

# THE SVEN-SAW, A MINNESOTA-MADE CAMPING STAPLE, TURNS 60

By John Myers

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Dick Swenson probably has told the story a thousand times, about a canoe trip he and his brother were on out of Ely back in 1960.

They had come upon another group on a portage up near Knife Lake, including one guy who had his foot bandaged up.

"He said he hit it with an axe trying to cut firewood," Swenson recalled some 60 years later while in the comfort of his Duluth living room.

"I figured, there must be a better way to cut wood on a camping trip than swinging an axe around," Swenson said. "So I went home and dreamed this up."

"This" is the Sven-Saw, an extremely functional camping saw for cutting firewood that folds flat for storing in backpacks and duffel bags. The lightweight saw (about one pound) is designed so the blade stows away into the handle when not in use so there's no rough edges sticking out to damage the pack or the person carrying it.

It is one of those go-to camping tools that is iconic Northland, in nearly everyone's camping box or bag, like a Coleman stove on fishing trips or Duluth Pack backpacks in a canoe. If weight or space is an issue, this is the right saw to carry. (Mine has been on fly-in fishing trips in Alaska, boat-in camping trips in Voyageurs National Park, a car-camping trip to Yellowstone with the kids as well as canoe fishing adventures.)

Swenson's first homemade version was made out of electrical conduct, crimped so the saw blade would fit inside the handle. Other people liked it so much they asked him to make more.

"I didn't have time for that. I had a full-time job with Honeywell at the time in Duluth. But I did end up getting a patent on the saw," Swenson said. "That was a good idea."

He found a machine shop in Minneapolis to bend the aluminum handles just right. Then he purchased a ton of aluminum, literally — enough to make 2,000 saws — and found the perfect saw blades to buy from a



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Cecile and Dick Swenson hold Sven-Saws in their Duluth home. Dick invented the popular camping saw 60 years ago.

company in Sweden.

But the first mass-produced prototypes didn't work. The aluminum was too soft, and the saw handles crumpled when the blades were tightened to use. The problem was solved by heat-treating the aluminum, and the first Sven-Saws hit the market.

They've been selling well ever since — on average more than 15,000 per year. Do the math and that's approaching 1 million Sven-Saws sold, and it's safe to say most are still cutting wood. (About the only thing that can go wrong is you lose the wing nut that fastens the blade to the handle, which you can replace at any hardware store.)

"Really, it's been a hobby, not a career. But it's been good to us, too. It helped put my daughters through college," said Swenson, now 88 and still helping run the company.

Swenson grew up in Minneapolis, received his engineering degree from the University of Minnesota and worked summers at a Honeywell machine shop. That's where he learned how to make and invent things. Dick moved in 1960 to Duluth, where he met Linnea "Cecile"



Hilding. They married in 1961 and continued to take camping trips into the Boundary Waters Canoe Area Wilderness for decades.

Swenson originally called his invention the Swen-Saw, "but everyone up here (in northern Minnesota) pronounced it 'Sven,' so that's what it's called."

The first big break came when L.L. Bean decided to carry the saw in its catalog, back when the Maine-based outdoor company sold camping gear as well as boots and clothing. Then, during a trip to visit the Seattle World's Fair in 1962, Swenson stopped in at the office of Recreational Equipment, Inc. to see if they, too, might put the saw in their catalog.

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An example of the first model of the Sven-Saw. The saw features an aluminum frame and a Swedish steel blade that folds into the handle.



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A modern Sven-Saw.



## SVEN

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"They were a tiny mountain climbing supply company operating out of the second floor of a dilapidated old building in downtown Seattle," Swenson said.

But the company — you'd know them now as REI — liked Swenson's saw and has sold them ever since. The saws are now available at dozens of retailers locally, nationally and internationally, including Amazon, Campmor and Frost River. The 21-inch version retails for about \$40.

Steve Piragis, owner of Piragis Northwoods Co. outfitters and gear store in Ely, said the Sven-Saw has become a Boundary Waters standard that he's sold for more than 30 years.

"It's light and compact and cuts about all you need for a campfire," Piragis noted, saying sales of Sven-Saws have held up well even as competitors have entered the market in recent years.

A more compact, 15-inch

version was added to the Sven-Saw line in the 1980s.

"I made the smaller one to fit in my lunch pack for deer hunting," Swenson said. "Again, once people saw it, it caught on pretty good."

"People like the smaller version for trimming branches around their yard, too," noted Cecile Swenson, who headed the company for several years while Dick worked as an engineer for Honeywell and, later, Minnesota Power.

Dick's brother and sister-in-law also took stints running the company, making sure the parts got to the Minneapolis shops that formed the handle and that the right saw blades from Scandinavia arrived on time.

The saw has always been assembled in the Twin Cities, but the Sven-Saw company, Swen Products, Inc., has always been officially based in Duluth.

"My job for about 10 years was to go pick them up in Minneapolis, haul them up here to see if they were all OK and then ship them out of Duluth," Cecile said.



Photo courtesy of Sven-Saw

Sven-Saws have been selling well for nearly 60 years because they work well and then fold up for travel in backpacks and duffel bags.

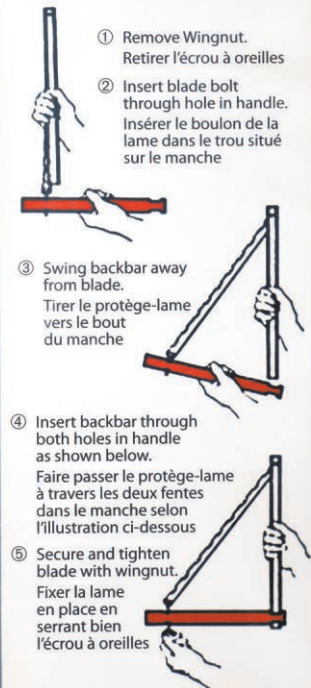
"She knew the business. ... My business sense was never really that good," Dick added. "I invented it, but other people did most of the work selling it and running the business end."

Now, the Duluth Swensons are handing off the company to their daughter and son-in-law, Twin Cities-based Linnea

and Jon Swenson Tellekson. Assembly of the saws is now handled by Opportunity Partners, a Twin Cities-based disability services company.

"The saws are still selling pretty well," Dick said. "I'm proud of it. It's been a pretty fun little hobby. I guess people must like them."

### Easy Assembly Assemblage facile



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Instructions for assembling a Sven-Saw.

For more information, go to [svensaw.com](http://svensaw.com).