

The Pennsylvania Reader

Appalachian Plateau Edition

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A WORK DEVOTED TO BEAUTY, WONDER AND KNOWLEDGE.

THE GUN MAN GETTING A GRIP

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Dan Haney started repairing and customizing pistol grips and gunstocks as a hobby 40 years ago when he was a street cop in Philadelphia. Often he performed this service for his friends and co-workers. He even did gun repair work for Frank Rizzo, then Philadelphia police commissioner, who later became mayor. When Rizzo was a police officer, he carried a pearl-handled revolver, and thus was given the nickname "The Cisco Kid." Dan can't take credit for Rizzo's pistol. "At that time, I had never done anything that famous," he says. However, what began as a hobby, has turned into a flourishing business.

Dan had to retire from the force 25 years ago with a service-connected disability when he injured his knee while leaping from beam to beam in an old, abandoned warehouse while pursuing a suspect. He relocated to a heavily wooded part of Tioga County, surrounded by the Tioga State Forest. There he runs "The Stock

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Shop, performing gun stock repair, restoration, fitting, finishing, checkering, carving and some light gunsmithing (repairing the metal). He also performs bluing—applying the characteristic gunmetal blue color to weapons.

He works with both new and old guns—some antique. Mr. Haney has quite a following, as there are only a handful of craftsmen in the country who offer the services that he does. He attracts business by advertising in gun magazines and appearing at gun shows. He has been a large proponent of the Morris Gun Show, sponsored every spring by the Morris Township Fire Department, spreading the word about Morris to other vendors he meets in his travels. The advertising has worked. He has had business from every state in The Union, including Alaska and Hawaii.

His shop is outfitted with an assortment of hand and power tools and a large stock duplicator machine that allows him to form a stock from a rectangular block of wood. He places the pattern of a stock or a broken stock into the machine and a block of wood next to it and the machine makes an exact duplicate of the stock, which he can then fit and finish. He uses over forty different varieties of wood, imported and domestic, including Wendge (from Africa), Madagascar Kingwood, Coco Bolo (heavy wood popular in pistol grips), Tiger Tail Maple (often used in black powder guns), Ebony and Rosewood. The most common wood that he uses for rifle stocks is Walnut. He makes pistol grips out of both wood and ivory and does inlays and initials in silver, gold and ivory. He once inlaid a shamrock in a pistol grip for an Irish cop in Philadelphia.

Recently, he was sent two rifles that were used in the Civil War, one by a Union soldier and one by a Confederate. The stocks had been cut down and were in need of restoration. He will create a new stock for one gun and restore the other, so that they appear as they did during the War Between the States.

Hand checkering requires skill and patience, and the use of a special hand tool that cuts a pattern into the stock, small diamond-shaped projections, about 400 to an inch, formed by fastidiously filing intersecting grooves one by one. This is not only an ornamental feature, but also provides for a better grip when shooting and adds to the value of the gun.

It was, in fact, the lost art of hand checkering that got Dan into this craft when he was about 25 years old. One of his friends had purchased a reproduction of an old .41 caliber cap and ball pistol and had tried to checker the grips. "He messed it up. He was going to throw it away, but I asked him to give it to me. I wanted to take that mess and try to improve on it. It worked out even better than I hoped. It gave me my hobby."

An accomplished artist, he can take a plain rifle stock, one he made or one provided



From a solid block of Walnut, Dan Haney can create a work of art that is both beautiful and functional. He stands at his workbench, displaying his tools and a project in various stages of completion.

by a customer, and hand-carve an outdoor scene or other image requested by the owner. His work is impressive and he takes great pride in the finished product. He showed an example of his work; a scene depicting two fighting elks, one of the first stocks he carved. He learned to carve "just by doing it." He is self-taught. "Practice makes perfect," he says.

The work that he does can range from minor repairs and decorations to a full-blown custom stock or restoration. He tells customers ordering custom work that they are "only limited by their imagination and pocketbook."

He works both on collector's items, as well as shooting guns used for target practice or sport. One of his customers had a pair of very powerful Grizzly target pistols, and he used them extensively. However, he kept blowing the grips off. Dan made him a pair out of man-made marble resin, but those blew off as well. He sent them back to the shop and Dan fitted the guns with a pair of very dense Rosewood grips. The client has not called back.

When he was still living in Philadelphia, he was approached by a man with a \$1,000 Swiss-

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made Hammerli pistol—the Mercedes-Benz of target pistols—a difficult gun to improve. The owner wasn't comfortable with the grips, so Dan fitted the gun with custom rosewood grips tailored exactly to the shape of the man's hand. The owner was thrilled. Dan said, "He told people that I made him a better marksman, which isn't true. What I did by giving him those custom-made grips was make him feel comfortable and relaxed, and that helped his accuracy."

Although officially retired, he works most everyday at this hobby/vocation, which he says that he very much enjoys, this being obvious from the way in which he gives a tour of his shop and speaks with excitement about his craft, and the interesting and humorous anecdotes associated with his 40 years of gun work.

"I could be a door greeter at Wal-Mart, I guess," he says, referring to the position often associated with the retired, "but restoring and customizing gun stocks is what I do. I'll never stop. Even if I won the lottery, I would still do this."

Dan, a stocky man with a full, gray beard and infectious smile jokingly explains that, "I can never die. I have too much work."