



Making knives a cutting-edge family business

Roadside attraction brings in business

By **Celina Sumner**
The Seward Phoenix Log

The large, standing knife at Mile 20 Seward Highway is hard to miss.

Some people don't give it a second look, but most can't help but turn in, get a picture with the large, CD-covered blade, and step inside of I.R.B.I., which stands for I'd Rather Be Independent.

The interior is a showroom filled with different knives. However, over the years, the owners, the Campbell family, have acquired other collectibles that decorate the cabin. A shelf above the main display case is filled with different cameras, mostly older models, and one case contains currency from all over the world.

And then, two men emerge from a shop in the back, wearing protective aprons and goggles. At first glance, they look like serious outdoorsmen, who are even more serious about their knives. But, underneath that tough exterior, two funny men tell stories, answer questions about knife making and reminisce about their father and grandfather, keeping guests entertained.

Virgil Campbell and his son, Hunter Campbell, are the current craftsmen. The two men make and sell 99 percent of the knives in their

shop, while wife and mother, Dawn Campbell, makes leather sheaths and takes care of business.

"If it wasn't for mom, we'd be homeless knife makers," joked Hunter Campbell.

Virgil's father, Irvin Campbell, who was a rig welder in Prudhoe Bay, built the log cabin that serves as a knife showroom and shop.

Irvin Campbell passed away March 2006, but not without passing the tradition on to his son, who has been making knives since the 1960s, and his grandson, Hunter Campbell.

Hunter Campbell, 22, is a third-generation knife maker. The Seward High School graduate has been keeping an eye on the business his whole life, watching over the showroom since he was in eighth grade. About two years ago, he started making his own knives.

"He makes mistakes, but that's the only way he'll learn," Virgil Campbell said.

The men make many knives out the carbon-steel chainsaw guides and even use cable wire, like ones in elevators. The custom making doesn't stop at the blade, though. The two make handles out of everything from hardwoods from all over the world to ivory to deer antlers. They were even given a request to make a handle out of oosick - the penis bone of a walrus.

Virgil Campbell said that some-



Hunter Campbell, left, and his father, Virgil Campbell, work together in the shop to make the knives at I'd Rather Be Independent, or I.R.B.I.

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times fathers will take their sons hunting for the first time, and the child will shoot his first deer, which isn't big enough to hang on the wall. So, the father will take the antlers and have the Campbells make a custom handle out of it.

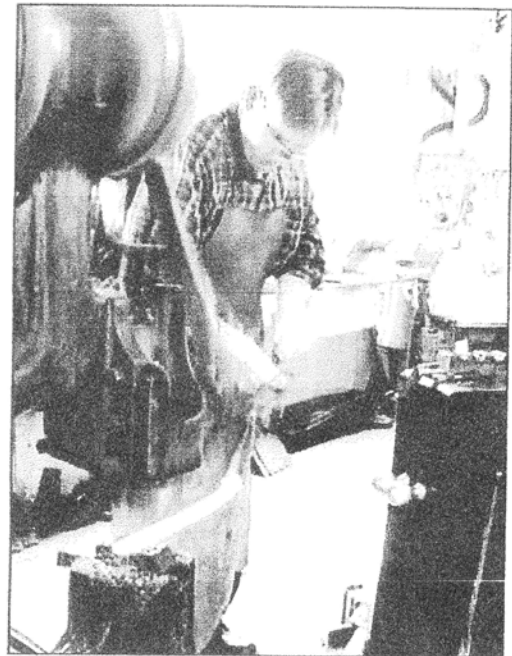
During the summer Hunter Campbell said there are many tourists, possible 50-60 carloads per day. In the winter, business slows down quite a bit, except for Christmas. Virgil Campbell said he is planning on making about 60 knives before Christmas.

The Campbells also do their part to help the community. They have donated knives to the Solstice Festival, the Toys for Tots Auction at the American Legion, and the NRA Auction in Soldotna.

I.R.B.I. is open all winter. And, aside from the many custom-made knives and sheaths available, there are also some ulus that are made by a couple in Sterling and some unique Alaskan-made jewelry.

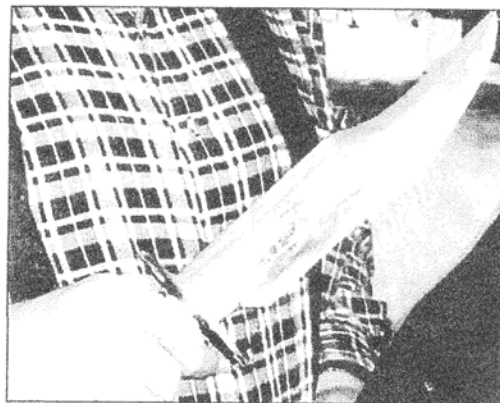
Virgil Campbell's brother, Walter Campbell, who is from Idaho, makes fillet knives in Sterling over the summer.

I.R.B.I. is at 27546 Seward Highway, near Mile 20. More information, irbi@seward.net or 288-3616.



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Hunter Campbell uses a special machine to hammer down a piece of elevator cable wire, or Damascus - a hard, flexible steel with wavy lines - that was heated to 2,500 degrees Fahrenheit. Campbell is a third-generation knifemaker.



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A knife, custom made by Virgil Campbell.

I.R.B.I.



KNIVES HANDCRAFTED BY
VIRGIL & HUNTER CAMPBELL
SHEATHS BY DAWN CAMPBELL

27546 Seward Hwy
SEWARD, ALASKA 99664

(907) 288-3616
MILE 20 SEWARD HWY

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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