

Knife maker, Campbell, carries on family tradition

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G Staff

Virgil Campbell is looking forward to being independent.

Now that he is taking the reins of the "I'd Rather Be Independent" Knife Shop (IRBI), a trade name that his father made synonymous with quality Alaskan knives during the last 20 years, he should get the message.

In this technology oriented, fast-paced world it is coming harder to find a self-taught, independent craftsman. But, it is even harder still to find one of these small family enter-

prises that survives from one generation to the next.

Campbell admitted he is getting a considerable head start in the field, noting that his father learned the trade through book reading and trial and error. Over the years Irvin worked out his production kinks by skillfully turning out 11,000 knives. "And he said that when I made a thousand knives, I'd start to get the hang of it," said Campbell. He did get the hang of it during his three year apprenticeship, and he is now very close to that 1,000 mark.

Irvin Campbell started making crude wide-blade

knives in the late 1960s, and now.

now the Knife Shop at Mile 20 of the Seward Highway holds an ever stocked gallery of handsome cutlery. The knives come in various shapes with handles made of exotic woods, bone and antler.

"You name it, it's in here," said Campbell as he leaned on one of the glass cases in his shop Monday. The designs have evolved considerably since Irvin began making his prototypes at Prudhoe Bay, when a lack of materials had him using copper tubing for handles. There are even machete sized Bowie knives and swords in the collection

"For years dad tried to get me to make knives. I wish I would have started 15 years ago," said the younger Campbell. He currently works for the Alaska Marine Highway, but plans to buy the shop and be his own boss. Considering that his work is now almost indistinguishable from his father's, the shift should be smooth.

Campbell said his father will still make knives though, just at a more leisurely pace. Transforming worn automobile leaf springs and chainsaw bars into knives with shining, beveled blades and smooth formed exotic wood handles is definitely an art form, but Virgil Campbell considers himself a craftsman. He insists that the knives are designed with usefulness as the primary goal, even if tourists purchase the ivory and antler adorned pieces for their beauty alone.

"In the last 10 years, knife making has really come up as an art form," said Campbell. When his father began his work around 1969, there were only four knife makers in the state. Now the Alaska Knife Makers Association has over 40 members, he said.

Campbell said there is usually about 300 knives on display at the shop at any given time. The pieces are made throughout the year, but the bulk of the work is done during the winter months in a back room lined with grinders and buffing wheels.

If you break it down, there are roughly 50 steps to forming a knife, said Campbell. Each piece takes half a day to make, and the prices begin at about \$80. Larger works, like the Bowie knives, can run up to \$700.

The knives are covered by a "lifetime warranty" -- the lifetime of the maker, said Campbell. Now that the next generation is working, that warranty has just been extended. "We don't have too many disappointed customers," added Campbell modestly. "If somebody breaks a knife, we take care of it," he said. Of the hundreds sold each season, only a few will come back damaged.

One reason the problems are few and far in between, is due to the blade tempering technique, said Campbell. The edge of the knife is much harder than the rest of the metal, which allows the blade to bend instead of snapping. One knife on display has its blade oddly bent at a 90 degree angle as evidence.

Though the work is very detailed, Campbell said each knife has its own characteristics and does not look machine tooled. "I think by not being too precise, they look more hand made," he said. That handmade look is the key attraction for customers.

Irvin Campbell ran the business with his wife Clara, until she passed away last April. Clara cut and formed all the sheaths for the knives, and she taught that skill to her son's wife, Dawn. Now the next husband and wife team is ready to continue the work, filling the same roles. "Nothing is going to change here," said Campbell. "The tradition is going to carry on."

I.R.B.I.



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LOG Photo/Dwayne D. Atwood

STEP AT A TIME, Virgil Campbell takes crude slabs of steel and creates beautiful hand crafted knives in his father's shop at Mile 20 of the Seward Highway. Campbell has purchased the business and practices the trade full time.

This is a carbon steel blade. Care must be taken to prevent rusting. Keep lightly oiled. Don't store in a wet sheath.

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