

Ramblin's of a Mountain Man

By Dean A. Hazuka

The Butcher Knife

Several issues back Dan Shechtman made a comment I totally agree with. (paraphrased.) "I believe there have been more styles and sheer numbers of production of the common household butcher knife than any other knife in history."

With thousands of variations, who knows what the "original" was. Large and small, thin blades and heavy, half tang, full tang, tapered tang, straight pins, tapered pins, three pin and five pin handles or cutlers rivets. Some had both. All were similar yet so different.

They say Jim Bowie used a large butcher knife at the sand bar fight which evolved into an entire different breed of its own and became a catch-all term for any large knife that could be used for fighting.

The "butcher" knives did the same for a basic utility type of knife to be used around the homestead. Actually Butcher was one of the more prolific and famous knife makers of the Sheffield, England area as was Kitchen.

Recently I have found documentation of orders for

"Butcher type" knives dating in the mid 1700's so it looks like the process was named before Butcher the knife maker was ever born.

I do almost 50 different sizes and styles of knives.

At times I get frustrated at the constant requests to change this or tweak that or modify something else in order to satisfy a customer.

When I look at how many variations there were and are to a basic knife style like the butcher's knife it confirms, there is no perfect knife.

A knife is a tool and there is a different tool design for every purpose.

Lately I have been noticing personal modifications made to these basic old knives.

I don't have money or space enough to buy all I've seen but here is a photo of a couple modifications.

One has a rounded nose- no tip- and I did several of these in Mn. for beaver skimmers when I was first playing with knife building. I estimate this knife to be early 1900's. The second has a finger guard attached to one side. The handle slab was carefully removed, the guard added then the slab was re-riveted.

I saw one that had a similar guard on the bottom of the handle with finger notches filed into the top of the slabs. Obviously used for ripping to protect the thumb

from sliding forward onto the cutting edge.

I've hesitated to produce knives of this design where the handle transitions onto the cutting edge with no guard or step. Seeing these modifications tells me a lot of folks over the years had a fear of sliding forward onto the cutting edge too. I don't like a guard as I find them cumbersome, they hook up and they don't let me get close enough to my work.

I design a stop into my blades so my finger will not slide forward onto the cutting edge. When I am reproducing the old blades I put file-work between the hilt and the cutting edge to prevent that. I recently found documentation that this was done on the old roach-belly knives too.

Back to the butcher knife; I knew with so many produced there had to be something to them.

I studied various sizes and styles I have on hand then came up with the one you see here. I sized it to fit in our standard large sheath. We have been using it for several months now and I see how practical they are.

I added a brass bolster to class it up a bit. Most of the old ones I see had a plain wood slab handle however I just got some great info. from archaeologist Mike Twist. I see a lot of these old knives did have silver and brass bolsters.

I have seen some internet chatter about modern makers not being traditional because we use curly maple for handle slabs. It is true a lot of the trade knives had very cheap soft wood handles that were steam formed for mass production but I have also seen a lot of plain bladed old knives with very tight curled maple handles.

The blade is thin so it slices well. It has a bit of flex but not much. It is small & light weight enough to make it comfortable for peeling and yet it is long enough at 4-3/4" to chunk large potatoes, squash etc. It has a large enough radius at the tip to slice off fat & trim sinew off of steaks and roasts and it will make a great skinning knife.

The handle is long enough and big enough to be comfortable and yet small enough for the average housewife.

The high carbon blade holds a great edge and sharpens easily but it will rust if not cared for. Just keep them dry. They will stain and tarnish with use but that just adds to their character. Please do not put wood handled knives in the dishwasher.

I am doing a couple dozen to see how they go. I hope to get some feed-back on this old tried and true style.

I think you will see why most everyone's Grandma had a favorite knife like this.