

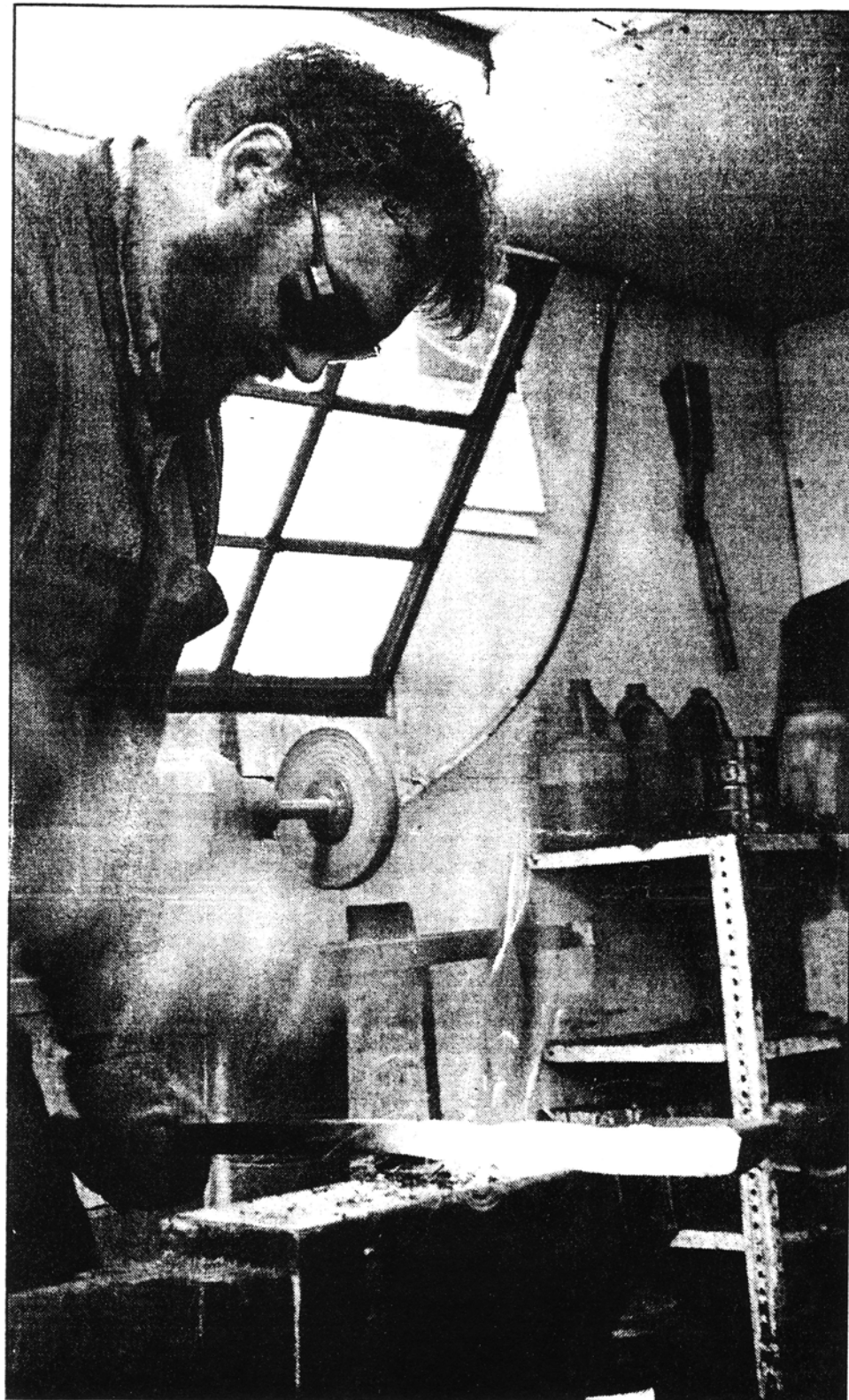
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Roger Kane/LOG photo

Virgil Campbell forges a steel cable into a Damascus knife blade. Campbell will take the cable through roughly 50 steps before finishing the blade.

The independent guy

Knife-maker has always done it his way

By Roger Kane

LOG Staff

Being independent is nothing new to knife-maker Virgil Campbell. In 1973, while still in high school, Campbell moved away from home to live with schoolmates Jerry and Mike Fillingim in a cabin near Healy. Campbell recalled the cabin as pretty basic, with wood heat and no electricity.

The house did have running water though — not far away was a small stream, he joked.

"It got so cold we'd be sitting on the backs of the chairs" to be as close to the ceiling as possible, because that's where

the heat was, he said.

Campbell also said the three of them were on the basketball team, so they would stay at school late every night and shoot baskets, to stay as warm as they could for as long as they could.

The hot school lunches were also very welcome, he said. And once the cafeteria workers learned the boys were living as they were, they would feed the trio extra helpings for the same 25 cents.

By the middle of winter his buddies gave up the nightly moose-meat meal and the cabin's rustic charm and moved back to their parents' home. Undaunted,

Campbell remained where he was.

"After those guys left it got pretty grim," he said. But he made it through the winter and spring and graduated from high school, completing his senior year on his own.

Taking those first independent steps, he would have had no way of knowing that more than two decades later, he'd be crafting knives under the name I.R.B.I., an acronym for I'd Rather Be Independent.

"His dad (Irwin) came up with that. He'll be 78 this summer and is still making some knives," said Dawn Campbell, Virgil's wife of 20 years.

Irwin started I.R.B.I. in 1971 in a log building he used to call The Kenai Lake Tourist Trap. The Tourist Trap catered to the tourist palate, selling novelties, T-shirts and knives, among other items.

In 1971, Irwin decided to sell knives that he manufactured, as well as other family-made items, and the line of tourist novelties was discontinued. Irwin's wife, Clara, now deceased, made all the knife sheaths.

The store is pretty much the same today as it was then. After making and selling more than 13,000 knives, Irwin sold the shop to Virgil and Dawn, who are carrying on the family tradition of husband and wife knife-making team.

Virgil uses the same techniques his father taught him, and has made upward of 5,000 knives. Dawn does the leatherwork as she was taught by Clara.

"His mom taught me. Officially I've been doing the leatherwork for six and a half years." Dawn said she loves the idea of being the second-generation husband and wife team.

"We do our own heat-treating," Virgil said, and although the blades he makes will rust if not taken care of, he has no desire to work with stainless steel.

The knife handles are made of just about anything imaginable. The Campbells use 40 different types of hardwood, bone, fossilized bone, and deer, moose, caribou and elk antlers. Sheep horns, water buffalo horns and man-made materials are also used. They've even used cactus stalks.

Carbon steel is the material of choice for I.R.B.I. blades, and all

the edges are flat-ground.

"We just don't like hollow-ground blades. My dad learned flat-ground and he taught me how to do it. And the blades are easy to sharpen," he said.

Most commonly the blades are forged from 5160 spring steel. Virgil also uses chain saw bars, elevator cables and auto-engine timing chains.

Using steel cable, Virgil makes Damascus blades. The cable is heated in the forge, then covered in borax and pounded with a ham-

mer on an anvil. Virgil repeats this process four or five times, before the cable becomes solid and the strands of wire begin to disappear.

Once the cable is pounded solid, it is again covered with borax and reheated, but this time when he pulls the cable from the forge, he puts it in a trip-hammer. The trip-hammer he uses is a 95-year-old electric hammer with a 50-pound hammerhead.

The trip-hammer turns the former cable, now folded in half, into a solid, workable piece of steel.

A true Damascus knife blade has 512 layers of steel laminated together. Virgil said he's never counted the strands of wire in a cable to see how many layers a final blade has, but guesses there are somewhere around 400 strands. Pounded flat, then folded over, the number of layers doubles to somewhere around 800.

He also uses 52100 bearing steel — the same material ball bearings are made of.

"That's hard stuff to work with," Virgil said.

As are some clients who spe-

cial-order knives. He said he's willing to do custom orders, but now he makes sure to tell his customers to leave him some leeway as to his knives' final sizes.

He said he never had to inform customers that they were getting one-of-a-kind, hand-made pieces that were not precisely measured, until not long ago.

He made a knife for one customer who showed up for the finished product with a tape measure and exacting specifications. He inspected the blade and complained that it was one-eighth of an inch longer than he ordered and what was Virgil going to do about that.

Virgil said, "I put the knife back in the display case and closed it up. The guy asked me if I was going to make him another knife. 'No, I'm not,' I said."

So a word to the wise, don't show up for your custom order with tape measure in hand. Leave your micrometer at home and be ready to appreciate a one-of-a-kind knife, expertly crafted by an independent knife-maker.