

Knife MAGAZINE

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History of Buck Knives



**Spartan Blades:
Full Disclosure**

Bill Ruple

**Stunning Slipjoints
From the Lone Star State**



Bill Ruple

Stunning Slipjoints From the Lone Star State

By Stephen Garger

An over-the-top Ruple jumbo trapper, dressed up with superb amber stag scales, feather pattern damascus blades, and gold-accented engraving by Joe Mason. Photos by PointSeven.

A number of years back while driving through Northwest Montana to see the National Bison Range in the southern portion of the Flathead Valley, I stopped off at the small town of Lincoln to visit my friend, knifemaker Don Bell. Don makes a butter smooth opening gentleman's folder, and I had written a profile of him about a year prior. While we chatted and looked over some of his recent creations, Don went quiet for a bit and then said: "Wait... there's something I want to show you."

He returned a minute later from a little room off the shop with a traditional style folder, and handed it to me while murmuring what sounded like: 'If you drop it, scratch it, in any way harm or damage it you may not leave this shop alive!' Forewarned is forearmed and I gingerly took the knife from him. Even with a quick glance I immediately understood his affection for the blade, as well as his reluctance to trust the beauty in the hands of anybody else. It was the first time I had ever seen one of Bill Ruple's knives in person.

Too many years and life interventions after that day, I recently had the opportunity to speak with Bill and find out some things about him and his approach to the craft. Our conversation opened with him satisfying my curiosity about how he started out as a maker. "I was



farming peanuts in South Texas and was friends with a rancher named Pat West, who had started making knives and showed me what he was doing," Bill began. "I fell in love instantly with the process and having nothing much going on in the winter months, I became a Winter, November-to-May knifemaker and a full time summer farmer."

That was back in 1988, and Bill began his knifemaking by learning from Pat. "I went out and watched him build knives, single blade trappers at the time and that's what I started out doing, with my multi-blade stuff coming later," he recalled. "Since Pat West was selling using knives to local folks, to keep from being his competition I attended my first knife

show in '92-'93." Where Pat was content as a homebody, Bill on the other hand emphasized that he "wanted to get the heck out of Dodge any chance I got."

Fourteen years later, in 2002 Bill retired from farming and the "Winter Knifemaker" went full time. That shift, which he describes as "the best thing that ever happened to me," was accompanied by a sharp increase in the quality of the knives he began to produce. "Once I became full time and knives became my total focus, my workmanship showed a difference since I no longer had to stop and start making because of something happening on the farm," Bill explained. "There was also another big leap from 2002 to 2004 when I began going to



Above: Ruple's take on a 'user grade knife': 3½" blade of CTS-XHP stainless with carbon fiber scales. SharpByCoop photo. Right: Ruple copperhead with clip and wharncliffe blades, jiggled bone scales. Photo by PointSeven.



[Texas maker] Johnny Stout and attended a [Texas maker] Harvey Dean hammer-in and they both had a considerable influence on me."

By Bill's account, making knives look right came easily to him. However, the fit and finish process was both frustrating

and challenging for him and "Working with Johnny Stout and Harvey Dean greatly enhanced the necessary skills in that area."

Bill also cited the work of Tony Bose and Richard Rogers as providing inspiration and incentive: "Tony Bose has been an influence on me since I first saw his knives and thought: 'Man, this is what I want to be doing;' and though Richard's [Rogers] doing a lot of the tactical stuff

now, he can do *anything!*"

Bill explained briefly the reasons for his emphasis on the importance of fit and finish. "You need the f&f if you're going to be successful in this business," he said. "We [knifemakers] all struggle to do things better; and a collector also wants to see the knives get better." I mused that an enthusiastic willingness to embrace the "struggle" Bill referred to is where the difference between a good and a great

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maker may begin to take root. For many new knifemakers, the initial learning curve is quick... but noticeable improvements tend to occur slower and become less apparent as the maker's experience and skill increase, ironically providing fewer tangible reinforcements. Simply put, there's a lot more work for a lot less gain.

Bill concurred and expanded on that line of thought: "You have to keep working at the fit and finish, even though it takes time for people to recognize that what you're doing is better than before." He paused for a few seconds, then laughed and said: "It drives my wife Janice (who is supportive although she doesn't get the knife thing much) crazy, because she says I'll spend a lot of time working on a knife for something nobody will see." It comes as no surprise that Bill rates fit and finish as the biggest improvement in his work over the last 28 years; nor is it surprising that his knives are so highly regarded by his peers and serious collectors.

Our conversation turned to steel preferences and Bill's favorite(s) as well as the significant advances in steels he has witnessed over the three plus decades he has pursued knifemaking. "I generally will use whatever a customer wants me to use," he replied. "Most of the collectors paying pretty high prices for knives don't want to deal with rust, so stainless is the steel of choice." Bill's personal preference



Some first rate stag, a dash of filework, and boldly patterned blades made from Josh Smith's damascus make this Bill Ruple two-blade saddlehorn pattern a joy to behold. Photo by PointSeven.

is for CPM154, because "it holds an edge and finishes better," but also noted that his shop contains "just about every steel imaginable." As proof, Bill told me he "sent a knife out recently with an A2 blade!"

"Crucible Steel [Crucible Speciality Ma-

terials, now Crucible Industries] has really been a front runner in manufacturing stainless specifically for custom knifemakers, where prior to that we had to use ATS-34 since nobody made steel specifically for knives," Bill continued. "The whole industry owes Scott Devanna, who



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A canoe pattern whittler by Bill Ruple with damascus blades, fossil ivory scales, and tasteful filework and engraving. PointSeven photo.



Amber stag and filework are a great match for the clean lines of this Ruple jumbo trapper. PointSeven photo.



Ruple trapper with fancy filework and fossil ivory handles. The engraving is by Steve Dunn. SharpByCoop photo.

works for SB Specialty Metals [that sells Crucible Industries and Carpenter Technology knife steels], because he was instrumental in convincing steel companies that there was a market for custom makers using CPM steels.” Devanna, a metallurgist, is currently the Vice President of Technology at SB Specialty Metals and as part of his job description oversees their knife steel programs.

In terms of handle materials, a strong bias for stag is evident in Bill’s work. “Probably 85% of the knives I make are stag and I’ve kind of become known for that,” he said. “Of course I use all of the handle materials depending on what the customer may request, and right now I’m putting the finishing touches on a mother-of-pearl piece.”

Bill then shared his thoughts about the current and future state of the traditional folder market in view of the popularity and demand for tactical knives. In his view the traditional knife market remains promising. “The main difference I see is that the secondary market is not as strong now and as a result the dealers aren’t buying; but that’s OK with me since I don’t have to give the dealer discount,” he said while laughing. “Last year was my best ever, and every year since I have been making knives has been better than the previous one – the orders haven’t let

up.”

Bill related that he finds it positive that his older knives are holding their value and tend to sell for what they did back when he made them. We both agreed on the point where that fact may also be a good indicator to pay attention to the old saw about ‘buying what you like’ and not put a knife purchase into the financial investment category assuming it will necessarily increase in value.

As the talk turned to tactical knives and knifemakers, Bill emphasized strongly that he does not feel like he is in any sort of “competition” with them, and in fact he takes quite the opposite view. “I share a lot of customers with the tactical guys,” he began. “Custom traditional knifemakers owe those tactical makers a debt of gratitude because they are introducing many younger people to the business, and we all benefit because that keeps our market growing.”

In an area also related to “competition,” we discussed whether improvements in the quality of most factory knives over the years has cut into the custom maker’s business. As it turns out, Bill’s attitudes towards the improved quality of factory knives resemble how he views the growth of the tactical knife market. “I think the custom knife influence on the industry forced the factories to improve, and of

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A fine looking trio of trapper variations handled in amber stag: clean, simple and beautifully executed by Pleasanton, Texas' craftsman Bill Ruple. Photo by PointSeven.



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Another Ruple 'Canittler' (canoe pattern whittler), this one with amber stag and an engraved shield. Note the decorative grooves in the stainless bolsters. Photo courtesy SharpByCoop.

course many customers start out in factory knives," he opined. "As those people progress, their tastes and knowledge evolve along with the growth of their factory collections, which they may then sell, and with that money begin collecting [the work of] custom makers like myself."

Speaking of factory knives, Bill is currently entered into a collaboration with the Queen Cutlery Company of Titusville, Pennsylvania and as testimony to his previous comment, it turned out to be one of their collectors who also owns a number of Bill's folders that catalyzed the collaboration. "Ken Daniels [Queen Cutlery Company owner and CEO] and I actually met through a collector of Queen and my knives," Bill recalled. "So I knew Ken three or four years before he approached me about working together." Since then Bill has designed several knives for Queen and he outlined how the process works.

"I build a knife I think will be a good seller, actually I build two – one a pull-apart and one a finished prototype," he said. "Then they'll [Queen] auction the prototype for charity at the Blade Show, and take the components from the pull-apart and laser cut them." In point of fact Bill said that Queen Cutlery plans to introduce one of his designs at the 2016 Atlanta Blade Show.

I mentioned that the steps involved in his collaboration with Queen Cutlery sounded a lot like how the deal Tony Bose has with Case Knives works. "It is a similar arrangement in that my designs and a lot of Tony's are standard factory-made, although a difference is that a limited number of the Bose Case knives also come out of their custom shop."

As his knifemaking career approaches the thirty year mark, I was curious about what the motivation is to stick with it. "For one thing, I'm really enjoying the more complicated pieces, and that also



keeps me going in a slow market," he said while laughing a little. "Different whittlers, lock back whittlers, five blade knives... they make me mad and keep me interested at the same time." Bill is probably best known for his trappers, but obviously enjoys the challenges and creative process in making knives chosen from the varied menu of traditional folder models.

As we ended our conversation, Bill offered to send me a photo of a knife he thought I'd enjoy seeing. A few minutes later the picture came through: It's a two bladed saddlehorn trapper with Devin Thomas stainless feather damascus, mammoth ivory scales and engraving by Joe Mason of Brandon, Mississippi. [As it turned out, the knife appears on the cover of this issue.]

I smiled when I saw it and couldn't help thinking back to that time in Don Bell's shop: "If this was the Ruple that Don brought out that day, he probably would have held a gun on me as I examined it!" While Bill's work is undoubtedly improving, to me the knife exemplifies the product of a person at the top of his game.

Bill Ruple knives range in price from \$1000 - \$5000 and there is currently a six-to-eight month wait. He can be reached at: Bill Ruple, 201 Brian Drive, Pleasanton, TX 78064, by phone at 830-570-0056, by email at rupleknives@live.com or on Facebook ([bill.ruple.10](https://www.facebook.com/bill.ruple.10)). □

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