

MAKING SAWHORSES

By Oliver Cameron
with Ole Wik¹

I make my sawhorses so that they are stand-alone and can be moved independently. They consist of two parts. I use the upside-down crotch of a tree to make two of the legs, in one piece. The third leg is a single stick. Since the horses are three-legged, I don't have to worry about having an exactly level spot to set them on.



Freshly-made sawhorses at spring camp.
Image: Curt Madison

Big cottonwood trees have branches that come up more or less opposite to each other. For the first part of a sawhorse, I cut off a tree six or eight inches below such a crotch, trim off the two limbs, and turn it upside down. That puts trunk part at the top, so that I have a larger piece of wood to work with where the third leg joins it.

There are two ways to attach the single leg so that it sticks out to make a tripod. Sometimes I simply drill a hole through the crotch where the two branches meet together, and put the third leg through. Otherwise I cut a dovetail notch and shape the upper end of the third leg to fit into it. The dovetail notch is not a hole—it's just cut into the side of the wood.



Sawhorse detail. Note dovetail notch and lightweight saw.
Image: Curt Madison

When the sawhorse is sitting on the ground, the feet may be 2 or 2-1/2' apart. That third leg projects upward to form a "V" at the top with the upper end the crotch. When a log is sitting in a pair of these sawhorses, it will lie parallel to the feet of each of the crotch pieces.

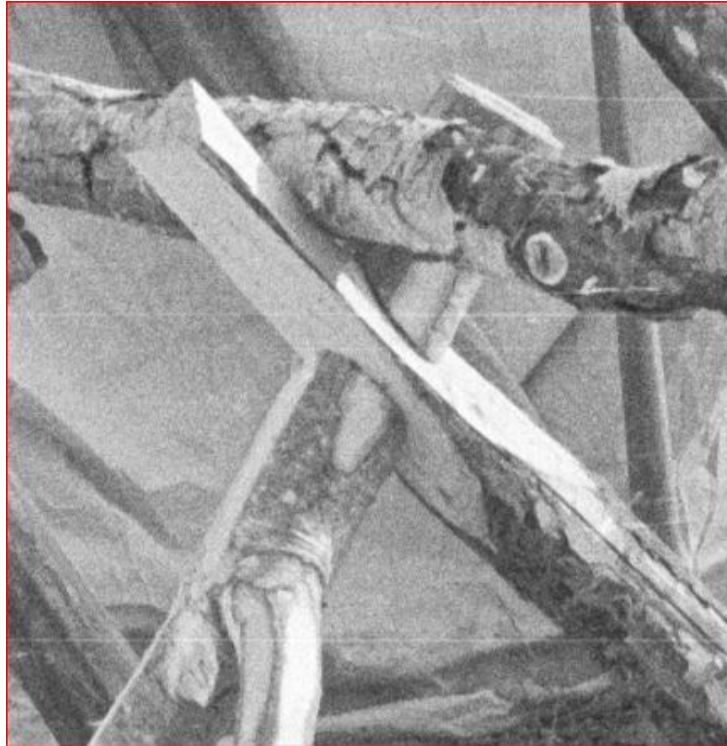
The two pieces don't meet at right angles--that would put your legs too far apart. Instead, I lay the third leg alongside the forked piece to get some idea of how it's going to turn out, and then go ahead and drill the hole or cut the notch.

Quite often the trunk piece at the top might be four or even five inches in diameter. I cut the dovetail into the side of that.

To visualize the dovetail notch, imagine a drawer with walls that slant inward, such that the top of the drawer is narrower than the bottom. Imagine also that the drawer also gets narrower and narrower toward the back end. You could push the drawer in only so far until it would jam. At that point, you wouldn't be able to lift it upward either.

In this analogy, the drawer represents the third leg of my sawhorse. You can see that I have to make my saw cuts for the notch in such a way that they are converging toward

the top of the sawhorse, with the walls of the notch slanted inward. I make those cuts about 1-1/2" deep.



Detail of dovetail joint

Once I have those two saw cuts made, the next step is to chisel out the wood. The cuts toward the top of the sawhorse are fairly close together, maybe a 1/2 or 3/4" apart. If I tried to run a chisel in there, the chip would just get wedged in, like the drawer that couldn't be lifted.

To get around that, I make a second cut next to each of the two original cuts, to the same depth. These new cuts can be either vertical or slanted the opposite way from the originals. Once that's done, I can easily chisel out the wood between the new cuts, and then there will be no opposition when I chisel out the wood that remains underneath the original slanting cuts.

Next, I whittle off the end of the third leg until it's shaped to fit into the dovetail. Like the drawer in our example, this leg gets gradually wider as it goes down so that it wedges in tight. I shape the end of the stick and a little extra so that when that leg sticks through that dovetail slot, maybe 3" of it sticks out to form the other side of the "V" that the work rests in.

After I insert the third leg, I use my folding saw with a narrow blade to cut out a little bit of the trunk wood on the top part of the opposite double leg. I make the cut in such a way that the firewood logs will sit in a shallow groove rather than in an acute angle.

That third leg takes a lot of beating, rocking and so forth. It also slides in a little more over time as the wood dries and shrinks, with the result that the top of the horse gradually leans a little toward that leg. If it leans too much, I simply make a new leg.

If I have a fairly long stick to cut up for firewood, I set the horses quite a ways apart. As the stick gets shorter, I move one horse toward the other. Since I set the horses up with the single legs on opposite sides, the two of them will fit right close together.



Sawhorses with the single legs on opposite sides.
Image: Tonya Schlentner

When I am down to final cut, there's no projecting end to cut off, so I'll have to make the cut between both of the support points. Toward the end of that cut, the wood will start to sag, and the blade will get pinched. I just turn the piece over, saw most of the way through the other side, and then hit it with an axe to break it in two.

Quite often when I finish cutting firewood, I'll spread the horses apart again and lay the next day's stick of wood in them. Then I have something to go out and sit on while I'm chewing on a toothpick or whatever.

1) This essay stems from a series of telephone conversations that Ole Wik had with Oliver between December 2007 and February 2008.