



Yoshiko sees that her husband is properly dressed on trips to Japan, where he is regarded as a sensei.

ping flint into cutting edges before he invented the wheel. No matter how sophisticated we become, a knife takes us back to the cave.

"I can see myself as a Neanderthal flint chipper sitting by the fire in the night. It was the first specialized labor in human history. Maybe I knew where the best flint was, or how to flake it better than anyone else. My lineage goes back before what we call the oldest profession. It's a craft at least 30,000 years old. When people wonder how a man can spend his life making hunting knives, they should remember that. It's a gloriously venerable occupation."

Turning one of his knives over in his hand, Loveless says, "If people think my knives are better than anyone else's, there's a reason. A knife is an extension of your experience. And I've had more intense experiences than most people. There's more character running in my veins."

If character built on hard experience

is what it takes to become a celebrated knifemaker, Loveless has been working at his profession all his life. Born in 1929, he lived through the Depression on his grandparents' 17-acre farm near Warren, in northeastern Ohio. When he was 14, he altered his birth certificate and joined the Merchant Marine. In the waterfront bars of several foreign ports he witnessed some knife fights, which intensified his interest in these weapons, and he experimented with improving them. During the early part of World War II, he sailed in the Merchant Marine; later he became an Air Corps control tower operator on Iwo Jima.

In the early '50s Loveless attended the Institute of Design in Chicago, the last enclave of architects, artists and designers of the Bauhaus school. He studied product design and took a course taught by the famed architect Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. Most of all he was indoctrinated in one of the Bauhaus school's holiest beliefs: form follows function.

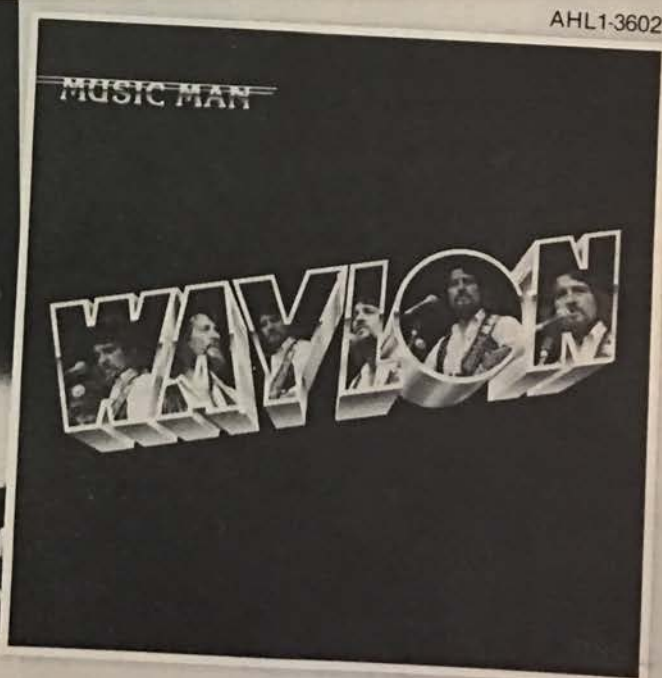
Loveless went back to Ohio and studied literature and sociology at Kent State for a while but soon wound up sailing again, this time on a tanker homeported in New York. "I went to Abercrombie & Fitch to buy a really good sheath knife," he recalls. "We used knives hard aboard ship. I saw a beautiful Randall knife. Bo Randall was the man in knives in those days. His shop in Orlando was a legend. But the salesman told me that the Randall was only for display. There was a nine-month waiting period to get one. I thought to hell with it, it can't be so hard. I'll make my own."

Using a piece of leaf spring from a 1938 Packard, Loveless forged his own blade on the oil-fired galley stove of the ship. Pleased with the results, he presented his work to the head of the Abercrombie & Fitch cutlery department, who was impressed by this first effort. Soon Loveless was a full-time knifemaker, settled in Claymont, Del. From 1954 to 1960 he turned out more than a thou-

continued



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sand hand-forged knives called Delaware Maids for the New York store, and they became one of Abercrombie & Fitch's best-selling handmade items, outselling the Randall blades. Loveless' early efforts, he admits, were copies of Randall designs. But in the mid-'60s he achieved the breakthrough that would make him the king of the knifemen and would revolutionize the design and crafting of sporting cutlery.

Randalls were great, heavy knives, with lethal if unwieldy six- and seven-inch blades. They were the knives that helped win the Island War in the Pacific. Novelist James Jones collected Randall knives and wrote about one in *Some Came Running*.

But Loveless felt that Randall's combat knives were too fragile and unbalanced for a hunter's fine work, in which the skinning of a trophy animal, particularly the delicate work around antlers, nose and eyes, is critical. As to how he hit on the solution, Loveless says, "Most creative work is done by *not* walking up to the front door of a problem. It's usually more productive to go round behind the barn and have a nap in the grass." The result of this theory of creativity was the Loveless four-inch "dropped hunter" knife.

"Dropped" refers, in this case, to the point of the knife, which drops away from the back of the blade, allowing the knife to be worked blade upward, sliding under a deer's hide, for instance, without damaging the flesh. After just a few years the design has become widely imitated by both commercial and handmade cutlery the world over.

On the way to his moment of genius, Loveless gave himself a thorough course in metallurgy. He was the first knifemaker to develop his own special-melt steel—a highly alloyed (silicon and manganese were the main additives) tool steel—instead of using the less sophisticated Swedish variety, which was standard at the time.

Loveless pared inches and ounces from the hunting knife, determining from his own experience and that of a number of hunters and guides that four inches was enough blade, that anything more would be too difficult to control precisely. His current designs have shrunk to 3¼ inches.

More important, Loveless found, in exploring an abandoned 19th-century

technique, the strength and balance that would allow the smaller, thinner blade to stand up to the rigors of field use. The technique is called the full-tapered-tang method and was originally required to offset the weaknesses of steel softer than what is now available. Before Loveless, the tang of a modern steel knife was often ground down to a point half the length of the handle. The result of this was often an unbalanced tool with a weak handle mounting. Loveless refined the disused full-tang technique, tapering the butt end of the tang, which runs the length of the handle, down to one-sixteenth of an inch. Just as the Loveless blade was thinner and lighter at the tip, so the butt of the handle would be similarly light, concentrating the weight perfectly at the center of the knife. And the handle then became two thin slabs of material attached like halves of a pistol grip to the tang, instead of a great lump of stag or ivory and brass.

In the master's self-described "howling egotist" mode, which comes on him for brief periods daily, he'll enthuse, "The tapered tang is a beautiful concept. You have this full thickness where you need it—at the hilt, where the stresses are greatest. Meanwhile, your hand is controlling the tip of the knife through the length of the handle. When people say that a Loveless knife feels better than another, that's what they're experiencing."

Loveless also affixes his mark—an important aspect of bench-made knives—in a different manner from most other cutlery. R.W. LOVELESS, MAKER, RIVERSIDE, CALIFORNIA is acid-etched on the blade, not stamped on the knife, so there is no chance of stress fractures occurring. A few Loveless knives carry, in addition to his mark, the figure of a reclining nude woman. Loveless won't say why she's on some and not on others; he just smiles gummily, his eyes twinkling.

Another Loveless advance brings the sheath to a functional art form. "I hate to have to fumble around unsnapping one of those keeper straps that hold a handle," he says, "so I borrowed a design of wet-forming leather around each knife, sewing in a welt to keep the knife in place. Enough of the handle sticks out so that you can get it with one hand, and the damn thing will never fall out."

Add to all this the superior craftsmanship of Loveless' hands and his unforgiv-

ing eye for detail, and you have the state of the art in knifedom today. "One of my knives in its sheath is about the neatest package in all of design," he says. "I make one of the finest tools in the world. A knife is as personal and necessary a thing as a man ever owns, and, by God, I don't have to apologize to anyone."

In fact, if there is any apologizing to be done, Loveless figures that it is owed to him by customers who refuse to treat his work as something of utility, who put his knives in cases and "fondle and drool over them."

"Ninety percent of my knives aren't used!" he exclaims. "And, damn it, they should be out working. That's why I make them. When some old cowboy or guide comes back to me with a knife that's worn down to a nub and he says, 'That thing fit my hand better than any knife I'd ever had, and it worked longer, too,' that's fame. That's what I'm on earth for. A knife is a tool, and if we don't treat our tools with a certain familiar contempt, we lose perspective."

Loveless has developed some unique ways to foil collectors who only want to display his knives. In his shop is a collection of handle materials sent to him by customers. In fact, handles are about the only things on a Loveless knife you can specify. "I'm a *bench* maker," he insists. "A *custom* maker is a guy who'll tailor a knife to your specifications. I only make my own designs."

While he'll attach slabs of manatee rib, walrus ivory, rare woods and stag, elk and sheep horn to knives, Loveless' standard material—the stuff one will get unless one tells him otherwise—is a synthetic called Micarta, a close relative of fiber glass, made from layers of cotton cloth and phenolic resins. "All the so-called 'natural' stuff like stag and ivory eventually shrinks and cracks," Loveless says. "But that damn Micarta never does. Those handles will outlast the collectors and maybe get back in the hands of sportsmen and working guys a hundred years from now." Although Loveless does not say it, one senses that durability is not the whole reason for the plastic handles. He knows that collectors look down on so plebeian a material. It's the handle of a beer drinker, while ivory is the champagne of materials.

When Loveless began using his steel in blades, it rusted rather easily, and therefore it was polished to a mirror fin-