

# Tools Never Die. Waddaya Mean, Never?

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by Robert Krulwich

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## Listen to the Story

Morning Edition

Kevin Kelly should know better, but boldly, brassily, (and totally incorrectly, I'm sure), he said this on NPR:

"I say there is no species of technology that have ever gone globally extinct on this planet."

What does that mean? I asked him. (Kevin, among other things, is founding editor of *Wired Magazine* and runs a very popular blog, called *Cool Tools*, that reviews new gadgets.)

That means, he said, "I can't find any [invention, tool, technology] that has disappeared completely from Earth."

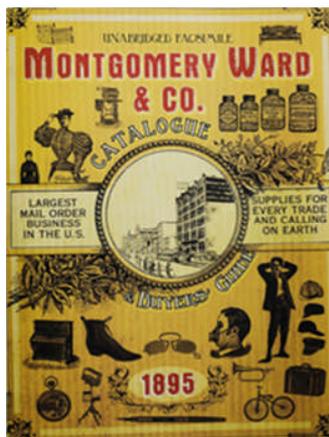
Nothing? I asked. Brass helmets? Detachable shirt collars? Chariot wheels?

Nothing, he said.

Can't be, I told him. Tools do hang around, but some *must* go extinct.

If only because of the hubris — the absolute nature of the claim — I told him it would take me a half hour to find a tool, an invention that is no longer being made anywhere by anybody.

Go ahead, he said. Try.



Skyhorse Publishing

If you listen to our *Morning Edition* debate, I tried carbon paper (still being made), steam powered car engine parts (still being made), Paleolithic hammers (still being made), 6

pages of agricultural tools from an 1895 *Montgomery Ward & Co. Catalogue* (every one of them still being made), and to my utter astonishment, I couldn't find a provable example of a technology that has disappeared completely.

And Kevin continues to insist he is right. In his new book *What Technology Wants*, he says:

A close examination of a supposedly extinct bygone technology almost always shows that somewhere on the planet someone is still producing it. A technique or artifact may be rare in the modern urban world but quite common in the developing rural world. For instance, Burma is full of oxcart technology; basketry is ubiquitous in most of Africa; hand spinning is still thriving in Bolivia. A supposedly dead technology may be enthusiastically embraced by a heritage-based minority in modern society, if only for ritual satisfaction. Consider the traditional ways of the Amish, or modern tribal communities or fanatical vinyl record collectors. Often old technology is obsolete, that is, it is not very ubiquitous or is second rate, but it still may be in small-time use.

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Agriculture tools from the 1895 *Montgomery Ward & Co.* catalogue.

I know Kevin's wrong. There have to be prominent exceptions to his Technologies Never Die claim. Problem is, I'm the wrong person to prove him wrong. I'm just not tool-wise. Pens instantly dry up when I touch them, computers — don't even ask. So what I'm wondering is: Can you help me here?

**Help Me!**

If you honestly think there is a tool or invention from any century, any culture, any time (no science fiction please, we are trying to be real here) that has gone completely extinct, please send it in.

Just mention the tool in the "comment" section.

We are publishing the most promising claims — and counter-claims — in the next *Krulwich Wonders...* blogpost which you can find [here](#).

We will keep this post open a couple of days and if, collectively, we come up with a list of plausibly extinct technologies, it's back to Kevin for Round Two of this colloquy.

I know I can count on you people. You always bite me when I say something wrong. Now it's time to bite Kevin.

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*Kevin Kelly's new book is called What Technology Wants, (Viking, 2010); He and I and the writer Steven Johnson debated some of these issues at the New York Public Library in October, 2010. That debate is on video. A different, edited version that focuses on Kevin and Steven's ideas about how technology evolves (and, says Kevin, has a primitive "will") appeared on a Radiolab podcast.*