed for farmers, homeowners and the occasional logger.

'Back then, farmers cut their own posts and sawed logs, and they needed a reliable saw,' Nyle says. 'In the 1950s, there was a considerable market for the landowner. There was a dealer on every corner for reason able-cost landowner saws. They just kept getting lighter, more powerful and faster.' As time went on, aluminum and magnesium replaced cast iron.

Nyle recalls his rather s entry into the chainsaw market: 'My dad used a crosscut saw up to the 1940s, and then he decided to get a chainsaw. He studied up on them, and then asked a dealer to get him a Mall chainsaw. Back then, the Mall was still made of cast iron. The dealer came back and said that the place he'd gone to didn't have a Mall, but he'd found a 5-hp McCulloch Model 5 49, made of aluminum. It weighed half that of the Mall, and it was reliable,' Nyle says. 'I remember my dad saying he was never so glad to not get what he ordered.'

Nyle's collection shows the variety found in early chainsaws. For instance, the bar is moveable on some models. 'In the bigger saws, especially the Mall and the McCulloch, the bar was pivotable,' Nyle says. 'You could lay the chainsaw horizontal for felling, or vertical for bucking up. The engine had to remain on a horizontal plane, so you moved the guide bar up and down.'

The 'bow saw' was developed for use on small timber and pulp wood in the South and East. Instead of having a flat guide bar, it had a bow configuration, and the chain went around the bow.

'They were advertised as having 'never pinch' bars,' Nyle says. 'That might've been a slight overstatement.'

A two-man saw required, as its name indicates, two operators. 'You'd have one guy out on the end of a guide bar that was 4 or 5 or 6 feet long,' Nyle says. 'The other guy was on the engine.'

Condition is unimportant when Nyle finds a vintage chain saw. 'I don't buy them with the expectation that they'll run,' he says. Several in his collection could be operated, but most are bolted to a trailer for display. All are original. 'It's really difficult to get decals, and you destroy the existing original decals if you restore very much,' he says. 'It's a trade off. I would like to be able to restore them, because some of them were just plain gorgeous when they were made.'

Along with the chainsaws, 'goes-with' items are another piece of the hunt. 'There's watch fobs, pens, calendars and oil cans, but they're all hard to find. And signs, they're a wonderful thing if you can find them, but they're desperately hard to find. If it's an advertising item, the advertising collectors have it. Likewise, if it's a sign, the sign collectors have it.

'Occasionally you find owner's manuals, bills of sale - that kind of thing. Anytime I find things like that, I'm so tickled I can hardly stand it. I find most of my chainsaws at auctions and salvage yards, and you don't know any thing about them. Anytime you get the history, it's just that much better.'

Information also comes from visitors when Nyle displays his collection at shows like the Midwest Old Threshers Reunion, Mt. Pleasant, Iowa. 'People at the shows give me a wealth of information. It's a real pleasure to talk with them. I like to gather all the information I can. and then I write it down.'

 Interested in a chainsaw collection of your own? Your timing's good. 'At the present time, chainsaws are still afford able,' Nyle says. 'There are still enough around, and they're not old enough yet to be a high-priced collectible. There are a few that are getting expensive. The older, unique saws may go for $300 or $400 these days. It's an inexpensive hobby now, but that will change. Chainsaws are beginning to increase in popularity.' FC

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