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CASE'S BANK STREET BEAUTIES

by Gary Moore

Sometimes it seems that the phrase "Made in America" is fast becoming a thing of the past. Though I have always held to that old adage of viewing the glass as half full and not half empty, I must confess that the demise of several very old companies in recent years really troubles me a lot. To see the loss of old American icons like Schrade and Camillus, where American made knives were produced for decades, is almost like losing a family member. Not to mention, U.S. Repeating Arms (Winchester) where American made rifles and shotguns have been made

for over 140 years. Yes, I know the right to use these old names have been purchased and the "name" is again being used, but in many cases the products are being produced in foreign countries, and dog-gone it, to me at least that just doesn't fill the bill.

Call me a purist or old fashioned or whatever suits your fancy, but in my case at least I will concede that the old saying, "it's hard to teach an old dog new tricks" has never before been more true. As I grow older my constitution seems to need the proverbial things more than ever before. I mean is it just me,

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This Case 6151L is handled in what collectors affectionately refer to as "old Rogers bone." Marked W.R. CASE & SONS, it was made at Case's Bank Street factory between about 1905 and 1914.

Traditional Knives by Rick Menefee

by Mike Robuck

Rick Menefee is an amalgam of custom knife-maker ingredients — including talent, drive, humility, and experience with a dash of redneck humor thrown in for good measure — that combined have him on the verge of joining an elite circle of traditional knife makers.

Menefee doesn't have to look too far for inspiration when he's making traditional pocketknives in his Blanchard, Oklahoma shop because there's usually 15 to 20 vintage knives on his bench and a stack of old knife catalogue reprints nearby.

Menefee, 37, started

making traditional pocketknives three years ago, but he has come a long way in that short amount of time, and he'll be the first to tell you that he still has a long way to go, but his passion for pocketknives started when he was a kid.

"My granddad was really heavy into old Schrade and Case knives," Menefee said. "I was six or seven years old when he started giving me those knives. It kind of piqued my interest and it has just stayed with me ever since. I love traditional slipjoints.

"I made some fixed
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Photo by Kerry Hampton

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 blades when I was a little kid. I'd buy kits and put them together. I was probably 10 years old when I started doing that and it

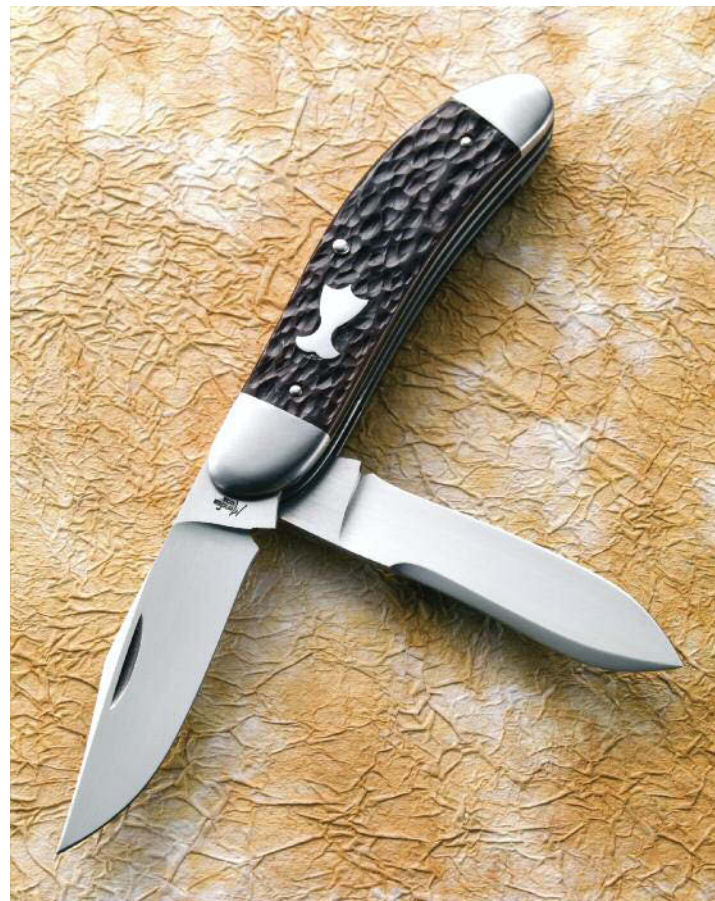
just kind of continued. I probably ground my first blades on a real knife grinder 15 or 16 years ago."

Menefee spent years

making fixed blades, but in the back of his mind he always knew he would make traditional pocketknives. Like a baseball player in the minor



Rick Menefee barehead gunstock jack with cocobolo handles, rattail bolster and an exaggerated gimp shield. The extended clip of the master blade really sets this beauty apart. Photo by Kayla Minchew.



Menefee's "Wichita Trapper" is an interesting creation, a modern looking hybrid of a soubelley frame with trapper-like blades. Photo by PointSeven.

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leagues, he literally honed his craft grinding fixed blades, which also included grinding blades for supply houses.

Menefee was learning to be a knifemaker on his own while also holding down his day job as federal trapper for the USDA. Menefee, who graduated

from college with a degree in wildlife conservation and wildlife law enforcement, knows first hand what makes a knife perform well in the field from his work as a trapper.

"I had read some books early on, and when I first started with the govern-

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This dogleg jack features fossil ivory handle scales, a long pull spear master blade and a small wharncliffe in place of the usual pen blade. PointSeven photo.

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 ment I was pretty poor," he said. "I saved for about a year for my first grinding machine and after I got that then I probably ground knives for a year and never really produced anything.

"I really didn't know anybody and I was just trying to grind on my own. I started figuring out that there were other knife-makers around that did this stuff."

One of Menefee's earliest mentors on fixed blades was George Englebretson, who lived in Oklahoma City. Englebretson helped Menefee with the fixed blades and also introduced him to Dan Burke, who is

an award-winning traditional pocketknife maker in his own right. Menefee wanted to start making traditional pocketknives, but the school of hard knocks for fixed blades came first, including "ruining enough stag to make you want to vomit."

"I've worked with my hands my whole life and I've built lot of things, but I needed to get to a certain point before I could build a slipjoint," he said. "There are more mechanics with slipjoints and they're more intriguing to me. I've made so many fixed blades that it just got to be second nature. I'm not saying it's easy, but it just didn't fascinate me. There is only so much you can do



Classic two blade saddlehorn with ebony scales, crest shield and rattail bolster. Photo by Bob Glassman, Custom Knife Gallery of Colorado.



Rick Menefee at work, using one of his homemade grinders.



Menefee Made pocketknife blades coming out of the liquid nitrogen cryogenic quench. A cryo quench after heat treatment helps impart more durability.

with them.

"With slipjoints, when I got to the point where I

could grind really nice, thin blades, like little pen blades, then I started to

pursue it. I spent probably a year before I made my

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first one because I was trying to figure out some of the problems I was fixing to start having before I even made one."

Menefee also commiserated with Todd Davidson and Bret Dowell, who were pretty much on the same trajectory with building traditional pocketknives.

"The same problems were going through at the

same time for all of us," Menefee said. "Todd Davidson has heard me throw fits like a two-year old baby. The way I looked at it, if I found a problem I tried to attack it and do the best I could do on it."

Menefee also started get more direct help from Dan Burke, who at the time also lived in Oklahoma.

"Rick has really come a

long ways, and I'm real proud that I was able to help some," Burke said. "Whether everybody wants to admit it or not slipjoints are the most difficult knives to make, without question. There are all kinds of guys out there who say they want to do this and then when it gets a little bit difficult they throw up their hands and do something else.

"Rick's real determined. I think that in time Rick will be one of the top makers in the United States. He has that kind of desire and that's what it takes. It takes talent and a lot of hard work, but Rick has got that ability. He's an Oklahoma redneck, but he's a first class guy. If he tells you something you can take it to the bank."

Menefee also received

knife patterns from Burke, as well as from Tony Bose. He said he currently has 50 to 60 patterns, which also include some of his own patterns. Burke introduced Menefee to Bose.

"I talk to both of them weekly and they're just a wealth of information," Menefee said. "If I have a problem I can call either of them. They're an unlimited resource and they never ask for nothing. I can call either one of them and they'll tell me whatever I need to know. I'm fortunate."

"Some of these older guys, guys like Gary Crowder and Gerald Nichols, pioneered the new high-end materials, the equipment and stuff like that. They had a lot of it already figured out before I started. They took probably 10 or 15 years off the learning curve for me because I already knew what I needed to Rockwell the springs at, or how to use fly cutters to cut nail nicks in with. I listened to everything that they said."

So with his vintage knives, catalogues and the likes of Bose and Burke in his corner, Menefee started making traditional pocketknives, mainly single-blade shadow patterns with micarta scales for the first few years. Menefee liked making the single-blade patterns because they were good using knives, but Burke pushed him to aim higher.

"Rick really likes shadow patterns and for a working knife they're excellent but I said 'Rick if you're going to sell knives to collectors the guy who buys shadow patterns is probably going to buy one or two and that's probably going to be it,'" Burke said. "Guys who buy a lot of knives want different patterns and you have to step up to the next level and the next level and the next level."

"Rick is really good about that. He reaches. Not everyone continues to reach. They find a soft easy spot and that's where they stay, but Rick really is aggressive about trying to get to the next level and that's why I think Rick will eventually be one of the premier knifemakers. He's got a ways to go, but

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Rick Menefee with the head of ranch security, designated hunting dog and shop dog "Sam."

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it takes a while to get there."

Over the past year, Menefee has stepped his knifemaking game up. His patterns now include stockman knives, dogleg jacks, trappers, sowbellies, and even fixed blade kitchen knives. He is working on split-spring whittlers and vows to have a five-blade sowbelly made before the year is out.

"One of the hardest patterns for me, for some reason, are the teardrops, because getting every-

thing symmetrical from side to side is tough," he said. "Those smaller knives you take off a little material here or there and it changes things a lot more. I made some lobster knives and they were the toughest ones I've ever made."

He has a stash of Utica and Remington bone, and he can jig and dye his own bone scales when he needs to for a bigger pattern. He also has stag, ebony and mammoth ivory scale material as well and while customers can order whatever they want, he prefers



Four-inch coke bottle with double pull master blade, crest shield and rattail bolster. Jugged bone handles are the maker's own creation. Photo by Bob Glassman, Custom Knife Gallery of Colorado.

micarta.

"I've used it all, including pearl, but for me the best handle material is micarta," he said "No doubt. I can take a hammer out to the shop and hit a piece of stag or bone and it will fly into a thousand pieces. I can take a sledgehammer and beat that micarta all day. Moisture, humidity, it's not sensitive to anything. It doesn't shrink. It's won-

derful stuff."

Menefee said he mainly uses 154CM steel on his blades, as well as some D2 and ATS-34. The springs are made out of 154CM while the blades and springs Rockwell at 59 and 50, respectively. "Everything gets one or two cryo cycles and everything is double drawn," he said.

The majority of his hollow-ground blades come

with polished belt finishes, but customers can also request hand finishes. The tangs are stamped with "Menefee Made."

After buying his first Burr King grinder, Menefee proceeded to make five more grinders to use in his shop. He's been known to have all five running at once as he goes from belt to belt to grind and finish knives.

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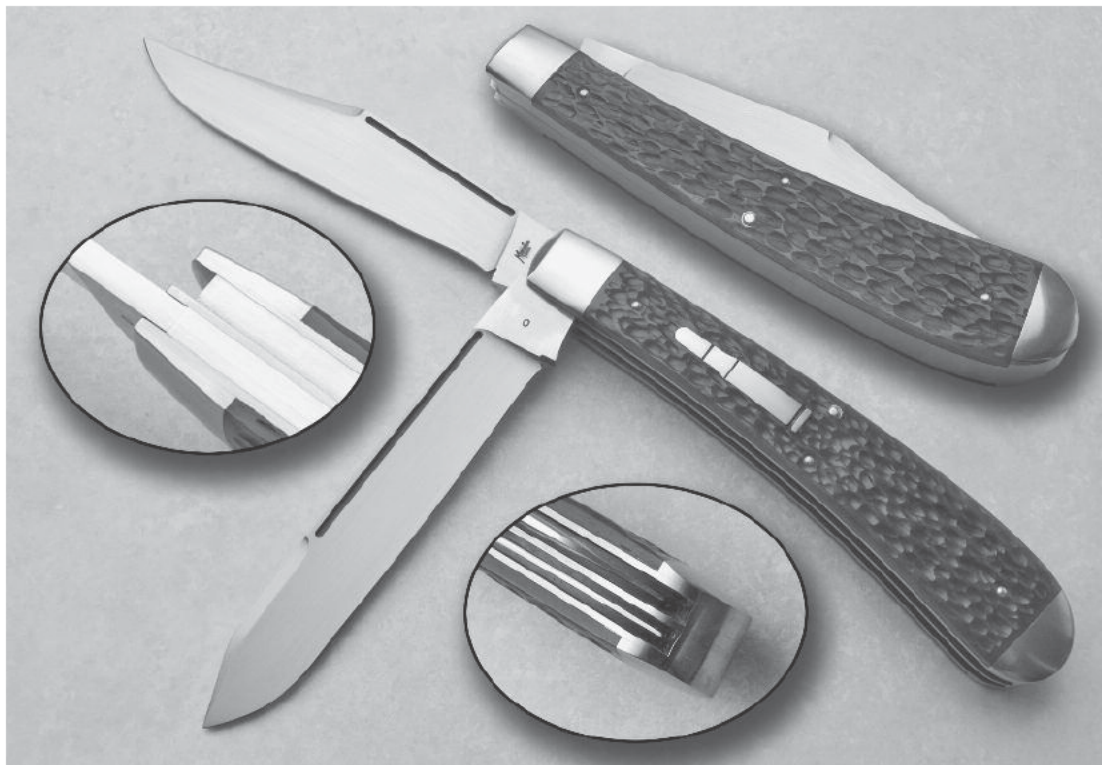
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Rick Menefee's version of an American classic, the Remington R293 Hunter-Trapper-Trapper Bullet knife from the 1920s. The Menefee Made version features such details as liners relieved around the blade joint. Bob Glassman photo.

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 "Basically everything in my shop but that Burr King I've built or re-built," he said.
 "The milling machines, metal lathes, I would tear them completely down, take every nut and bolt out of them and then rebuild them like they came out of the showroom floor. Then once I got that

done I would use those machines to make more machines."
 Menefee has an assortment of shields that he makes on a pantograph mill, which he also uses to inlet the shields, that he crafted out of two other machines.
 It's a family affair in Menefee's shop. His younger brother, Rocky,

has been making knives for about a year and his daughters, 8-year-old McKenzie and 4-year old Ryen, help keep the shop clean. His wife, Barbara, is an art teacher who keeps a close eye on his work.
 "She lays it out right quick if something doesn't look right," he said. "She can see lines and how



Another interpretation of a classic from the past, the Cattaraugus Yukon pattern as made by Oklahoma's Rick Menefee. Photo by Kayla Minchew.

things flow and she handles every knife I make."
 When not in his shop or at his other job as a government trapper, Menefee likes to spend time with his family, do long-range shooting sports, as well as go hunting and fishing.

In addition to studying vintage knives, Menefee also said he relies on knowledgeable collectors to help him improve.

"I wanted to surround myself with collectors who knew about this stuff," he said. "I'm just a knifemaker and I like knives, but there are a lot of guys that have spent half their lives studying knives and really have a love for them. Those are the guys who know what something is supposed to look like, or how it's supposed to be made. I don't understand why a lot of knifemakers don't emphasize that. I think that's one of the best learning tools we have."

Menefee said that when he first started making traditional pocketknives he wasn't even sure if a knife would come out right before he was done. He has more peace of mind now, but he said he wanted to continue on the learning curve with better mechanics, finishes and

more elaborate patterns.
 Bose said that while talent was important, a truly successful knifemaker needs to have a bad case of the "want tos," and that Menefee has that ingredient.

"To start with I think Rick Menefee is a real deal guy," Tony Bose said. "I think he was born with that knife gene that I've got and that some others have got where he just really likes them. He calls once in a while with a problem and I tell him what I think he should do to fix it. I will say this for him, he is a really good listener. He takes advice easily and he takes criticism easily. If you see something you think he should do and you tell him about it he doesn't get all bowed up like a tomcat."

"Rick's goals were similar to mine. He's not interested in being a big dog. Anytime you're interested in that you're probably not going to be one because that just comes with time. I think he's a pretty good maker and I think he's going to be around for a while."

Menefee can be reached by phone at 405-485-4529 or by email at rmenefee@pldi.net. □

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