

Circa the early 1960s, Blade Magazine Cutlery Hall-Of-Famer® Rudy Ruana holds one of his bowies in his shop. (photo courtesy of Mike Hargas)

# Trailblazer of Blades

RUDY RUANA BECAME A LEGEND  
HAMMER BLOW BY HAMMER BLOW



Ruana made this rare three-pin, square-cut-handle combat model sometime between 1938-43. He did not mark his knives at that time. Mike Hargas said this model was most likely made for a World War II serviceman. The sheath is original. Chris Amos' value: \$2,000-\$3,000+. (photo courtesy of Mike Hargas)

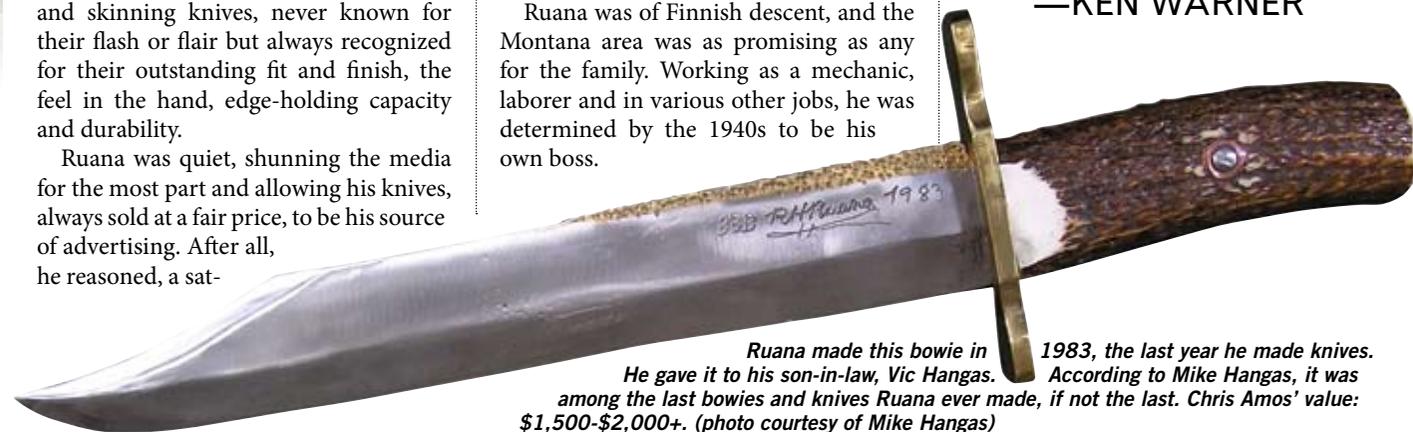


With a selection of Ruana knives in the foreground, Rudy stitches a sheath. (photo courtesy of Mike Hargas)

For more than 40 years, Blade Magazine Cutlery Hall-Of-Famer® Rudolph H. "Rudy" Ruana made knives for the workingman—which fits, because he was a workingman himself. Truly a pioneer of the modern custom knife movement, Ruana made knives as a soldier, a farrier to be exact, with the Third Field Artillery Battalion, Sixth Infantry Division, U.S. Army. His blacksmithing skills were a perfect prerequisite for the making of high-quality hunting and skinning knives, never known for their flash or flair but always recognized for their outstanding fit and finish, the feel in the hand, edge-holding capacity and durability. Ruana was quiet, shunning the media for the most part and allowing his knives, always sold at a fair price, to be his source of advertising. After all, he reasoned, a sat-

isfied customer is worth much more than a few enticing words on paper. A man of the Great Depression, he trekked westward from North Dakota with his wife, Helmi, and their young sons, Ray and Dennis, and 2-month-old daughter Ilona, out of the 1930s Dust Bowl that wracked the Great Plains. He found himself in what was then known as Finn Town, Montana, near Bonner and the larger city of Missoula. Actually, his trailer had broken down—some say he ran out of gas—in the hamlet of Milltown. Ruana was of Finnish descent, and the Montana area was as promising as any for the family. Working as a mechanic, laborer and in various other jobs, he was determined by the 1940s to be his own boss.

**"THERE WAS NO FLASH, NO EXCESS SPARKLE, JUST A REALLY SOLID WORKING KNIFE."**  
—KEN WARNER



Ruana made this bowie in 1983, the last year he made knives. He gave it to his son-in-law, Vic Hargas. According to Mike Hargas, it was among the last bowies and knives Ruana ever made, if not the last. Chris Amos' value: \$1,500-\$2,000+. (photo courtesy of Mike Hargas)

He left a job with the forest service in 1944 and began making knives full time.

"He did it the old fashioned way," explained Ruana's son-in-law, Vic Hargas, who married Ilona Ruana 53 years ago and joined Rudy in the shop seven years later. "He believed in forging the blades and came up with a tempering method of his own. People got to know about his

knives through word of mouth. At the time, there were a lot of knives on the market, and he could hardly give one away. Then, somebody in Alaska got hold of one, and when I went to work for him on Jan. 1, 1964, most of the dealers selling his knives were in Alaska. [The knives] became so popular that we started selling through dealers, and soon everyone

wanted one. We could only do so much production with two guys."

Six days a week, often stretching to 16 hours each, Ruana became a legend hammer blow by hammer blow. He worked until he was 80 years old, finally retiring in 1983. When he passed away three years later, his legacy was well established. Vic and his sons Mark and Mike were carrying on the tradition in the same shop Rudy had purchased decades earlier for \$900.

"We still use coal to forge with," Vic related. "I don't know that it makes a difference, but why change it if it's working? We use good, high-quality blacksmith coal from Kentucky. I don't know how many knives we have in terms of patterns, but, as the years have gone by, people have found that they don't need a great big knife, and we have streamlined our production."

Since humble beginnings, Rudy's knives have gained in popularity with users and collectors, many of whom seem to feel the connection with his commitment to a quality product offered at a fair price. Among his most popular models carried on through the years is the "Smoke Jumper," which Vic describes as a little 3.5-inch blade with a stubby handle of about 3 inches, and the 4-inch drop point known as the "Sticker."

"We do a lot of custom work in addition to running the production line," Vic noted, "and we can't keep up with what we have now."

**Vintage Models**

Through the years, the values of vintage Ruana knives have increased substantially—quite probably on a larger scale than Rudy ever would have imagined. The most common of his knives are those with the "M" stamp, which were made from 1962 to 1983 when Rudy ran a one-man shop, with help from Vic starting in 1964 and

his son Mark Hargas in the later years.

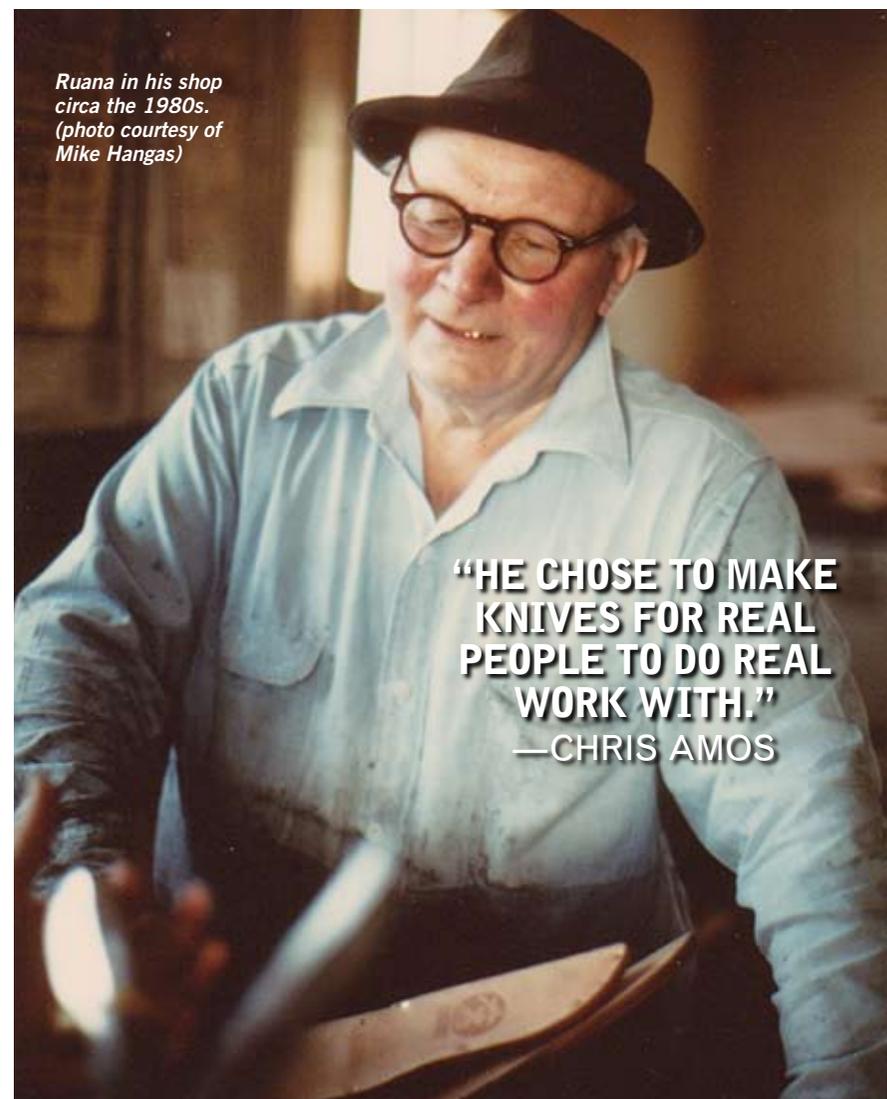
"Right now these are routinely going for \$250-\$350 and will most likely go higher," explained Ruana collector and knife-maker Chris Amos. "His more rare models, like the earlier 'S' stamp, the small knife stamp and the original three-pin knives, continue to be sought after and command premium prices starting at around \$1,000. Having the original sheath always adds value, at least 20 percent."

Though Amos never met Ruana, he asserts that he has come to know the maker through his knives. "The things he felt were important and the things he made," Amos commented. "He was a master with his hands and could have easily made art knives but chose instead to make knives for real people to do real work with. I am glad in a way that I never had the chance to meet him. The Ruana I know is one of

quality, honesty and hard-working integrity. His knives will always represent that for him, and that's how I would want to be remembered."

According to Amos, the most-sought-after Ruana knife is probably the original three-pin "special handmade hunting knife" from the late 1930s, followed by the custom bowies and early-mark pieces. Amos said an older three-pin knife in good shape could fetch up to \$2,500, and he has seen only four—one pictured in the 1995 Ruana biography, *Hear The Hammer*, by John Mandell, Frank Towsley and Stephen Smith, a couple on eBay, and another in a private collection. (Editor's note: At press time, a sequel to *Hear The Hammer* by one or more of the original authors reportedly was in the works.)

When Cutlery Hall-Of-Famer Ken Warner spoke at Ruana's induction into the American Bladesmith Society Hall Of Fame, holding a Ruana knife in his hand, his words

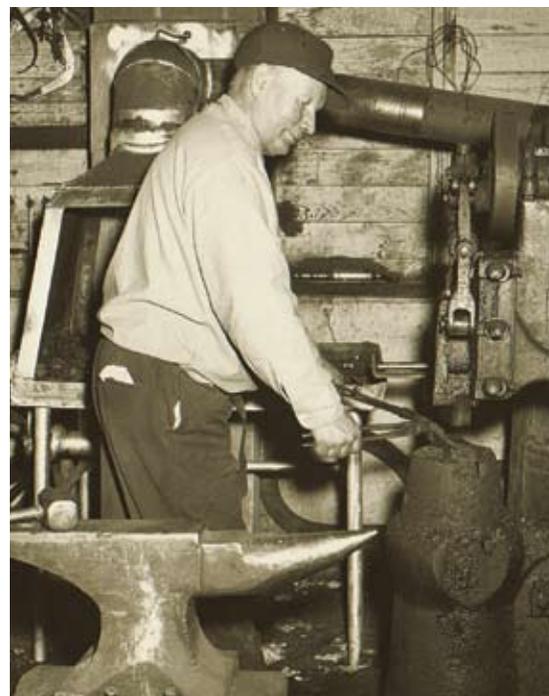
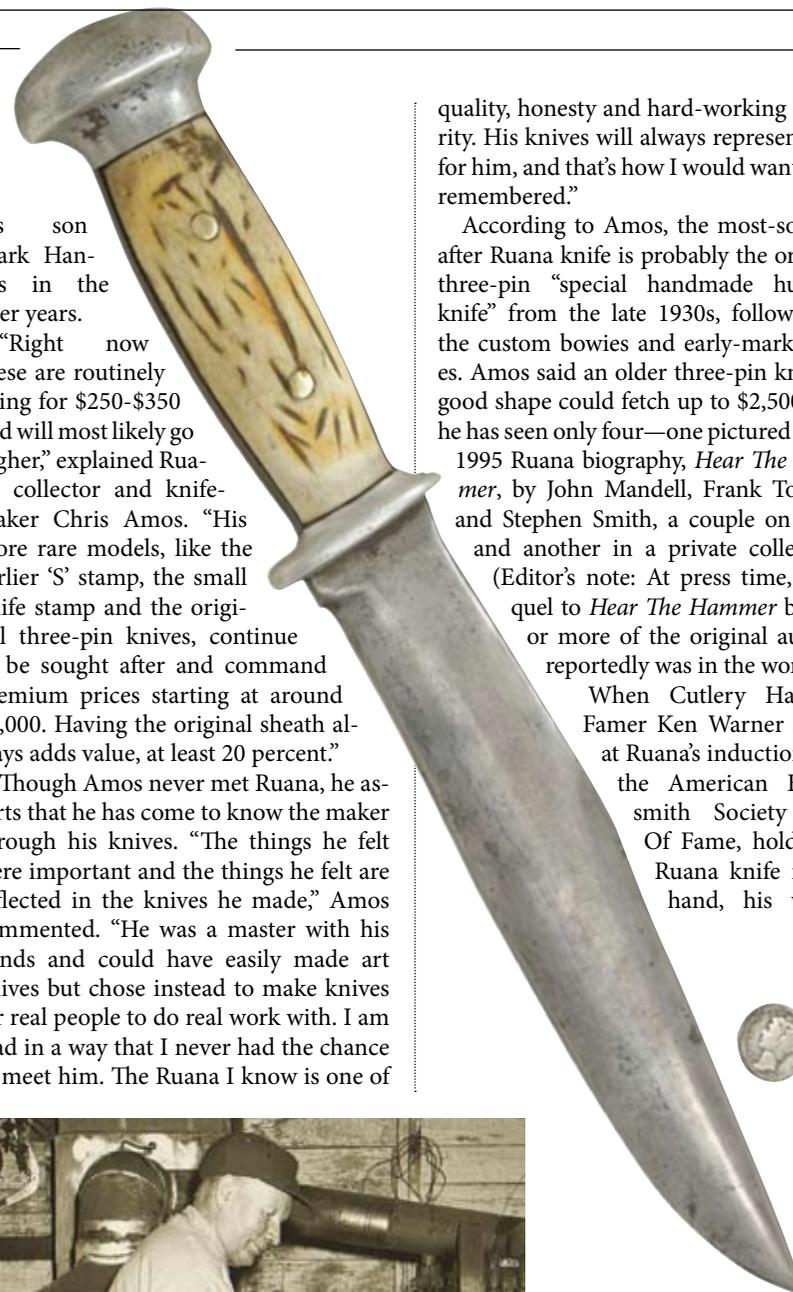


Ruana in his shop circa the 1980s. (photo courtesy of Mike Hargas)

**"HE CHOSE TO MAKE KNIVES FOR REAL PEOPLE TO DO REAL WORK WITH."**  
—CHRIS AMOS



Among Rudy Ruana's most popular models carried on through the years by today's Ruana Knife Works is the "Smoke Jumper," which Ruana Knife Works' Vic Hargas describes as a little 3.5-inch blade with a stubby handle of about 3 inches. (photo courtesy of Mike Hargas)



"No one really knows the value of this fighter [above]. It is unsigned but most people agree it is one of Rudy's very early knives from the late 1930s," noted Chris Amos. "It is one-of-a-kind as far as we know and would have a higher collector value if it had a signature. It should easily be worth several thousand as a one-of-a-kind to a Ruana collector." (from the Ed Fowler collection; Fowler photo)

Ruana works at his power hammer sometime in the early 1960s. (photo courtesy of Mike Hargas)

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## PIONEER KNIFEMAKER

were as matter-of-fact as Ruana's knives themselves.

"His knives were unmistakably, truly, Rudy's knives and nobody else's," Ken reflected. "There was no flash, no excess sparkle, just a really solid working knife. I guess I talked at the ABS induction about the fact that he didn't need to ask anybody questions or do a market study. He just went ahead and did the job. He made lots of knives and, as hunting season approached every year, sporting goods stores would have buckets full of them.

"The other thing was that he never went nuts on pricing. I assume he got paid to suit himself for his work, and even sometime later on \$100 was a lot. He wasn't overloaded with a sense of humor or a 'hail fellow well met.' He was a working guy and made honest knives his whole life."

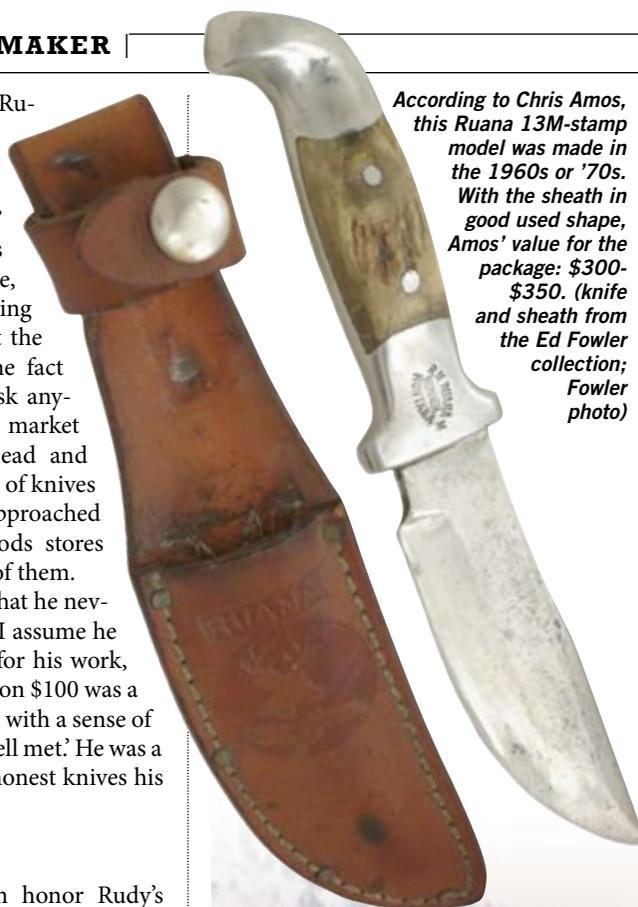
### Living Legacy

Today, the Hangas men honor Rudy's memory with quality knives Ruana would be proud to call his own. When Rudy was inducted into the Cutlery Hall of Fame in 2002, Ilona and her sister, Lea, offered memorable remarks about the knifemaking man.

"He didn't like the press because several stories were written with the facts all goofed up," Vic smiled. "He had a reputation for not liking writers. At the end, it added up to publicity he didn't want or need. Now, I'm half embarrassed when people talk about our knives being famous. We're proud of what we do, but this is still a humbling experience. We don't have a sign on our shop, and some of our neighbors don't even know what we do here."

Whether the neighbors know or not, the knife community far and wide is aware of Rudy Ruana, his reputation, and the living legacy he left behind.

For more information on contemporary Ruana knives, contact Ruana Knife Works, attn: M. Hangas, Dept. BL6, Box 520, Bonner, MT 59823 406-258-5368 fax 406-258-2895 [www.ruanaknives.com](http://www.ruanaknives.com).



According to Chris Amos, this Ruana 13M-stamp model was made in the 1960s or '70s. With the sheath in good used shape, Amos' value for the package: \$300-\$350. (knife and sheath from the Ed Fowler collection; Fowler photo)



Ruana holds his daughter Ilona in 1937. Sixty-five years later, Ilona and her sister Lea would induct their father posthumously into the Blade Magazine Cutlery Hall Of Fame®. (photo courtesy of Mike Hangas)

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