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HOW TO BUY CUSTOM KNIVES

PART VI

PURVEYORS WITH
STRONG HISTORIES AND
SOLID REPUTATIONS
BRING A LOT TO
THE TABLE

"I expect purveyors to be able to place me in contact with others within their network for such services as photography, engraving and scrimshanding," collector J.T. Oldham observed. Chantal Schaschl supplied the engraving on a folder by Simon & Jakob Nylund. (SharpByCoop image)



J.T. Oldham praised purveyor Michael Donato (above) for extending his services beyond the ordinary by offering a special custom knife maintenance and care kit.



Collector Chris Schluter said for someone new to the hobby, a good purveyor can serve as a tremendous resource.

In the custom-knife-collecting realm, the purveyor, dealer or middleman often plays a crucial role in delivering the sought-after work of a knifemaker to the buyer who most appreciates the work and is willing to pay a reasonable price to obtain it.

While a great deal of buying and selling occurs directly between the maker and the collector—or between collectors themselves—purveyors often bring interested parties together. They have access to a variety of custom knives that might otherwise be physically out of reach for a collector. For example, drawings at shows limit the access a collector has to a particular maker's knives. Further, makers often work with backlogs of months or even years. When collectors must wait, they sacrifice the enjoyment and satisfaction of ownership for an indefinite period of time.

The purveyor changes the paradigm, making knives from a maker available more readily and selling them at market prices. Remember that the definition of *market value* comprises an equally motivated buyer and seller. Therefore, the purveyor is indispensable to the health and vitality of the custom knife community.

And that brings on a few basic questions in dealing with purveyors: choosing the right one, managing expectations, understanding warranties or guarantees, and purchasing with confidence.



In the case of a rare or historically significant knife, a good purveyor likely will offer a written history or provide a certificate of authenticity. Here's a knife by Bill Moran (inset) with added historical cachet—the one he forged celebrating 50 years of bladesmithing. (Eric Eggly/PointSeven knife image)

PETTING the PEEVES

"A good dealer will know their customers and let them know when they have something of interest," collector Chris Schluter explained. "More importantly, a good dealer who knows their customers will know exactly what their quirks or pet peeves are and point out any issues before a sale. A good dealer will be able to accurately describe the knife, its dimensions, materials, action, lockup and such. They should also be able to answer general questions about the maker and the maker's experience. In short, a dealer should be able to provide

all the details about a knife."

Schluter makes these observations while acknowledging that with social media, the buying experience is sometimes a brave new world. Makers might post their wares on websites and the purchaser/collector might go direct. However, there might be scant information provided on the knife's critical aspects.

"Ironically, this is exactly the information that's often missing when a knife is for sale on social media," Schluter said. "For someone who's not comfortable with social media, or just



doesn't have the time or patience to keep following all the latest posts and getting the timing right to be on a maker's page when there's a sale or lottery, a dealer can be the perfect solution. Conversely, for someone new to the hobby, a good dealer can serve as a tremendous resource."

SIGNS of GOOD ONES

Deciding on a purveyor is an exercise in developing trust and appreciating a level of expertise in the marketplace. Of course, the reputation of honesty, straight shooting and honoring commitments are all givens.

“I’ve used purveyors frequently,” commented collector J.T. Oldham. “It was a purveyor who brought me my first *BLADE*® article knife—the Kelly Carlson Niobium Icicle. As many knife deals go, a purveyor acquires a knife from a maker or another dealer, and that knife might either be flipped for an immediate profit or taken out of circulation to enhance future value. In the case of this particular knife, I happened to be with a purveyor who’d purchased it as a last-minute deal as a show was closing. He saw a chance to turn a quick profit and help consolidate his expenses for the weekend, and I had

"A purveyor found a rare Loveless knife for me that was owned by another purveyor," collector Kevin Jones recalled. "He didn't even charge me a finder's fee!" Introduced at the 1979 Knifemakers' Guild Show, this rare Loveless knife includes artwork by Leonard Leibowitz. Only 12 were made. (SharpByCoop image)



Purveyors can, in fact, deliver a collector's dream. So what separates a good purveyor from a sketchy one?

“I look for purveyors who are knowledgeable and offer knives from the knifemakers and knife manufacturers whose knives I use and collect,” collector Kevin Jones explained. “I also look for purveyors who are knowledgeable on knifemakers’ primary and secondary markets and on the custom knife marketplace in general. A good purveyor should offer knives for sale and have a process for helping collectors sell their knives on a commission basis.”

Longtime collector Larry Marton agrees that integrity and knowledge are "twin pillars" for an established purveyor. Potential buyers should feel free to ask questions of a purveyor,

particularly why a certain knife should fetch its asking price. "It goes back to honesty being a significant baseline," he noted. "I've used purveyors whom I've known for many years and who were both friends and legitimate professionals."

Added Oldham, "One thing I've learned is that it pays to take people at their word. Give them an opportunity to prove themselves worthy of your trust and your hard-earned money. In addition, custom knifemakers are artists, and purchasing a custom knife is making an art purchase. It's not like buying a new or used automobile. When it comes to knives, the purveyor must show finesse in showcasing the knife and in closing the deal. How they close and what kind of deal they're willing to offer are hallmarks of any good salesman."

The purveyor works in other ways, too. Collectors routinely wish to sell individual knives or entire groups of knives, and employing a purveyor is the most effective means of accomplishing



Though knife lotteries/drawings have their place, they limit the access a collector has to a specific maker's knives. Ernest Emerson conducts a lottery at a past USN Gathering.

the business at hand. In the process, trust is developed on another level.

Marton pointed out that “there needs to be a clear understanding of the commission the purveyor will take, whether the knives in his/her possession are insured, and that if there’s a change of heart, the knives will be returned. I’ve been fortunate to have known and befriended a number of purveyors over the many years I’ve been collecting. Had that not been the case, then meeting and calling the purveyor and discussing the sale of your knives or the purchase of knives they are representing is critical. One should come away from the meeting or call with a sense of comfort about the transaction.”

CONDUIT and CATALYST

In their purest form, purveyors are neither fish nor fowl, collectors nor knifemakers. Truly serving as the conduit and a catalyst for a robust marketplace, they provide an array of services, along with the actual transaction. These services should extend beyond the basic.

“I expect purveyors to be able to place me in contact with others within his network for such services as photography, engraving and scrimshanding,” Oldham explained. “Another beneficial area might be in providing a reference or referral in contacting a particular maker with whom they might be friendly or enjoy a good working relationship. A simple introduction, perhaps, is particularly helpful with international knifemakers.”

Oldham indicated other purveyor attributes bring added value to the market. Leads on available knives spark interest and generate transactions. Purveyors who are “plugged in” will share information on the latest buzz, what they know and what’s happening in the custom arena. “Maybe you just missed a knife that you wanted, and they know where you might find another similar knife. They might also assist you in tracking down a particular knife that might prove somewhat elusive. Always be prepared to extend a commission for this courtesy.”

Oldham said he knows a purveyor, Michael Donato, who offers a custom knife care kit—actually extending his services beyond the ordinary. “I can’t think of a better service than that,”



According to collector Kevin Jones (above), a good purveyor should offer knives for sale and have a process for helping collectors sell their knives on a commission basis.

he opined. “This is the mark of a first-rate, high-caliber purveyor and, in my estimation, this gentleman, in particular, occupies the very highest rank.”

VALUE CONSIDERATIONS

One of the most obvious complaints purveyors encounter concerns the age-old conundrum of value. Is the engagement of a purveyor worth a premium? Well, that all depends on the tenor of the transaction and the satisfaction—or lack thereof—the buyer feels after its conclusion.

“You shouldn’t expect purveyors to be less expensive than buying directly from the knifemaker,” Jones asserted. “They provide a service and should be compensated for it. Having said that, purveyors should work with knifemakers for volume discounts so they’re not too much above maker-direct pricing. Purveyors should make a reasonable profit over what a knifemaker charges them for knives—they’re in business to make a profit, just as with any other business. But, I expect them to negotiate volume discount pricing so they don’t have to charge too much over what a collector can purchase knives for directly from the knifemaker.”

When the situation goes south—and inevitably, from time to time, it

does—the purveyor with staying power stands up. Now, this assertion doesn’t apply only to a dealer, it applies to everyone involved in the making, sale and ultimate satisfaction derived by the owner. Certainly, on occasion issues arise, as they do with any endeavor.

Schluter pointed out, “Sometimes, a problem might develop with a knife over time, and the knife will need to be returned to the maker. A good dealer might communicate with the maker and facilitate a repair for the customer. Personally, I think I can count on one hand the number of times I’ve returned a custom knife, but it has happened. However, it’s always worked out.”

Jones has never had a bad experience with a purveyor. In fact, one really good experience stands out in his memory. “A purveyor found a rare Loveless knife for me that was owned by another purveyor,” he recalled. “He didn’t even charge me a finder’s fee!” Talk about added value!

SHARP CRED

In the case of a rare or historically significant knife, a purveyor will likely offer a written history that helps establish provenance or will provide a certificate of authenticity for assurance.

“If the knife is a Bill Moran, Bob Loveless, Ron Lake, S.R. Johnson or something of great historical significance, you’d probably expect to have something in writing,” Oldham explained. “I’m constantly buying these kinds of knives to put them in my collection or to present as gifts.”

A purveyor with a strong history and solid reputation brings a lot to the table. Developing a mutually beneficial working relationship—whether you’re a maker or an avid collector—enhances the experience for all.

NEXT TIME: A capsule synopsis of How To Buy Custom Knives.

For the contact information for the pictured knives, see “Where To Get ‘Em” on page 71.

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