



Tiny Finnish community
has been home to
world-class bladesmiths
for several generations

a neighborhood tradition

Story by Donna Erickson
Photos by Anne Bailey

This page: Ruana hunting knives feature elk inserts held in place by rivets, not glue. Facing page: Mike Hargas heats aluminum to 1,500 degrees prior to pouring it into handle molds.

A coal forge hugs its brick chimney in one corner. Clamps, belts and wrenches hang on the walls. Old work benches hold a heavy vice, boxes of elk horn pieces and heavy chunks of steel. Metal shavings cling to every surface.



I could be in a museum where actors are demonstrating how knives were hand-crafted a century ago, but this the is here and now at Ruana Knife Works in West Riverside, Montana.

Near a bank of small windows, brothers Mark and Mike Hargas sit on opposite sides of an old metal table that supports three small motors that power four different machines. On Mark's side of the table, a machine with a thick felt disc spins rapidly as he polishes the blades of seven hunting knives. Over on Mike's side, sparks shower from a Bowie knife as he grinds the cast aluminum handle, smoothing it out before he proceeds to the delicate sanding technique he's mastered over the years.

The work is dirty, detailed and dangerous. The coal forge, though not large, turns aluminum to liquid at 1,600 degrees. Each Ruana knife model has its own handle mold where molten aluminum is poured. Mike admits to a few visits to the emergency room in his nearly 30 years at the Ruana.

The middle-age brothers wear leather and canvas gloves, work boots and heavy pants. Mike hands me the handle of the knife he's grinding. It's hot and still a bit rough, but this is only step 30 in a 46-step process of handcrafting a Ruana knife. Each step takes a couple of minutes to a half hour per knife—from forming the blade made of heavy chrome alloy spring steel to inserting the shiny finished knife in its leather sheath.

In the next room, their father, 75-year-old Vic Hargas, forms a leather sheath for a small "sticker" knife that I'm coveting. He already has sewn the leather pieces on a large black 1910 harness stitcher on which about a quarter of a million sheaths have been sewn over the years. He soaks the leather in hot water, inserts the blade, and then molds the leather to the knife with his fingers. ▶

You wouldn't know the shop exists if it's not your destination. Outside, there is no business sign and you have to look hard to even see a street number. The shop is a carefully maintained, modest wood-frame building. The oldest end is the shop where the knives are made. Expansion projects have been added over time, but these changes have not altered the knife-crafting practices that have endured for three generations.

But don't let the modest accommodations fool you. According to Stephen Garger, who writes extensively about knife craftsmanship, Ruana knives are collected by knife aficionados worldwide. They are made one at a time with hands-



on work through every step, which is highly unusual.

"The forged knives are rugged, virtually indestructible and easy to maintain in the field," says Garger. They are works of art with a simple beauty; many Ruana knives are not even used,

This page, top: Found at an estate sale, a rare 1938 Ruana knife engraved with the initials for Eino Weimer made its way back to the West Riverside shop in 2012. Weimer, a Finnish immigrant who came to West Riverside with his family at age 15, originally ran a car repair business where he employed Rudy Ruana as a mechanic and welder. Ruana later launched his knife business inside the same shop and gifted his former boss with one of his first knives. Bottom: In 1938 Ruana Knives founder Rudy Ruana set up shop in the small town of West Riverside, where the business continues to thrive today. Facing page, top: Rudy Ruana, Mark Hargas and Vic Hargas, pictured from left to right, stand outside the Ruana Knives shop in 1979. Bottom: Today, Mike, Mark and Vic stand outside the same shop.



'If you are hunting deep in the mountains and break your leg and your life ends there, at least the guy who finds you will know you had a Ruana knife.'

Ryan, an active hunter

but are purchased by collectors as art objects and investments.

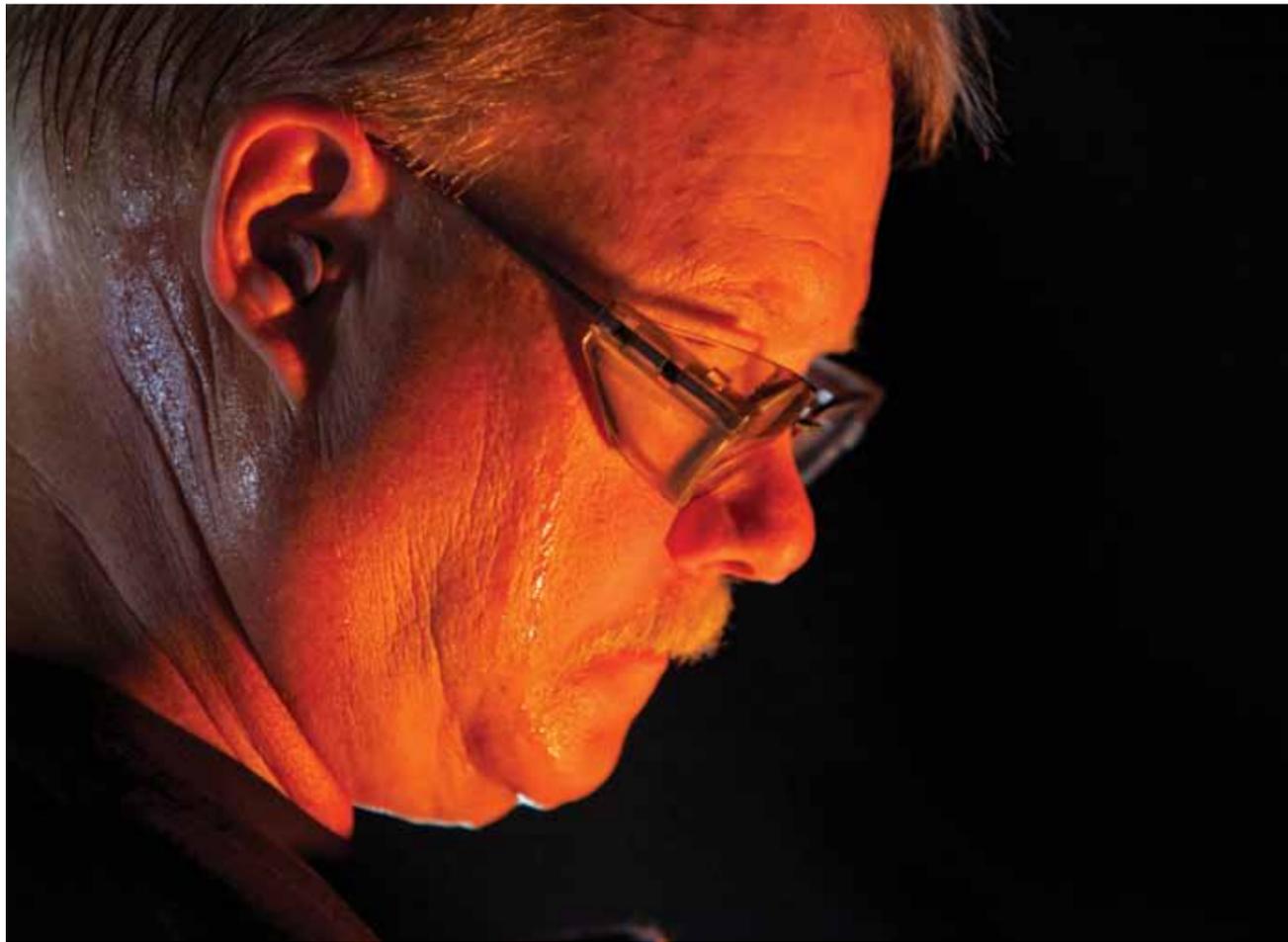
But hunters do take pride using their Ruana knives. My avid hunting friend, Ryan, claims, "If you are hunting deep in the mountains and break your leg and your life ends there, at least the guy who finds you will know you had a Ruana knife."

The Hargas family's nondescript garage is a mecca for hunters who revere Ruana knives. On one of my visits to the shop, Jerry from Georgia and his son, George, from Virginia, stopped by on their way to an early hunt in the Bob Marshall Wilderness. Jerry has a Ruana custom skinner he bought 35 years ago in Anchorage, Alaska. "I coveted it for six months and finally bought it for \$36. I've been beating it up elk hunting ever since. It is everything you could possibly want in a knife," he says.

Vic says there are a lot of Georgia hunters with Ruana knives, but Jerry jokes that they don't fess up to owning a Ruana because they'd be seen as affluent.

Mike leads the men into a small showroom that features framed photos of famous Ruana knife owners—he is especially proud of a photo and note from golf legend Jack Nicklaus. A signed life-size cardboard cutout of Howie Long—who owns a knife crafted especially to the size of his hand—dominates one wall. But the small knife showcase is nearly empty and often there are no knives on hand for drop-in buyers. Catalog knives are usually made to order and custom orders can take up to a year or more.

Vic says the knives are not only their family's livelihood, but also part of the legacy of West Riverside. Rudy Ruana, ▶



Sweat beads on the face of Mark Hangas, 54, as he runs the shop forge.

a crusty Finn with a sixth-grade education, landed in Bonner with his family in 1938 while en route to Seattle to seek work. According to Vic, Rudy—who would later become his father-in-law—only had \$40 and a trailer with the family’s belongings. The hitch broke as they crossed the Blackfoot River near the Anaconda Company mill and the family was forced to spend the night in a horse barn. The next day, Rudy went to a local garage and asked to use the shop to weld his trailer hitch. Not only did the owner let Rudy use his welder, but he was so impressed with Rudy’s skills that he offered him a job. Rudy never left and spent much of his adult life in that same garage, welding and eventually building his knife business.

Rudy bought the garage in 1952 and started making knives full-time as Ruana Knife Works. The metal for Rudy’s early knives came from Studebaker leaf springs. He worked with Vic, Mike and Mark until he was 80 years old. Today, Rudy’s shop is nearly exactly as it was when he started making knives. According to Mike, his grandfather had a gift for building unique machines for his craft like the washing machine motor that runs a grinder.

Ruana Knife Works is an important remnant of the Finnish community in West Riverside. Bonner,

Milltown and West Riverside straddle the confluence of the Blackfoot and Clark Fork rivers just upstream from Missoula. Vic, also of Finnish stock, started working with Rudy in 1964 and purchased the business in 1984. Mark started working for his grandfather in 1976, and it’s the only work he’s ever had. Both Mike and Vic say that he’s a perfectionist with remarkable talent. Mark is the detail person and Mike, with his business degrees, runs the operation in addition to crafting the handles and sheaths. He says the business is built by word of mouth and has only rarely advertised.

Vic, Mark and Mike make 750-800 knives a year including occasional limited-edition models that are popular with knife collectors. In 2013, the business will mark its 75th year and a special knife will commemorate that milestone.

The Hangases have tried to speed up some of the processes, but to create a handmade product, much of the labor can’t be rushed. All are down-to-earth, hard-working Montana craftsmen and it shows in their products. When asked what he’s most proud of in the business, Vic replies, “My sons and the work ethic that has kept this going.” **M**

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