

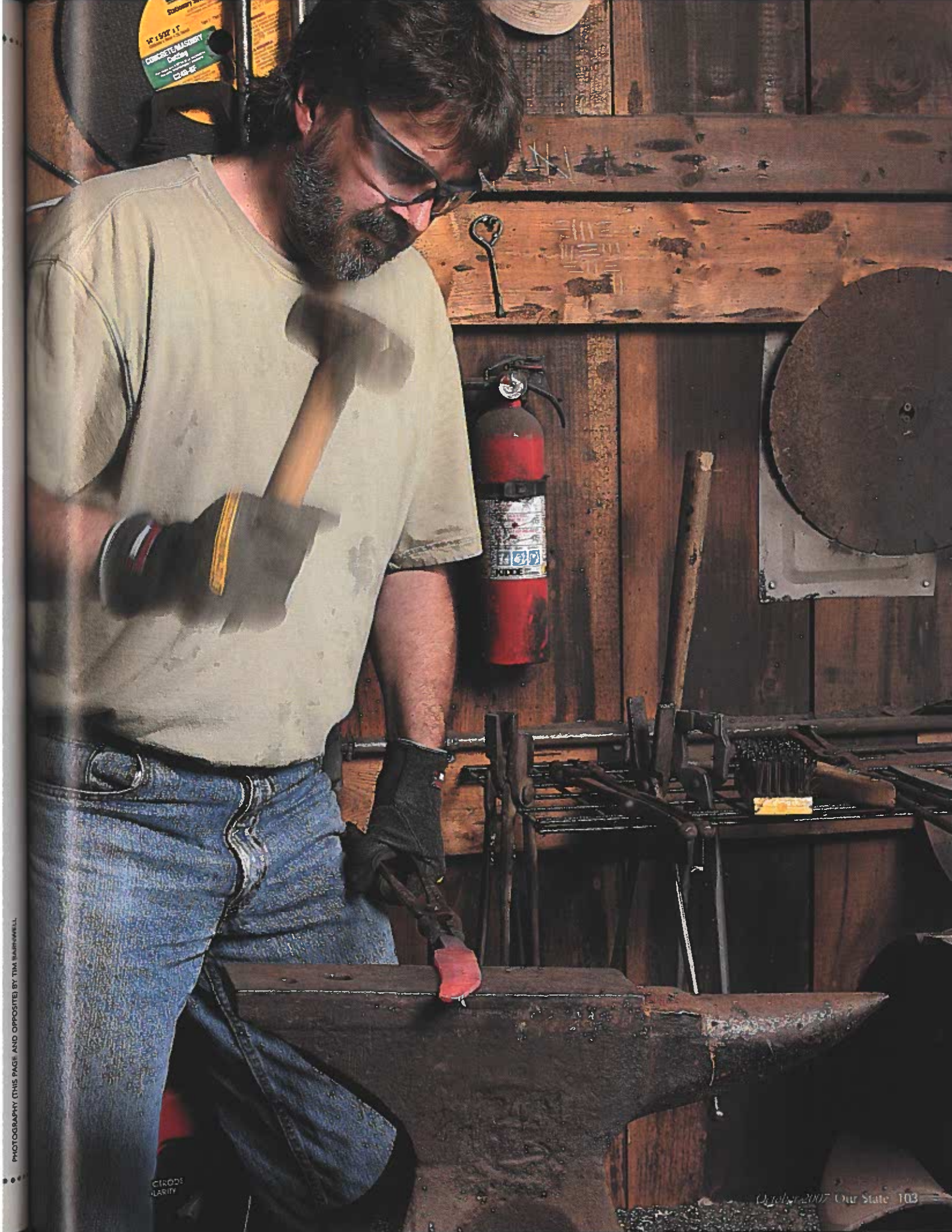


# *Making the Cut*

Watauga County natives Daniel Winkler and Karen Shook craft blades and sheaths that embody the Early American craftsmanship of an indispensable tool.

By R. Kelly Coffey

Daniel Winkler began bladesmithing in high school when he needed a small knife for historical firearm reenactments.



PHOTOGRAPHY (THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE) BY TIM BARRWELL

CIRQUE  
CLARITY



Winkler's use of both modern-day power tools and traditional forging techniques provides a blend of efficiency and authenticity.

**F**ew tools are as ancient and functional as a knife. With so many functions, a knife touches on almost all aspects of life at a particular time and place. Accurately designed and made, it can distill the essence of a culture like no other single object. A gun, for example, suggests warfare, and a cast-iron skillet evokes log-cabin domestic life, but a knife calls to mind both.

The essence of frontier America is embodied in the knives and sheaths produced by Watauga County natives Daniel Winkler and Karen Shook, who have been practicing their crafts full time in the Boone and Blowing Rock area for almost 20 years.

Winkler's bladesmithing evolved from his love of America's past. As a teenager, Winkler delved into black-powder firearms and competed in shooting matches. A form of historical reenactment, black-powder firearm events involve more than a gun. Participants typically outfit themselves with related gear, including small patch knives (used to cut the patches enveloping the ammunition). Winkler began making

his own accoutrements and crafted his first knife as part of a high school industrial arts project.

At the shooting matches, "people showed an interest in some of the stuff that I made," he recalls, "so I'd make a few extra pieces — a couple of patch knives or shooting pouches — and sell them to help pay for gas." Winkler continued to sharpen his knife-making skills, and he expanded his work to the point that it became a full-time business in 1988.

### A sharp pair

When Winkler began making knives, he asked Karen Shook to sew simple leather pouches to sheathe his work. Both Winkler and Shook are self-taught, and their crafts progressed together. Early on, Shook discovered from a museum artifact that rawhide is a more appropriate



and durable casing for the sharp instruments than leather.

Shook embellishes the basic rawhide covering with beads, leather fringes, quills, feathers, and other materials. Her objective is to take Winkler's finished knife and create a sheath that blends seamlessly with the cutlery. "What we try to accomplish is that it's harmonious — that nothing in the set jumps out," she says. "The sheath and the knife don't

look like two separate products.”

“We operate under my name,” Winkler adds, “but as far as the finished product, one’s not complete without the other.”

Winkler and Shook craft blades and sheaths that Daniel Boone would recognize: Their focus is the 1700s, a time when the Blue Ridge was the frontier where American Indian and

stock steel. When appropriate, he recycles steel from items like automobile springs. “It’s good for big knives, tomahawks, and camp knives,” he says, noting that steel is produced with varying properties, and years of working with the material have taught him the type of steel suitable for a particular blade.

After choosing the right steel, he

impractical as a business endeavor.

Because Winkler’s style reflects the wild frontier, the knife handles are usually crafted from natural materials — antler, wood, or bone. Because many of these materials have a shape that can’t be modified, “I may use the handle first to draw out the design for a knife to fit that particular interesting piece of handle material,” he says.

The custom knife trade is diverse. Some bladesmiths, for example, concentrate on knives with a modern, military look, using titanium and Teflon-coated finishes.

Others specialize in ornate cutlery composed with precious metals and gemstones. Winkler’s Early American style is quite varied in itself. Size ranges from the small patch knife to the large camp knife, which is used like a small ax. Belt and hunter knives are midsize blades originally

designed for wild-game preparation, but they also function as all-purpose cutlery.

## Perfect Fit.....

A few years ago, I found a deer antler in the woods. I asked Daniel Winkler to make a knife using part of the antler as a handle. The finished product has such a smooth, uninterrupted flow from the curved antler handle to the forged blade that the entire piece seems natural, as if the blade had sprouted from the antler and matured into its present form. The handle fits my hand perfectly, making the knife feel like an extension of my arm.

Winkler never measured my hand and could do little to size the natural antler anyway. But no doubt the sum of all the factors he is able to control (blade length and width, weight balance between the blade and handle, where to cut the curve on the antler) merged with artistic intuition to produce the sensation of perfect fit.

Much of Winkler’s and Karen Shook’s business comes through referrals and repeat customers. They also exhibit at several custom knife shows around the nation every year. Since they currently have a year’s backlog of orders, the pair has no need for a retail outlet.

“We’ll occasionally put pieces for immediate sale on the website,” Winkler says. “There are a few knife dealers who buy from different makers and sell them on their own websites or at shows.”

Prices reflect the pair’s skill and quality of work but aren’t out of reach for most people. Simple knives begin at \$300 and sheaths around \$100, but pieces can reach into thousands of dollars if an item is complex and time-consuming to craft.



Some of Winkler’s creations have handles crafted from natural materials, like bone or wood.

pioneer cultures mixed and struggled. Winkler’s and Shook’s work has a strong American Indian influence, especially Winkler’s tomahawks, which he describes as “just a different-shaped knife.” Knives, however, dominate their business, with tomahawks representing only a fraction of sales.

### Shaping the blade

The process of forging steel into any style of knife is the same, regardless of differences in design. Winkler begins with unformed, bar-

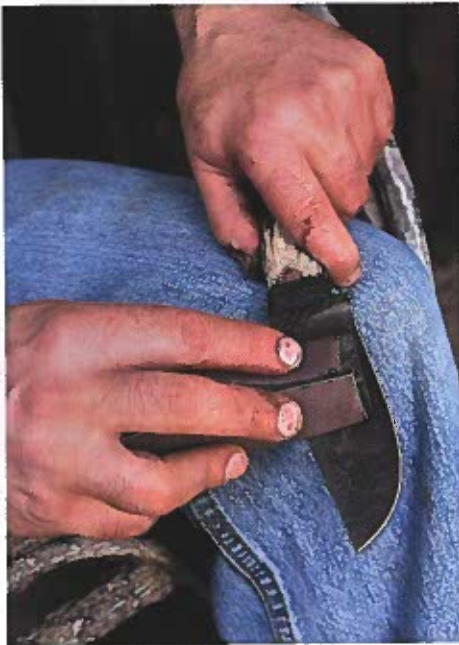
heats and hammers it into the desired shape. “The forging isn’t just for shaping the knife,” Winkler says. “The heating and cooling cycles also enhance the performance level of the knife.”

Next, he sculpts the blade to its finished condition through progressively finer levels of grinding and sanding. Although Winkler’s knives are historically influenced and handcrafted, he does utilize power tools in the process. Otherwise, his knives would be unaffordable and therefore

### Determining design

Producing historically accurate cutlery and sheaths is challenging because Early American knives were made primarily for utilitarian reasons. Blades were used until they wore out and then were discarded. A few pieces survive in museums, which Winkler and Shook occasionally visit for design ideas. They also have illustrations of period cutlery and sheaths.

But an in-depth understanding of knife design in early America requires some ingenuity. The pair looks at “things that were done in a similar time period with similar materials and similar skills,” Winkler notes. “When Karen does a sheath, she may get the stitching style or decoration from a pair of moccasins, or the handle-wrapping I do on a knife might have been influenced by a repair made on a tool or a hand-



Levels of grinding and sanding give Winkler's blades a fine edge.

wrapping on a bow or the fletching on an arrow." In the same way that a single design theme on modern objects is transferred from

dinnerware to towels to furniture, various 18th-century artifacts inspire designs that Winkler and Shook reinterpret in their knives, tomahawks, and sheaths.

Winkler's and Shook's customers buy for a variety of reasons. Some are attracted to the pair's work for its beauty and craftsmanship. Every knife and sheath they make is fully functional, even the ones destined for display only. Other customers are outdoorsmen who take advantage of the knives' functionality and use their Winkler knife as a hunting, gardening, or camping tool.

Others know a good investment when they see it and speculate that the team's work will increase in value over the years like rare coins or paintings. Museums have commissioned Winkler and Shook to replicate pieces in their collections for use by the museums' interpreters, a testimony to the historical accuracy of their work.

With the exception of museum replicas, Winkler prefers a minimal

amount of design direction from customers. If a client limits instructions to overall dimensions and broad design parameters, Winkler says, "I can put more of my own creativity into it and produce a better piece."

Although the team works within the boundaries of a particular style and era, they aren't just mechanically reproducing old knives and sheaths. The frontier motif and materials allow much freedom for artistic interpretation. "It's something that never ceases to fulfill the need I have to be creative," Shook says.

### Steel on the silver screen

Winkler's work was featured in the 1992 movie *The Last of the Mohicans*, filmed in western North Carolina. The movie is a screen adaptation of James Fenimore Cooper's classic novel published in 1826. Much more than an ephemeral flick that happened to use his work, *The Last of the Mohicans* is the epitome of the period, place, and

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people that Winkler and Shook capture in their art.

"To this day, I don't go to a show [where] somebody isn't attracted to our work because they originally saw or heard about it from *The Last of the Mohicans*," he says.

Steve Shackelford, editor of *Blade* magazine (a leading knife-trade publication) and bladesmithing expert says, "That movie cemented what was already a solid reputation for his knives and Karen's sheaths. Daniel's knife for the movie made the cover

of *Blade* magazine, and that issue was one of the magazine's best-selling newsstand issues of all time."

Winkler notes that establishing good relationships with customers is essential to his business because "quite frankly, nobody really needs what I do; they buy it because they want it." It's ironic, given that Americans living in the period he emulates considered the tools he makes to be indispensable. Winkler and Shook's products aren't crucial for survival in the 21st century, but their craft is a tangible reminder of our past — and a piece of art as well. Work like theirs may not be a matter of life or death as it was on the frontier, but modern life without it certainly would be dull. 

*R. Kelly Coffey writes from his home in Watauga County.*

Karen Shook's rawhide sheaths complement the design of Winkler's blades.



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