

To Clean Or Not To Clean or... Out, Damned Spot!

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There is a big Continental folding hunter here beside me right now that I'm debating about having cleaned professionally, and it pains me to even consider having it done. This is the reason I've been putting off for so long composing a piece about cleaning knives - it's such a mine-field of a subject. Cleaning knives evokes strong feelings in many of us, and not usually good ones.

We're talking about "cleaning" and refinishing of knife surfaces (usually blades) here, not the legitimate repair or replacement of broken parts with identical parts from identical knives by qualified knife repairmen.

There are undeniably some knives whose condition cannot help but be improved by cleaning: those with rust so extensive and so unsightly as to be worth almost nothing in the "as found" condition. This is one category of knives that truly benefits from cleaning. The second category consists of those knives which are essentially whole and in perhaps "excellent plus" condition, but which have one or two small blemishes that an expert could put right without a total, overall refinish of the piece. The choice becomes much more problematic when the neglect or abuse falls in between these two extremes.

For example, the dilemma I find myself in presently: Wood-handled folding hunter; iron bolsters with mild rusting present (easily removed); wood very dirty, with paint splatters also; blade absolutely FULL...but someone has taken a Dremel tool to the lower 3/8" of the blade, from tang to tip-ruining an otherwise very sound knife. Fortunately, they didn't know how to use the Dremel and only left swirl marks, not removing any appreciable amount of metal; balance of the blade has the original factory finish with some discoloration but no pits.

The problem: the handles and bolsters are easily put right - I could even do that much myself; but the rotary stone marks on the blade just kill this knife. Worst part is that 80% of the original finish is just fine (overlooking the staining and discoloration). A professional would find this knife an easy job on which to perform an overall refinish, he could even get the stone marks to disappear with little trouble. But the real result is that it would be obvious that the knife had been cleaned. And that reduces its desirability to a large portion of the knife collecting community. But it shor' would shine, and it shor' would be purty.

The over-riding problem with any knife that has been cleaned, and the reason that so many serious collectors will simply have nothing to do with a cleaned knife is that after a knife has been cleaned, you don't know what it looked like originally! Was the knife just lightly "touched up" by a real professional, or was major metal removed to make it look new? For example: did it really come with a pen blade, or are you looking at a spay blade that was so far gone that it was easier to reshape it to look like a pen blade? Are you looking at a knife that is a good representation of the

knife as it came out of the factory, or are you looking at a glowing testimonial to the skill, yes, skill, of an artful refinisher? Who knows? And that's the problem in a nutshell.

We collect and revere these old knives in large part because we admire the finish work done by hand on them. But if another's hands have changed the lines and looks of the knife by refinishing it, how are we to judge it? What value are we to assign to it? Certainly, it should be obvious that even a well refinished knife isn't worth as much as an unmolested original. Regarding very skillful refinishing of little-known knives, it may be difficult to even tell that the knife has been refinished, perhaps introducing an element of fraud into the equation. Often, we have little way of knowing whether the refinisher was careful and true to the knife's original conformation, or whether the knife was in such bad shape that he was forced to remove significant amounts of metal, modify the grind lines, and apply a non-standard surface finish just to obtain a "presentable" final product. Or maybe the refinisher was just sloppy or unskilled, reasoning that all he had to do was make it "shine like the bumper of a '53 Buick" and the owner would see such a dramatic improvement in the look of the knife that he'd be happy with the work. Regrettably, some folks are.

By the way, it's always a bad idea to compel a refinisher to attempt to "restore" a badly or deeply pitted blade. Reason: he's forced to remove metal down to the level of the deepest pits in order to make them go away...and in the process, usually the original blade shape goes away, too. Sometimes the blade ends up significantly smaller - often the case with blades that were somewhat thin to begin with. So one might make a rule that only "mildly" damaged knives should be refinished. But, you might be saying, what about the rusted hulk that's of no value in the "as found" condition? Wouldn't its value improve if it were shiny and new-looking? Unfortunately, due to our human (or crow-like) obsession with shiny objects, the previously mentioned hulk is often worth more after refinishing, even if the blade shapes are dramatically changed. This is a function of lack of knowledge on the part of collectors, not a criticism of refinishers. After all, the refinisher is simply doing what he was directed to do with the knife, and is forced to work with what he has been given.

If the owner of the knife had some way of seeing what the knife looked like originally, versus what it will look like after refinishing, he might think twice about having it refinished. This is one of the important uses of old catalogs that have illustrations of knives in them. They let one see what the knife really should look like. Sadly, such resources simply aren't available for a large number of knives. It is a sign of maturity in the knife-cleaning fraternity that we're beginning to see refinishers refuse to work on some knives that are too far gone. Though I must admit that it is partly just economics at work; a refinisher can look at a really bad knife and tell that there is going to be more work involved than the knife will be worth when it's finished.

By this time it must sound like I'm really down on refinishers in general. Not so. I use them with some regularity. But I choose only the best ones, and those who can be relied upon to do only what is requested, and do it with consummate skill. They are not cheap, nor should they be. This necessarily means that only knives of some value can be economically worked on...and that's as it should be, too. The world really has no burning need for wonderfully refinished shell-handled Colonials. If I'm sounding a bit elitist, well, I don't deny it. Isn't that what collecting anything is all about? We all look for the best examples of the best knives. No apology needed. The cream always rises to the top.

Good refinishers can remove a single blemish on an otherwise mint blade with the result matching the original finish. This is an example of a level of skill that most of us will not be able to match - it's what you pay a professional for. That's something the novice will never be able to do in his garage with his Craftsman grinder with a buffing wheel attached.

So is there nothing that a collector can do at home to improve the appearance of his knives without inadvertently reducing their value? Happily, there are some mild procedures that can be of legitimate benefit. And that will be the subject of our next installment.