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Knives with
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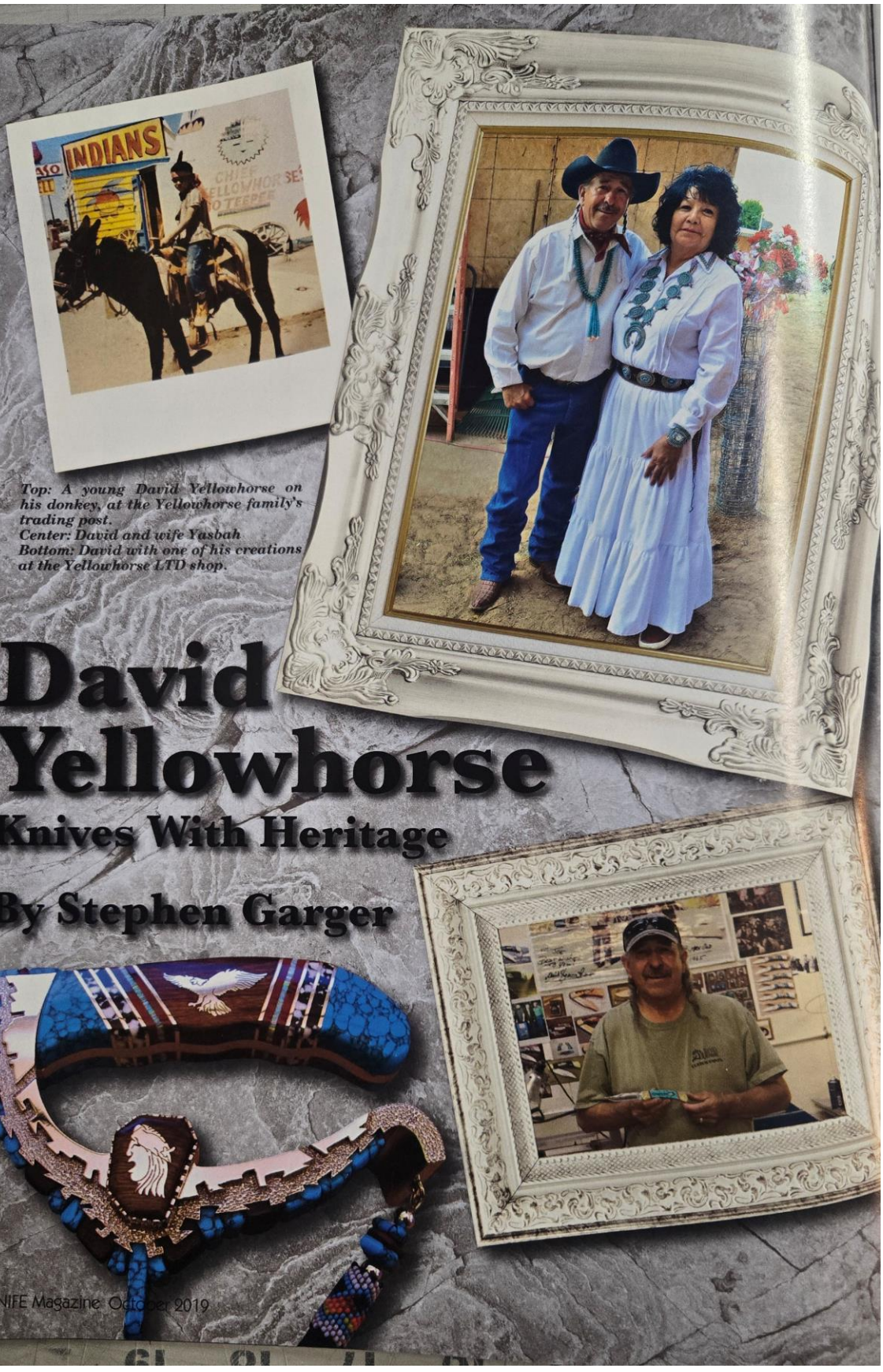

Top: A young David Yellowhorse on his donkey, at the Yellowhorse family's trading post.
Center: David and wife Yasbah
Bottom: David with one of his creations at the Yellowhorse LTD shop.

David Yellowhorse

Knives With Heritage

By Stephen Garger

In late July, 2018 after a short drive to the Buck Factory in Post Falls, Idaho I joined members of the Buck Collectors Club for a series of events celebrating their 30th Anniversary (1988-2018). One of the scheduled sessions featured David Yellowhorse, celebrated knife embellishment artist. The room was filled for his presentation and during one of David's stories the word "equanimity" occurred to me.

I was taken with his calmness, composure and even temperament ['equanimity']. Those admirable traits were apparent in David's affect and reinforced by a story about the flight of a drone around his Arizona home. I was curious to learn more about this man. That evening, while disembarking following the Club's Lake Coeur D'Alene dinner cruise, I introduced myself and promised to be in touch. Some time later we spoke on the phone.

David's interest in silversmithing, sand casting, and entrepreneurial spirit derive from a family tradition going back to Frank Yellowhorse, his 86 year old father and the tradition lives on through David's son Brian. During the 1950s Frank sold Navajo rugs and petrified wood at a stand along Route 66. Over the next decade the Navajo family's stand expanded into a trading post, located today on the Navajo Reservation just off Interstate 40 at the border of Arizona and New Mexico. It was here that young David began meeting and interacting with tourists making their way through Arizona.

Growing up, he would see his father and Uncle Shush doing silver work but "didn't stop and really look since I wasn't interested in what grown-ups were doing." Eventually David asked questions and started helping out, especially curious about the silversmithing and sand casting. "I kept learning and did a few things, nothing too magical or anything," he related. "But it did strike my interest and I did like it quite a bit." Helping enabled the youngster to begin figuring some aspects of the craft out for himself, and to "learn more about things."

Buck #822 fixed blade created as a tribute to the 29 Navajo men who utilized the complex, unwritten Navajo language to create an unbreakable code for the U.S. Marines during WWII. The Code Talkers participated in every major Marine operation in the Pacific theater, giving the Marines a critical advantage throughout the war.

At that time his parents were separated and his mother and brothers lived in Albuquerque. David moved there for school, was faring well and one day his dad paid a visit and asked: "What do you want to do in life?" David thought for a while before responding how much he enjoyed silversmithing and the time with his father and uncle. The following year his dad returned and this time left two black cases of jewelry, saying: "This is your start. I want you to see Indian jewelry."

David inventoried the contents of the bags. "There were Navajo, Zuni and Hopi pieces in there, priced on the back for retail," he recalled. "By the time I got it all calculated there was $20,000 worth of jewelry and I wondered 'Where am I going to sell this stuff?"

The narrative continued: "I went to Old Town in Albuquerque on weekends (I was in high school) and set up there. Somebody told me the real good place to be is Santa Fe, NM, so I went the next weekend and parked where lots of natives were set up in the square. I got my jewelry and my blanket and started making myself a little spread. People were grumpy because I was intruding on their area. These were Pueblos, Santa Domingos, Santa Claras – I wasn't familiar with... any of them."

It did not go smoothly for young Yellowhorse: "A woman with the biggest spread, Carnation, was the head of everybody and for the first three weekends she'd approach my blanket, grab one end and flip it to scatter my jewelry, telling me 'We don't want you here!' She was elderly and out of respect you just can't yell or scream; plus I was a kinda stubborn little kid." David would quietly put his spread back together and just carry on, adding that other Navajos were treated the same, "but after a rug pull they were gone."

As it happened, one day he chased down a thief and recovered a squash blossom necklace of Carnation's. "I brought it back, held it out to her and she grabs the necklace from me, says nothing, but from that point on never came over and flipped my rug." David noted that although she wouldn't talk to him, "the other Santa Claras would and I was in!"

He began making small earrings and other pieces, continuing to sell there. "It was my last year of high school, I had enough credits, but never made it through," David said. "There was this big Mexican Fiesta happening so I 'ditched' [school] for a week to go sell, made $2800 and never went back to school."

David was doing well in 1973 when his dad moved to the Glendale suburb of Phoenix and asked him to come help and be the head of his shop. "My dad means the world to me so there was no way I could turn him down," David explained. "He had a nice shop there, doing nice handmade silver link chains." But David "found the work repetitious, got bored and started doing channel inlays like the Zunis (who always impressed me)." He self-learned channel inlay and started developing a small line that people liked.

When his father decided to return home, David moved into the house and took over the shop. "I was responsible for a $255 a month mortgage and a 2 ¼ acre lot in Glendale and had to get pretty serious," he recollected. "My brother graduated without any plan and I told him 'I'll put you to work until you find something,' he liked what I was doing and stayed 15 years."

When his brother-in-law got out of the Air Force, David gave him a job and it turned out he also liked the work. "I stopped being a one man band – I had employees," David said, laughing. "I had three different designs with channel inlays that went well and I taught them the inlay and how to do

Buck #309 with inlaid Yellow Horse logo. Photograph by Tim Vanime

it." Every Friday was when David would go out and sell. "I sold to five different shops at Scottsdale, Payson, Camp Verde, Flagstaff, Sedona and back to Phoenix."

The work David grew to be best known for was hit upon serendipitously: "In 1978 we'd sit under a tree for lunch and got to throwing our knives at it. Eventually this Buck 112 knife took too many slams sideways and the handle cracked on one side. That night I was up to 2am working on a lady's cuff bracelet for her to pick up at 8:30 in the morning, so I was pretty wound up with coffee. I remembered my knife needed repair and mixed some epoxy, put up the heat lamp, but forgot about it and the epoxy solidified. So I tried a creative venture: I pried the handle off and started putting some of my scrap stone pieces in there. By early morning I had one side inlayed and liked it."

On that Friday's sales rounds David showed his clients the knife. They asked why he didn't do the other side while encouraging him to bring more in. David bought six knives at L.L. Smith Hardware, pried the handles off, inlaid both sides, and Friday each customer bought one. They were sold out by Monday. "Every one sold the knives that weekend and that's how my knives got started back in 1978," he explained. "L.L. Smith Hardware and Bob's Sporting Goods kept me supplied decently and those knives kept selling well with just one model [Buck 112]." David saved up enough money to get a brochure together and sent it to other dealers, though "there wasn't much response."

In 1984 he began doing smaller pocket knives. 'I found an importer and bought six Explorer models (made in Japan) from Gutmann Cutlery, the people liked them and all of a sudden I was doing a lot of the small knives," he said. "I was buying German Pumas too, so now I was inlaying Bucks, Pumas and Explorers."

"The Elk" limited edition Buck Kalinga, customized by David Yellowhorse. David's work is done in what is known as "channel inlay" style. (For more on how channel inlays are done, see the May, 2019 issue of KNIFE Magazine.)

"Buffalo Mountain" Buck #119 fixed blade with genuine turquoise, red jasper, and black onyx inlays by David Yellowhorse.

After an article featuring Gutmann Cutlery was published, they heard from a company wanting to include David's knives in their catalog. That company was The Sharper Image and founder/CEO, Richard Thalheimer offered to buy 700 of his knives, but David had a problem when he read the vendor agreement package they sent. He phoned and told the person who sent it: "I cannot do what the agreement calls for." She replied that there was a lot of money involved but David characteristically responded: "There's not enough money in the world to make you mad at me." He received a call from the supervisor the next day, after she spoke with Thalheimer who said to her 'You tell Mr. Yellowhorse whatever he wants, he has. I want him in this catalog!' David paused for a moment before concluding "That was my first and only knife in a national catalog and all of a sudden I was exposed to high end money."

The Buck Knives company's well known affiliation with David Yellowhorse also got off in David's typically personal fashion. "I went to Buck and asked if I could

Recent work: Buck-Yellowhorse #110 Auto, "Eagle Mountain"

Not a Buck! This Schrade fixed blade hunter customized by Yellowhorse feachures a chipped-flint style blade and handles of turquoise, red coral, and black onyx.

Buck #109 lockback with "American Eagle" inlayed handles by Yellowhorse. The chip flint style blade was originally created by custom knifemaker Bill Cheatham of Phoenix and has been frequently used on David's collaborations with Buck Knives.

buy knives directly from them," he remembered. "Al Buck was President at the time and I explained I have a store and take the handles off and make new handles for the knives with turquoise, mother of pearl, etc." Al Buck expressed concern that they only sold to bona-fide shops. Fortunately a number of Buck's people were very impressed with David's work and relayed that to Al, who then phoned: "I can't break my own rules, but can I send these knives to you with no handles on them? That's my loophole, and I can save you $1.80 a knife on top of that."

David began ordering. "The next year I made new flyers, called Buck and spoke with marketing," he related. "Jim Bloom [Director of Marketing] was out of the office, so I told his assistant Charlie Gregory what I was doing but was informed Buck does not give out their customer lists." Gregory requested David to send him a knife to look at and realized as soon as he saw it that he could sell them.

"He asked me how much they were and then told me 'I want to buy 500 of these right now,' but I said I can only deliver a hundred at a time and it would take five months," David remembered. "When the hundred were finished I called to ask Mr. Gregory how they were doing and he told me 'They're all gone."

That was the start of the David Yellowhorse/Buck Knives relationship. "Yellow-

horse had established a reputation among collectors who valued his knives as art, and the designs he produced for Buck proved very popular. Using what he describes as 'channel inlay' to blend turquoise, coral, mother-of-pearl, brass and desert ironwood into distinctive handle designs, Yellowhorse converted three of Buck's most popular knives into works of art for that first cataloged series. He also embellished the bolsters with beautifully handcrafted designs." (*The Story of Buck Knives…a Family Business* by Tom Ables, pp. 87-88)

David had a few cousins and uncles for a total of about six workers back then. "I also paid mothers in the neighborhood to help me with the boxing we made for those knives and mothers were pleased because they could have their kids nearby too." He began to realize the need "to get more 'official like' and move out of the house." Growth happened pretty fast. "My first catalog with Buck Knives was in 1987," he noted. "But they were selling my knives in '86 without a catalog via word of mouth."

Buck's long term plans called for an exclusive agreement with David, but he was unsure of entering the deal because he felt personal responsibilities toward his Arizona clients. "I took care of my customers, who took care of me when I first got to Arizona and I didn't feel real good because I would no longer be able to sell to them."

David visited those customers and shared his indecision. "I was totally surprised when they told me 'Dave this is good for you; we're on your side and we want to see you do this' – which is great." He continued: "They were the ones who encouraged me to do the exclusivity thing and took the weight off of me where I felt I was abandoning them. We had built a good relationship from '74 to '84 with store orders, etc. and I felt a connection with them. I was really surprised and warmed when every one of them told me to go for it."

"Black Widow" overlay on a Spyderco Cricket, utilizing genuine turquoise, black onyx, and red coral, with a nickel silver spider inlay.

With Buck and The Sharper Image orders came needed expansion. "I had a shop, and 1500 feet was for a gym and nutrition bar for my people to exercise," he said. "The 32 employees were nearly all from the Navajo Reservation and provided through the Indian Center in Phoenix." The Center helped David recruit employees by referring Navajo that came in looking for work to him for an interview. David laughed

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while he told me that "One year Chuck Buck and Charlie Gregory, who I consider a marketing genius and was now in Jim Blume's Marketing Director position, came out and were impressed. Charlie looked at Chuck, who everybody knows was a wonderful person, and asked 'Chuck, how come we don't have an exercise room?'

In negotiating his early deal with Buck, David proposed a knife honoring his great-grandfather, Cuthair Yellowhorse. He asked Phoenix maker Bill Cheatham to build the knife. "He nailed it and made the most beautiful knife – an Indian looking chipped flint blade," David said. "I inlaid it and showed Chuck the Cuthair Yellowhorse knife and it sealed the deal." That knife became the first in a series produced by Buck Knives that featured Cuthair Yellowhorse.

Toward the conclusion of David's 2018 session that opened this piece, Buck Knives President CJ Buck came in. He spoke glowingly about David, then presented a special knife set wedding gift to Yasbah and David. Yasbah is also Navajo and they have been together for twenty-two years. I later discovered David has several grandchildren when he highlighted them at his website YellowhorseLTD.com in a video featuring a unique swimming hole. The site also offers an opportunity to purchase his work; while the videos change periodically. Recently there was a detailed tour of Lupton, Arizona in Navajo Land, USA, narrated by hometown boy David!

Finally I had to ask whether he had ever made a knife. David replied that though he has received awards in the past for custom knife making, "It kinda feels weird because I don't make knives, I customize knives and would call myself a 'factory customizer' where I make a knife into an artistic statement." He paused, laughed and noted: "I am too busy to even think of making a knife... too busy putting handles on them."

One can't help but admire the way this self-proclaimed "factory customizer" has conducted his life, developed his artistic ability and unselfishly shared his talents and successes with family and community. It would have been easy that long ago time in Santa Fe to let the rug be pulled out from under him and give up. But it is the strength of character which undergirds that "equanimity," that allowed young David Yellowhorse to quietly regather his wares, set up again and go on to become the artist he is.

David's operation Yellowhorse LTD can be found on Grant's Road in Lupton, Arizona near the state's eastern border with New Mexico, off of I-40 Exit 359. The website is located at YellowhorseLTD.com, and the shop can be reached by phone at 928-688-3192. ❑

A double blade Buck #532, with a "Rising Wisdom" theme in black jet, orange spiny oyster, turquoise and nickel silver.

Buck #503 Eagle Feather, customized by David Yellowhorse. The hand cut inlays are of bloody jasper and nickel silver, accented with blue turquoise. The blade is custom ground and blackened by Yellowhorse, a style he calls "Native Steel."

"Buffalo Mountain" Buck axe and #110 knife set with genuine turquoise, red jasper, and black onyx inlays by David Yellowhorse.