

SAWMILL FORUM

BY CASEY CREAMER

How long does it take to learn how to hammer a saw?

The simple answer is, a lifetime. Let me explain my thinking behind that wise guy answer before I get to the more useful answer to your question. One of the traits that most successful saw smiths share is that we are always learning. Most of us try to learn something new every day of our lives. Most saws should look basically the same when they are finished and ready to go, but they all look a little different when they come in. That means that hammering a saw isn't recipe oriented the way welding a shoulder on a saw or even sharpening a saw would be.

Because we have to do some thinking and strategizing during the saw hammering process, it follows that there should be opportunities to always be learning and striving for improvement of the process and the outcome of the process. So the day I stop learning will be the day I stop working on saws.

Now that I have gotten past the philosophical answer, let's get to a more

useful answer to your question. In the old days, the common method for training a saw smith involved a long apprenticeship program. That sounds like a good idea in theory, but I don't think it worked out all that well in practice. Remember this was during the time when saw doctors thought the best key to job security would be to try to keep everything they knew a secret.

As an apprentice or trainee, most of what you got to do was the grunt work for the grand exalted saw smith. You learned how to clean saws, lift saws, put them on and off of the bench, and if you were lucky you got to turn and position the saw while your mentor used his golden hammer.

When I was 16 I worked for a car dealer who agreed to have one of his mechanics teach me to be a foreign car mechanic. It didn't take long for me to realize that the guy who was training me really didn't want me to learn or become successful because of his own idea of job security.

Basically he taught me how to do any of the jobs he really didn't want to have to do himself.

That is about how it is with saw hammering and many other skilled professions. The teacher really doesn't want you to learn or become proficient. There are of course many exceptions to that sort of thing, but it still exists. I recently had a conversation with a manager at a saw factory about training saw smiths, and he told me that they will generally budget at least a year to training someone new.

Personally, I think that is crazy. My theory is that one very intensive week of serious hands on training – where you get to do it all, not just the grunt work, and the course is designed to actually teach you the entire process – should get you started. That part should be seen as the foundation to your education.

At that point, the successful student should know exactly what a finished saw should look like and how to check an incoming saw to determine how its look differs from that of a finished saw. During that short but intense week the student will also learn how to turn a few different saws into the finished product. Of course along the way they have to learn things like how to use straight edges and tension gauges properly, how to swing a saw hammer properly, and how to use a dial indicator and a test arbor, not to mention a segment on the proper use of a stretcher roll.

After that week of getting a good foundation, it is up to the student to start working on saws with the idea that each saw they work on will be a learning experience. Once they have learned how to make a few examples look proper, they just have to figure out what they will need to do to the next saw. It will be different from the few they worked on during their one week training session, but they should possess enough skill at this point to be able to figure out what this saw needs, and be able to execute that

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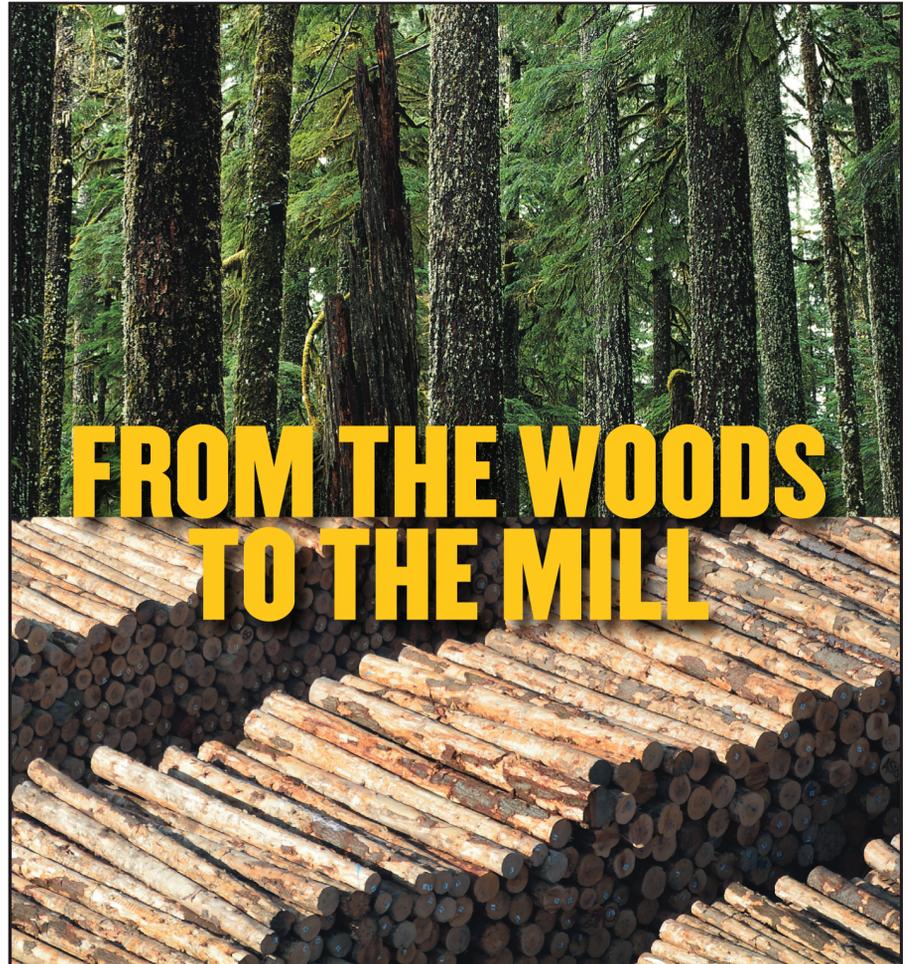
strategy properly to get the saw to look like what they learned that a finished saw should look like.

The biggest difference between them and a seasoned professional is that it will take them a lot longer to hammer that saw properly. But it should still come out just as well as if someone like me had hammered it. We are using the same tools and the same specs, and aiming for the same target. So the only difference should be how long it takes for them to get the saw to the same place I would have gotten it to.

And it follows that the more saws they experience, the more efficient they will become in executing the process. Not really any better, just more efficient. Some of the future efficiency will come from confidence. When you are inexperienced, you tend to take your time thinking and deciding about what to do next, and of course due to lack of experience you are going to make some mistakes along the way. But for the most part, whatever you can do wrong with a saw hammer, you should be able to eventually fix with that same saw hammer as long as you keep in mind what target you are aiming for.

Efficiency will arrive in its own time. But what you need to develop quickly is proficiency, which is defined as the learned capacity to carry out predetermined results, often with the minimum output of time, energy, or both.

Well the minimum outlay of time or energy is the efficiency part, but the learned capacity to carry out predetermined results is the part of proficiency that the properly trained student should achieve in a relatively short time. If the student is in a position to do a saw per day for at least four days a week, they should



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become proficient in maybe a month or so according to how I look at things. I know the rest of the industry disagrees with me, but then the rest of the industry used to

think you should never let a customer watch you while you hammer a saw. My customers know what I think about that idea.

Interested to learn more from Casey Creamer? You can watch our video on how Casey hammers circular saws on The Northern Logger YouTube page. Just search for "The Northern Logger" on YouTube and click the video entitled "How to Hammer a Circular Saw with Casey Creamer." Please send future questions about sawmills and their operation to Casey Creamer, saw doctor and president of Seneca Saw Works, Inc., PO Box 681, Burdett, NY 14818, (607) 546-5887. You can also reach out by email: casey@senecasaw.com.