

Learn knife making

Be part of Arkansas' rich history

by Gregg Patterson

There are place markers in history where a moment or event in time, the iconic nature of an object and a personality larger than life all come together to create something special. The Bowie knife – so named after legendary frontiersman and knife fighter Jim Bowie – is that iconic object. Who made the first Bowie knife isn't a completely settled question. However, the belief of some prominent knife historians suggests the best evidence supports the maker as James Black, a renowned knife maker of the time who lived in Washington, Ark. Black's signature coffin-handled, long-bladed knives were popular at the time along with other quality large knives (blades at least 8.25 inches). The big knives also were nicknamed "Arkansas toothpicks" by riverboat men, hunters, trappers, woodcutters and others who valued their utilitarian uses for frontier living, like skinning, chopping and self-defense. The wild, rough-and-tumble Arkansas territory was a hotbed for quality knife makers in the early 1800s.

It still is today. And you can be a part of it.

Lin Rhea of Prattsville (rheaknives.com) is one of those carrying on Arkansas' prestigious knife making tradition. Rhea, 56, is a Master Bladesmith who took up knife-making at the urging of his wife, Kay, in 2002. He signed up for the Bill Moran School of Bladesmithing held at Old Washington State Park, the same Washington where James Black plied his



Functional art *A little more than a decade ago, Lin Rhea decided he wanted to be a part of Arkansas' rich knife-making history. Rhea, a blacksmith at the Historic Arkansas Museum, attended a knife-making class at Old Washington State Park, and it fired his creativity. His knife-making skill is well respected.*

craft more than 175 years ago.

"Introduction to Bladesmithing' is where someone who has never done it before can come in and learn the basics of forging a blade. That includes the forging, the grinding and heat treating of the blade," Rhea said.

The first two-week class in 2014 will be April 21-25 and April 28-May 2. Other classes throughout the year include classes on making knife handles and guards, making Damascus blades, and forging and hammering techniques. Rhea will teach a "Handles and Guards" class Sept. 29-Oct. 3. Class registration and payment is handled by Texarkana College. Rhea suggests getting more information by going to the American Bladesmith Society (ABS) website at americanbladesmith.com.

Rhea believes in "doing it properly" when it comes to knife making. That means making every part of the knife himself. He also makes all of his knives for use. This means during the knife-making process, he "runs each knife through its paces," testing each to make sure it will withstand



everyday use. His finished knives have won awards in ABS cutting competitions designed specifically to test for blade quality.

"I always like to test my knives. Your reputation as a knife maker grows based on doing well in competitions and testimonies from people who use your knife," Rhea said.

Rhea says the quality of a knife blade – a strong tip, its ability to hold an edge or resist pitting – is based on how the maker heat treats, or forges, it. "If he does a really good job on his heat-treat, the people who purchase and use his knives will testify to his superior skill," Rhea said.

Though Rhea demands the functional use of each knife he crafts, he understands the artistic nature of knife making. "It's functional art. I make and am involved in every part of my knives," Rhea said. "It brings complete enjoyment." *✍️*