

Irwin Campbell named Who's Who 1989 Artist of the Year



ARTIST OF THE YEAR IRWIN CAMPBELL and son Virgil among the knife display at the Mile 20 I.R.B.I. shop. The opportunity to to check out the transformation of steel and meet the artist is well worth the trip.

by Laura Beam
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Art is not just confined to galleries, museums and traditional showcases, sometimes it's found in unexpected places and created not of paint and canvas but forged steel.

Open the door to the "I'd Rather Be Independent" Knife Shop (IRBI) and view the displays of shimmering polished blades with their handles of bone, horn, fossilized ivory, wood and man made materials. You'll find their appeal is more for their beauty than their utility.

Craftsman Irwin Campbell owner and operator of the shop at Mile 20 of the Seward Highway has recently been recognized for his work in the publication "Who's Who in Alaskan Arts and Crafts." He has been chosen as their 'Artist of the Year'.

"I don't really understand how they came about picking me, I don't even wear a beret," said the surprised Mr. Campbell.

Nominated by various sources from individuals to galleries the nine artists up for the 1989 award underwent an extensive review of their work spanning the past several years, said publisher Lory Leary.

Ms. Leary and a panel of seven judges, each from different parts of the state, made their choice on the individual's growth in the approach and dedication to their work.

"We base our choice on the artist's philosophical growth as reflected in their technique, style, method and presentation," said Ms. Leary.

Irwin Campbell began making knives in 1968 as a hobby while working in Prudhoe Bay. Lacking materials, one of his first creations is grasped by a handle

made from copper tubing. In the early seventies Campbell erected a log building at Mile 20 and established a small gift shop there including his knives among the merchandise. Eventually he did away with the gift shop and set up a showroom for his knives which has now grown to a display of over 400.

"We don't make them as art pieces, we make them to be used," he stated matter-of-factly.

But Campbell realizes that many people who purchase a skinning knife, for example, would not consider taking it on a hunting trip.

Campbell who obviously derives great pleasure from his work has made over 10,000 knives in the past twenty years. He uses carbon steel and forges each blade on an eighty year old electric trip hammer. Recently he began making

Damascus knives. Incorporating 512 layers of soft and hard metals laminated together the blade is given subtle swirling patterns in contrast to an overall even high polish from working with a single piece of steel.

Several members of the Campbell family are also involved in the creative process. Son Virgil now makes knives and sells them under his own name. Mrs. Campbell constructs custom leather sheaths, and daughter Clara Elge scribes blades with Alaskan scenes.

Mr. Campbell has received recognition in magazines catering to the knife collector and through several write-ups in Alaska Magazine. And now he has been featured as Artist of the Year in the new edition of "Who's Who in Alaskan Arts & Crafts". The book will be available at local shops and the library after February 15.