

Are Knife Organizations Getting Left Behind?

By J. Bruce Voyles

What is an organization of knife collectors? At first thought, the standard definition is the sum of the parts of its members. But that definition is far too simple.

Knife collecting started in the aftermath of the Gun Control Act of 1968, when easy sale of firearms over state lines was restricted.

The generation of people who survived The Great Depression and fought in World War II were in their peak earning years and were compulsive collectors of dozens of collectibles—no doubt because of the years of deprivation they suffered during The Depression. With the 1968 law, knives were the next best thing.

The few active knife collectors were spread over the U.S., with a concentration in the Southern towns, where it was still common to find the old-timers on the courthouse square on Saturday morning or the monthly First Monday market day. They would congregate on the sidewalks with pockets bulging with used knives for trade or purchase. In fact, your editor traded his first knives on just such a courthouse square in Lawrenceville, Georgia, in the early '70s.

Serious collectors traded knives via knife lists, which began as knives traced onto a piece of paper since, at that time, few knew knives by pattern names. Around 1972, knife organizations changed all that.

Knifemakers formed the Knifemaker's Guild, and in Del Rio, Tennessee, and a dozen collectors formed the National Knife Collectors and Dealers Association. These early organizations pulled all collectors together from across the nation, gave them unity, purpose, regulation, and guidance in ethics. This, in turn, pulled more members. The groups created newsletters, and later, magazines, and knife shows. My first magazine job was editing just such a newsletter that grew into a magazine for the NKCA.

The National Knife Collectors Association spawned dozens of regional knife clubs who in turn produced their own knife shows. Knifemaker's Guild member, Bill Moran, and a few others created the American Bladesmiths Society initially because the

Guild would not assist him in promoting hand-forged knives, and Moran was concerned the art would be lost. State knifemakers organizations would begin, such as the South Carolina Knifemakers Association, under the tutelage of George Herron, having a serious impact on knifemaking and collecting in that state. Knifemakers from other countries joined the Knifemaker's Guild, and a few would return to their homes and create their own knifemaking guilds. The Professional Knifemakers Association would later form for full-time makers who disagreed with organization decisions that affected their livelihood being made by part-time knifemakers with other sources of income.

These groups were created by men of vision, men who worked for the public good, for the good of the members, and with the knowledge that whether their organization grew or failed, that responsibility rested with them. These organizations fulfilled a need in providing the impetus to produce shows, spread information, and keep the members united with a common goal. Those boards are still populated with directors holding those same goals and loyalty.

That is not to say that there have not been those in such organizations who sought a management role as a director or officer based on little more than massaging their own personal ego, ending in questionable management decisions one might expect from such motivations.

Over the years, the original founders of many of these worthwhile organizations faded or died. Their places have since been taken by others who have tried to follow those original goals and add some tweaks of their own, but in a mature industry in changing times, sometimes all those goals have to be turned on their head. The benefits to a knife collector or maker that were once exclusively available through knife organizations are now available from other sources as well.

Knife shows that were once the private domain of organizations are for the most part produced by effective show promoters, in many cases, producing better shows than the organizations. One notable exception to this

is the Oregon Knife Collectors Show, managed by Dennis Ellingsen. The rule by committee of most organizations does not appear to be as effective as a sole promoter whose own dollars are on the line in the success of a knife show. The communication between collectors once only available via newsletters and magazines of the organizations is now as close as the nearest laptop.

In a world with increasing costs, and dozens of groups vying for attention, there are no longer dominant knife organizations that govern a segment of the knife industry or have the impact, power, and influence they once did. That is how things evolve. A knifemaker's success no longer requires membership in a specific organization as it once it did.

Today, there are dozens of non-affiliated knifemakers and collectors who are getting by very well by not being members of any organization, going to non-organization sponsored shows, and fulfilling their need for comradeship on the Internet.

Unique things knife organizations once offered are no longer unique. But, to join the 21st century and have any relevance, these organizations must adapt to the 21st century. For them thrive, they must offer their membership more than their members can obtain easier at other sources and venues. A unique membership card is not enough in today's markets.

The director meetings of knife organizations must have more on the meeting agendas than deciding when to have the next meeting or debating the location for the next organization's knife show. The directors of the knife organizations that survive in the future have to figure out how provide more perceived value to their members. Anything less is the recipe for failure.

Business guru, Tom Peters, said that anything you are doing the same way you did five years ago means you're probably doing it wrong. He could have been writing about knife organizations.

We are creative human beings, and if we recognize a problem, we can usually find a solution. The big question for this column is: