

The Soul of a Tool

By Michael Ullman

I went out to say good-bye and thanks while he was still alive. He started to have a very rapid decline, and although I had not seen him for about 10 years, I felt I needed to go. Having just hung up the phone with my wife, I grabbed the big brass punch sitting on my bench, and as that tool often does, it launched me back in time.

It is not a pretty tool, in fact it is big as far as gunsmithing tools go, and it is beat up. Made out of a 5/8th piece of hexagonal brass about five inches long, it carries many battle scars. The back is flared like a mushroom from repeated hammer blows. The middle is beat from being dropped, used as a pry bar, and thrown. The two knurled areas in the middle are almost worn smooth. The punch itself is smooth and clean, but only because about eight months ago I turned it in the lathe, cleaning up the surface as it was in pretty bad condition. Not to anthropomorphize, but that punch almost speaks to me and it often takes me back in time. Oh, not every time. Sometimes I just need a tool, and usually, if I need that big punch, it is because something needs to be beat, HARD. I can't tell you how many barrel band front sights it has removed, launching them air-borne from their bond with the barrel because I tried to squeak out just a little more lapping, only to curse my impatience. I suppose it just stirs memories.

As I sit in the chair holding that punch, the exact words I cannot recall, but they were something along the lines of, "It's a tough way to make a living." He spoke the truth to me that night, informing me that he really did not think that becoming a gunmaker was the best decision. Many had tried and most walked away, and those who did survive in the industry weren't exactly financially stable. Better to make it a hobby like he did and make money doing something else. But, if you must, you might as well have a good brass punch. Having never run a lathe before he showed me how and

told me to make a punch. I did all the feeding by hand, I was supposed to not just make a punch but learn a little about what every handle and dial did. It was the last and only time he ever discouraged me from my profession. So it began, my first ever gunsmithing project that finished with a punch that seems to have some sort of magic memory recall power over me.

Like the time after asking three electricians in the area how to wire a two phase motor and make a home built phase converter, and being told by all three that it could not be done, I called him and he told me how. When later that night I had my mill finally running, backwards, I placed a call at midnight, his time, asking



Photo by Michael Ullman

what I had done wrong. He told me which wires to move and waited on the phone while I changed them, and we shared my success together.

The punch works its magic some more and reminds me of a visit one time in his shop when he showed me the reamers he was making, piloted on both ends. He told me of the gun shows he went to; looking for and buying rusted out old muzzle loader barrels. He told me how he would bore them out with those reamers and then cut new rifling using a home built rifling machine that he had. It was quite the Rube Goldberg device, but it got the job done. I have a pistol barrel he gave me that night, still sitting in my tool box. It also reminds me of regret, as there

is never enough time for personal projects when you own your own shop, and I wish I could have showed him what I did with his gift to me.

Blacksmithing, gunmaking, tractor, oil well and home repair, he could do it all. Did I mention that he started an organic grass feed cattle business when he was in his late 60's? The punch speaks one last time taking me back to the night when we were talking on the phone and he told me that he was proud of me and how I was doing. He knew it was not easy but that he sometimes wished he had done it. He made muzzle loaders mostly, and although for the most part he was a hobby gunsmith, he was talented, better than many professionals. I remember the enthusiasm in his voice as he told me that he was really getting the hang of carving gun stocks and how much he enjoyed it. When I would go and visit him we would stay up until the wee hours of the night talking shop. Two weeks before his rapid decline he called me and we had a brief 20 minute conversation. We talked about guns, and I updated him on all things involving my family.

I got back late Monday night, and my cousin called Tuesday afternoon to inform me that my Uncle Ed had passed away an hour and a half ago. I had just made it in time and was so relieved that I did. He smiled at me once when he saw me and even called me by name. In a moment that we had alone I thanked him, not sure if he could hear me or not, as he was in and out, but I needed to say it.

After the call, I went up and sat in my chair in front of my bench, and grabbed that punch, and smiled. I'll miss him for sure, but he is in a better place and out of pain. That punch reminds me of a mentor I will carry with me for the rest of my life, and that often times, it is little gestures of kindness in life that have profound impact on someone. In this case, it is memories, which are somehow stored inside the soul, of a simple brass punch.