

Of Knives and Knife making.

Knife making may strike you as a curious endeavour. With so many good knives available why should anyone want to make a knife by hand? Hand made knives are unique, reflecting the personality and skills of their maker. They can be made to our own particular requirement and there is great satisfaction in using a tool that we have handcrafted ourselves.

Knife making must surely be the oldest craft. Knives have a long and interesting history. The first ones of course were flint. And I think the craft of knife making began when primitive man chipped the naturally sharp edges to improve them. Chipped knives of the Neolithic period have been made with great skill.

As metals came into use copper and bronze were used. Then steel and today, alloys of steel. Table knives came into use about the year 1600.

Previous to that individuals brought their own knives to the table to eat. These they carried as daggers.

About this period too, knives with blades that folded into the handle appeared. These were the first pocket knives.

A small pocket knife, even referred to today as a pen knife was used to point quill pens for writing. Certain localities became known for the quality of their steel. Toledo in Spain, Solingen in Germany and Sheffield in England have been noted for the quality of their knives since the middle ages.

What may be of interest to silversmiths are the folding fruit knives that were made from the late 17th century

to the 1920s. These knives had blades of gold or sterling silver which didn't tarnish when used to cut fruit.

They were given as presents by affluent gentlemen to their wives or girlfriends. The handles were often carved or decorated with engraving. They are collectors items today and their hallmarks tell by whom and when they were made. They can be seen in antique shops in Perth.

As an item of knife history one must mention perhaps the most famous and well known knife of all and that is the Bowie knife.

This was first made about 1830 in America, to the design and order of Colonel James Bowie, a slave trader, smuggler and land speculator. The knife was first brought to the attention of history when he used it to protect himself from two assailants. Though shot in the hip and stabbed with a sword cane he managed to dispatch one and wound the other, and he survived.

Like some early Rambo his knife and knife fighting ability became famous. Suddenly everyone wanted a knife like Bowie had used. It became a national fad and the bowie knife was carried by farmers, gamblers, private citizens, knaves and congressmen alike. The cutlers of Sheffield England started filling the demand for this new design. Thousands were made for the American market.

Important cities from New Orleans to St. Louis had knife fighting schools. Murder and duels were committed with the bowie knife with such frequency that many states banned them by law.

Colonel Bowie died at the Alamo in 1836. Did he go down wielding his famous blade against the Mexicans? History doesn't say.

The bowie knife of those days was large and heavy.

However, the style, reduced in size makes a most attractive hunting knife. Two examples are displayed here.

There is a wide variety of knives. From camping knives heavy enough to chop with; domestic knives; hunting and skinning in a diversity of styles; pocket knives; art knives; fantasy knives; Japanese tantos; letter openers; miniatures and knives as weapons.

They can be plain working knives or collector's items, embellished with gold or silver fittings. Blades can be engraved or of damascus steel with intricate file work. Handles can be from a range of dozens of hard beautifully grained timbers. From jarrah burl off the wood heap in the back yard to expensive snakewood from South America. Of the timbers displayed here six are indigenous to Western Australia. Also used is pearl shell; black coral; elephant and fossil mammoth ivory; buffalo, ram and other animal horn; antler; boar and walrus tusks; and man made materials such as ivory, black and burl micarta and pearl and black polyesters.

Prices of custom made knives can range from \$50 for a small game skinner to an exact replica of Tutankhamen's gold dagger at \$100,000. Pocket knives, of consummate excellence, beautifully crafted and decorated can be priced to \$1,000 or more.

Historical knives can be valuable too. Recently a cased pearl handled pocket knife, with a letter of acceptance and thanks, that had belonged to Abraham Lincoln sold at Sothebys in New York for \$99,800.

There are two methods of making knives, that is, forging and stock removal. The knives displayed

here are made by the latter method.
 A minimum of equipment is required to hand make a knife. A vice, drill, hacksaw, a variety of files and wet and dry paper. The job can be made easier with a belt grinder and a buffing wheel.

There are a variety of steels used for knives. The two most popular perhaps would be a tool steel known as D2 and a stainless steel known as 440C. Bars of the D2 steel in three foot lengths would be available from steel suppliers in Perth. The 440C has to be ordered from suppliers in the United States. Popular sizes of bars are $1\frac{1}{2}$ " wide by $\frac{3}{16}$ " and $\frac{1}{8}$ " thick. Also suitable is the steel of sawblades and worn out chain saw bars. These would need to be annealed to be able to work them, then hardened again when formed into a knife.

This can be done with a 20LT. drum with a cutout in the side containing a jarrah wood fire with a hair dryer playing on it. The D2 and 440C steels are in the annealed state when purchased and need to be professionally hardened by a heat treatment firm.

Having decided on the style of knife to be made (there are plenty of ideas to be had from knife magazines) a full size thin cardboard template is made. This is placed on the steel and drawn around. The shape is then cut from the bar. The blade is usually tapered in its thickness and if full tang, this is often tapered too.

The blade is formed by grinding and filing and smoothed to a mirror finish by various grits of wet and dry paper and finally buffed. Holes for pins are drilled in the handle area and usually extra holes to lighten the handle to give balance to the knife. Handle slabs are secured by 5 min.

Araldite and pins and then shaped and smoothed.
 For anyone interested in knives there is "Blade
 Magazine" published every two months and
 "Knives Illustrated," quarterly. These are
 obtainable from some newsagents. There is also
 a "Knives Annual" from some book shops.
 Displayed here is a variety of knives with a
 couple in different stages of completion. And
 a variety of handle material.
 There are three antique items. An English
 stiletto and two Japanese knives one being a
 woman's dagger. Each of these have some
 silver ornamentation.
 Also there is a hunting knife that I bought
 and began to use over fifty years ago. It was
 made in Sheffield by a firm of cutlers that
 had supplied bowie knives to the American
 market last century.
 Finally, I would be pleased to help and advise in
 detail, anyone of you attempting the stock
 removal method of knifemaking.

L. A. Harding.

23^d Oct. '89.