

Behind the *Blade*

The storied history of William Henry Knives includes snakes at the workshop and mammoth teeth

Matthew Conable, chief designer and partner of luxury knifemaker William Henry Knives, loves a good story. Did you hear the one about the master knifemaker whose red-tailed boa snake mistook his artisan hand for lunch? Or the one where an Ivy League student risked his future by ditching Cornell University to milk goats in California? How about the time Fox Studios donated one of its movie sets to a company filming footage for a DVD, but the set turned out to be a morgue?

These aren't jokes or ominous signs. They are real-life nuggets that gave Conable and his growing company character. To him, the stories behind his company's success make success that much sweeter—just as the intrinsic value of his luxury knives is elevated by the complexity of their creation.

"The challenge for us is to educate people about the back stories that exist behind our product," says



Conable, whose William Henry Studio headquarters in McMinnville, Oregon, is dedicated to designing, manufacturing and preserving the art of knifemaking. “These stories help create legitimacy.”

William Henry sounds like a Founding Father or a presidential candidate, but its moniker derives from the middle names of Conable and co-owner, Michael Henry Honack. With scarce high-end competition and international word of mouth spreading like wildfire, the award-winning company is on the cusp of “breaking out” in its tenth-anniversary year.

Innovative art

William Henry’s art is about innovation, engineering and craft—an

interplay between elemental function, aesthetic refinement and the stories that connect them. The brand motto: “Superlative function deserves to be elevated to superlative art.”

William Henry Knives showcase engraved limited-edition collections (generally five to twenty

pieces) that include pocketknives, culinary knives, letter openers and accessories like presentation cases and display stands. Like the Space Shuttle and submarines, the brand uses aerospace-grade alloys such as titanium, as well as carbon fiber and “superconductor” made from remnant copper/niobium wire

William Henry uses rare, exotic materials like fossil ivory (left), fossil bone and fossil tooth.



from the super-collider the U.S. government built in the 1990s.

"I like watches and study them as another functional item for men," says Conable, whose luxury knives range from \$300 to \$2,000.

"The rare materials we use and the stories of how the knives are made is amazing even compared to movements, complications and straps from luxury watch brands. Think of the intrinsic value of what you're buying. You could buy a \$2,000 knife, but the story of what it took to get that knife is amazing."

800 steps

A typical William Henry knife takes more than seven months to create and involves the expertise of at least thirty artisans across 800 steps. The steel blades are hand-forged by master bladesmith Mike Norris, who uses his proprietary technique called "Damascus," which seamlessly integrates up to 120 layers of specialized alloys into a single piece of patterned steel, a precursor to the finished blade.

The blade blanks then travel to Seki City, Japan, birthplace of the famous Samurai sword. Each blade is hand-ground and polished by master knifemaker Kikuo Matsuda, who sculpts sophisticated edge geometry. Ultimately, Conable himself rechecks the sharpness and functionality of the final blade.

Higher-end William Henry frames are called mokume, a wood-grain metal from 89 layers of copper, brass and nickel silver that, like the blade, create a metal tapestry where no two are the same. Featured prominently in the upscale

handle designs are overlays of exotic material scales from the tundra of Alaska and Siberia, including fossilized walrus ivory, walrus bone, mammoth ivory, mammoth bone and mammoth tooth.

Retrieving these rare materials creates more stories for Conable to tell. He commissions indigenous people from Alaska's St. Lawrence Island to dive into the ocean at certain times of the year to pull tusks from walruses that died 6,000 to 10,000 years ago.

"If the story resonates with the consumer, when they take the knife out of their pocket, they can tell their friends, 'Guess what? This is the molar of a woolly mammoth from the Ice Age.' We've gained access to so many unusual supply sources. This stuff is so obscure in the world, and it needs to stay that way," says Conable.

Snake charmer

He is drawn to the exotic. As if working with knives isn't precari-

ous enough, since being bitten, he now crafts knives in the presence of six smaller snakes which grace his office. Even as he's interviewed, he pauses for a few moments. "I think my king snake is missing," he says calmly. But it's a false alarm. The snake turns up. Second mishap averted.

Like snakes, knives can be perceived as dangerous—a challenge Conable nullifies with storytelling to "move people away from that." In fact, William Henry's best sellers are smaller knives (under 3-inch blades) because they are non-threatening, practical tools. In this range, Damascus blades, mokume frames, and exotic fossil materials are most popular.

"We're talking about something that has elegance, soul and character. It has some kind of appeal that you can't quite nail down. It didn't merely come off of a machine. You get a little piece

of each [artisan] in the knife, the techniques they've developed, and the care and pride they bring. The workmanship is superlative, the techniques and materials are rare and obscure, and the results are magical."

Conable paid his dues in a little knife shop at 19 and eventually became a museum-quality custom knifemaker (and craft show traveler) before Honack approached him to launch William Henry Knives. Casting aside his MBA desires, Conable risked it all again. Since then, the company has grown to "four times the original intention," Conable says.

A luxury player, William Henry Knives packages its cutlery in leather-lined wooden boxes

The firm also makes limited-edition knives with metal tapestries, hand-burnished gold inlay and chisel-carved silver.

This model is made with a unique carbon fiber frame with gemstone fittings.

To create these distinctive blades, William Henry employs the Damascus technique. It integrates up to 120 layers of specialized alloys into a single piece of patterned steel.

with engravable options and a DVD, narrated by actor Peter Coyote, himself an aficionado of knives and of the William Henry collection. Fox Studios donated the set, which was originally a morgue, where Conable refused to shoot due to the unfortunate knife-morgue negative connotation (“bad karma,” he says).

Other William Henry knife collectors include entertainment personalities who appreciate the art of storytelling through performance or song: Harrison Ford, Brad Pitt, Angelina Jolie, Bill Murray, Nicolas Cage, Andy Garcia, Tim Allen, Billy Gibbons from the band ZZ Top, and Pierce Brosnan, who is rumored to carry a William Henry pocket knife with him every day.

This fall, William Henry is slated to produce fifty to 150 higher-end limited-edition knives ranging from \$5,000 to \$20,000. In fact, it may eclipse \$100,000. Conable is creating a one-of-a-kind masterpiece with channels of platinum set into 18-karat gold against the canvas of a “folder” (folding knife) for Austin retailer Zoltan David, who plans to exhibit it at a future PGA Tour event. Conable is also consulting with other jewelers to design knives that could be defined as precious jewelry.

“Like a fine watch, [a knife] serves a purpose, but if kept in good condition, it also appreciates with time,” says Conable. “We’ve seen the secondary market add anywhere from 20 to 500 percent to the value of our pieces—and we’ve only been shipping for 10 years.”

At that rate, William Henry Knives may begin its own next story with “once upon a time.” ☺