

# MONTANA KNIFE MAKERS

Written by Jay Hanson

*There are dozens of knife makers in Montana. They range from the hobbyist, who may craft an occasional, simple tool for his own deer hunting, to the fully-accredited craftsman who creates pieces of art to all over the world. For all, it is a labor of love, using skills that only grow over time, rarely making two pieces that are the same. Fortunately, for the reader, the people behind the knives are as interesting as the masterpieces they construct.*



## Making Knives From History

Those native to Montana are often proud to boast of their upbringing, often letting the rest of us know that they were here from birth. However, Powell Swanser, is a Montana native with roots deeper than most. In fact, Swanser is related to John Colter, one of Lewis and Clark's charges. Colter enjoyed the blood, sweat and tears (none of his) from the expedition so much, that he returned to the untamed Rockies three times. Swanser is more civilized than Colter, but has plenty of stories to tell, nonetheless.

Swanser grew up in a rural, uncivilized part of Montana that is still fairly untamed today. Swanser hails

from the Missouri Breaks region of eastern Montana, roughly 50 miles northwest of Jordan, if that tells you anything. It is unforgiving country with choking heat in the summer, frigid winters, sticky gumbo soil when it rains, rattlesnakes, etc. Beautiful country, but it doesn't treat the unprepared very well. Swanser has been in a knife-fight in the outback of Australia, threatened by aborigines in Fiji and been taken hostage. Danger obviously runs in the family.

Just like a lot of knife makers, he built his first knife when he was a kid, a creation he labels as "second-class", but he still has it hanging on the wall today. The wood handle is cracked, the blade less than perfect, but it has field-dressed a couple of deer, so it was an honest knife.

"If someone wants it", states Swanser, "it will cost them a bundle."

Swanser, who is also a world-renowned sculptor, sells his knives with a relevance to his heritage. He sells a two piece set of his prized Colter knives that are owned by famous folk from around the globe. The set includes Colter's big belt knife, "The Grizzly Chisel" and his moccasin blade, "the Wolfang." The set isn't cheap at \$5,000, but it is difficult to put a price on the unique craftsmanship and heritage of the Colter knives. Swanser balances his time between his sculpting and knifemaking, but is just as content doing either.

Worldly as he is, Montana is where Swanser works and recreates, listing fly fishing as his favorite activity when not in the studio. Swanser is a self-proclaimed "water-wolf" chaser, targeting large northern pike more often than trout. His wife Tazun has found herself in many precarious situations while on adventures with her husband, but always has been no worse for the wear. They now reside in western Montana, where there is just as much trouble to get into, but just like Colter, some men aren't made for doing things the easy way. Being legendary runs in the family.

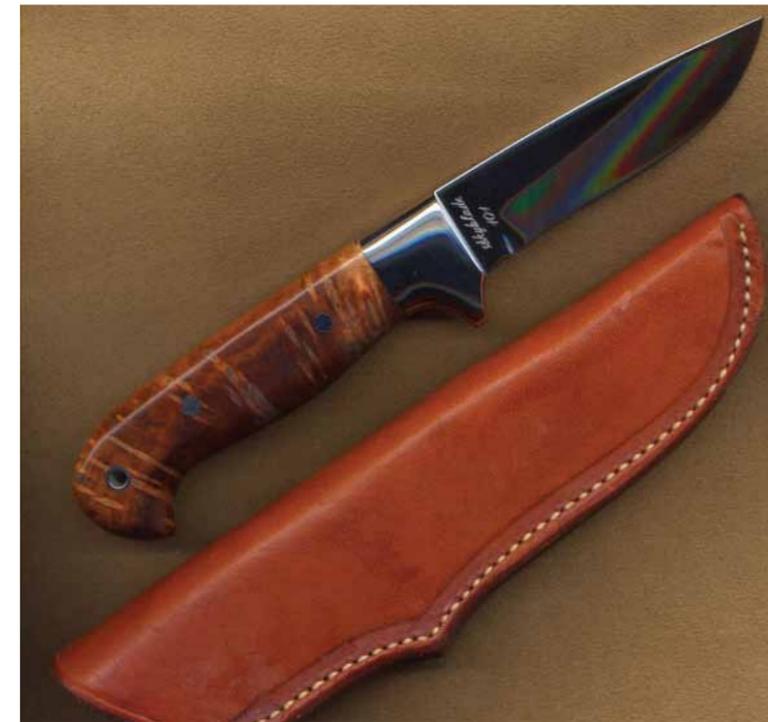
For more information on the Colter knives or Swanser's world-class sculptures, visit: [www.powellswanser.com](http://www.powellswanser.com)

## A Sporting Artist

Todd Orr also had the privilege of growing up in rural Montana, hunting and fishing every chance he had. While today's boyhood activities are made up of television and video games, Orr grew up with a BB gun or fly rod in hand. When your backyard is the Madison River near Ennis, Montana, your proximity to excellent fishing and big game hunting is as good as it gets.

As a sportsman in Montana, a knife isn't optional gear that you consider lightly. It is a tool that is as essential as the shells in your rifle or the food in your pack. Orr was given his first hunting knife at age 12 from his father. That same year, he also killed his first elk, not delaying the use of his new knife in the least.

Years later, in 1987, an elderly knife maker at a dinner party showed him a custom-made knife, explaining the details of what a quality knife consists of. It was his epiphany moment, as he knew he had to make a knife of



**Opposite from left:** Powell Swanser, in Colter-like garb, right down to the legendary knives. The "Grizzly Chisel" and "Wolfang". **Above:** The Summit Hunter and sheath, courtesy of Skyblade Knives. **Below:** Todd Orr and one of his many bull elk, taken with a pistol.



his own, with the design and look that was truly his. That was the beginning of Skyblade Knives.

Orr's outdoor upbringing is reflected in his knife making and insists that his end result is functional, as well as elegant. His knife models range from \$250-\$350, depending on blade length, design complexity and handle. The package is classic Big Sky, as the custom leather sheath each is accompanied with is made by Madison Saddlery of Ennis, Montana.

Like many sportsmen, Orr continues to challenge himself as he has matured. Originally hunting with a rifle, Orr had transitioned to bowhunting at age 14. Due to a ski injury and the desire to make things sporty, he now hunts with a pistol. Amazingly, he has killed 32 bull elk in his life and 20 of them fell to a handgun. He speaks graciously of the land and the wildlife that makes its home on it. Like many hunter/conservationists, Orr speaks in high regard for the blessings that Montana offers.

For more information on Todd Orr's knives, check out: [www.skybladeknives.com](http://www.skybladeknives.com)

### 100 Years And Counting

For perspective, Rudy Ruana began building knives for a couple of Indians who used them to skin horses in the 1920s, while he was in the US Calvary. Just that sentence alone should provide you with a sense of historical placement.

Today, Vic, Mark and Mike Hargas continue Rudy's tradition of quality knife-making, in the same Bonner shop where Rudy brought his craft to Montana in the late 1930's. While they have updated most of the shop over time, it still has some equipment that appears to have been there since the beginning of Ruana Knives. But, similar to Coca-Cola or KFC, why would you change the recipe after years of success?



**Above:** Vic, Mark and Mike Hargas of Ruana Knives in their Bonner shop. **Opposite:** Ruana Knives from top to bottom: 1) Damascus Sidekick, 2) Hunter, 3) 10 B Smokejumper

Vic Hargas was Rudy's son-in-law, so he had a couple of reasons to do a good job when he began working for Ruana in 1964. Rudy retired in 1983, selling the business to the Hargas family. Mark had started working with Rudy and his father in 1976, with brother Mike coming on board in 1984. Rudy passed away in 1986, leaving his established company in very good hands.

The Ruana way continues to be "blade-focused". In the 1920s and 30s, a knife was meant to be a functional tool with a blade that was as reliable as a well-breed steed. Looks were always secondary. While today the visual attributes of the knives created by the Hargas family have become distinctive, they still are a working man's knife. Just the fact that they have an extensive line of Bowie knives, skinning knives and a hatchet, should say something.

The Hargas family is an outdoor family, all enjoying various Montana activities. Mark and Mike both inherited their love of elk hunting, fishing and floating the local rivers from Vic, just as they had the knifemaking skills passed down. In the outdoors and in business, the Hargas family has remained a team, which not all families are able to do. Their combined experience of 100 years making knives shows in the craftsmanship.

Depending on the knife model and the time of year, there may be a brief wait for your Montana-made treasure, but typically less than four months. Knife sales are at their peak during hunting season and around Christmas. Prices vary greatly, just as the models; however, a hunting model can be had for less than \$300, their largest Bowie knife runs around \$1500.

An aspect that I found fascinating, is their offer to buy old Ruana knives or allow you to trade in an old model on a new purchase. How many manufacturers become collectors of their own product? Not many. Certainly not mass-produced, overseas knife makers. From this point on, I will have my eyes open at every garage sale or pawn shop in the region, hoping to come across a Ruana that needs a new home.

To learn more, visit: [www.ruanaknives.com](http://www.ruanaknives.com)



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### Trapper to Teacher

Ed Caffrey, of Great Falls, Montana, was given his first knife by his grandfather. It was a Schrade Barlow, the prototypical pocket knife, which he still has. From that instrumental gift, he purchased his first hunting knife when he was 12. He and his best friend worked all summer to purchase new knives for the upcoming beaver trapping season. From that point on, he was on a continual journey, looking for a better knife.

His knife making career began in earnest while serving in the US Air Force and after joining the American Bladesmith Society. He “accidentally” sold his first knife when someone offered him \$40 for a knife that he would routinely make for friends or relatives. At first unsure if the gentlemen was being earnest, Caffrey gladly took the offer and at the time, the proceeds were enough to make six more knives, catapulting his knife making business.

**Above:** Ed Caffrey forging Damascus in his shop. **Left:** Caffrey's 52100 Hunter model.

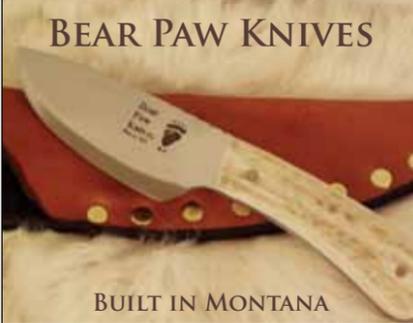
After retiring from the Air Force in 2003, Caffrey ramped up his Bladesmith credentials and achieved the ABS Mastersmith Rating. His specialty is Working Grade field knives to high-end Collector Grade pieces. Nearly everything is forged, with Mosaic Damascus his current passion.

Like any good military man, Caffrey is taking his knowledge and passing it along to those beneath him. He teaches all over the US, Europe and Canada and also offers one-on-one classes in his Great Falls shop. Caffrey hunts and fishes as much as possible in Montana. He calls the Montana countryside his “test bed” for his knives and gains insight into what would help him improve his knives.

The Montana Bladesmith's knives range in cost from \$189 for an everyday, carry knife to \$10,000 for a unique, collector grade knife. There is typically a waiting list of 6-8 months for one of Caffrey's works.

For more information on Caffrey's knife making instruction, visit: [www.caffreyknives.net/classes](http://www.caffreyknives.net/classes) 

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