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## Utica's First Century

by Mark D. Zalesky

It's no secret that this country's cutlery industry has been under siege for decades, fighting for their survival against foreign competitors with significantly lower production costs. One by one, many of America's cutlery manufacturers large and small have fallen by the wayside, and their loss has been felt not only by the communities they were a part of but also by those of us who take pride in America's cutlery history and manufacturing prowess.

In my travels I encounter many knife enthusiasts with something to say about the state

of cutlery affairs; concerns about recent layoffs or closings, competition from imports, quality issues, design trends, public disinterest or what-have-you. Often, we arrive at the question of which American companies still produce traditional folding knives – and almost without fail, the survivor that surprises folks is Utica Cutlery Company of Utica, New York.

Yes, Virginia – there still is a Utica Cutlery Co., and they still produce traditional pocketknives as well as a variety of other products including modern linerslocks and lockbacks, multi-

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*Two exotic pearl gems that were once part of the Utica factory collection – a gunstock jack in peacock abalone shell and an enclosed backspring pen in green sea snail.*

## Ruana's Vic Hangas - The Real Deal

by Stephen Garger

The "real deal" was a frequently used expression while I was growing up and could variously apply to athletes, media personalities, local characters, manufactured products, and even love. Perhaps with good reason that phrase isn't heard too much anymore, so I was pleasantly surprised when it came to mind while my wife Kathy and I were talking with Vic and Ilona Hangas at their kitchen table in the small town of Bonner, about six miles east of Missoula, Montana. Ilona is the daughter and Vic the son-in-law of one of the founding custom knife-

makers in the United States, Rudy Ruana (1903-1986) and since 1983 they have been the owners of Ruana Knife Works, Inc.

Rudy, who made his first knives in the early 1920s while serving in the Army, retired from the business in 1984 and has begun to receive due recognition over the past decade or so. But I was curious about Vic, who went to work with Rudy forty-six years ago and, along with his sons Mark and Mike, has kept the 72 year-old knife business going for 26 years (and counting) since the founder retired. "Back in the mid 1960s when I

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*Left to Right: Knifemaking legend Rudy Ruana, Mark Hangas (Vic's son) and Vic Hangas display their wares outside the Ruana knife shop in 1979.*



*An early Vic Hargas-made cast handle knife.*



*Ruana's model 20B Skinner has been used as the logo knife since the mid-1990s.*



*A custom model 50A with bighorn sheep handle, made by Vic Hargas in 1988.*

*Continued from page 1*  
 joined Rudy there were probably only three full-time knifemakers in the country," noted Vic. "There were more people making knives, but only a couple were doing it full-time and earning a living from it."

In 1938 Rudy Ruana set up the shop in Bonner and made knives part time until fourteen years later, in 1952, when he decided to go at it full time. It is never easy for any small family business to succeed, yet Rudy and his wife Helmi raised three sons and two daughters by his labors. In 1964 Vic Hargas joined his father-in-law at Ruana Knife Works and he and Ilona have brought up three boys of their own. The business has been a family operation since its inception and no other knifemakers have ever worked there besides family members. As of this writing Vic still crafts knives side-by-side with Mark and Mike, although he is allowing himself more time to concentrate on a pastime he always enjoyed – painting – and is thinking about a series of paintings with the knife shop as the theme.


Vic Hargas did not start out making knives for a living. He married Ilona Ruana in 1956 and worked for the phone company, residing in Miles City and then Livingston, Montana. "Ilona was working in an office and made more money than me," Vic recalled. "We returned to

Missoula in June of 1958 and put our trailer right next to the shop." To which Ilona added that "Mark was born in August of 1958." Vic went to work for the Bonner Lumber Mill [which shut down in 2008] on the 6 PM to 4 AM night-shift. "During the day I would go to the knife shop where I would watch for a couple hours and think 'that'd be interesting,'" recalled Vic. "I always liked to work with my hands and that is when I'm happiest."

In October of 1959 Vic was rehired by the phone company and with his young family moved three hundred miles to the north central town of Havre, Montana. Later he was transferred within the state to Great Falls and then to Billings. "I worked in the central office installing and ten of us were chosen to go to school," said Vic. "In order to get ahead we would have had to move to Denver, Colorado and I did not want to raise a family there. Plus I love to hunt and fish and had to drive 60 miles to do that in Billings."

Instead of pursuing the phone company offer, Vic contacted his father-in-law. "In 1963 I wrote a letter to Rudy to ask if he would consider taking me on as an apprentice," said Vic. "Rudy had three sons and two were Air Force pilots, the other was not interested in the business

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Continued from page 14 and Rudy was set to retire when he turned 65 in 1968." Though Rudy agreed to the proposal, Vic noted it was with a stipulation: "That I apprentice for one year to see how it worked out." I jokingly asked Ilona if Vic had to write a formal letter to get her father to consent to the marriage! "Just about," she smilingly replied.

A person doesn't simply begin making knives after working to convert phones from an operator to a dial system, so I asked Vic to describe his development as a knifemaker under Rudy's tutelage. "The shop was pretty dusty and had a total of two light bulbs," recalled Vic. "I was first taught how to make sheaths - those were the ones with the deer head

and crossed knives. After a while I started to do a little polishing - from rough to medium and to the final stage. Then I got to grind and sand the handles until the big day, when Rudy said: 'We're going to put you on the forge.'"

"My first knife looked like a corkscrew," continued Vic. "Actually I got into it though and after five years, which is about

how long it takes to get proficient, I did nearly all of the forging, blade rough grinding, tempering and handle work. Rudy did most of the final grinding and final polishing." I won-

dered aloud what Rudy was like as a teacher. "He was stern and did not give a lot of compliments but would correct you if you were wrong," said Vic.

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Vic's personal hunting knife. The barely legible "TS" to the right of "Ruana" indicates tool steel, which Vic was experimenting with at the time.



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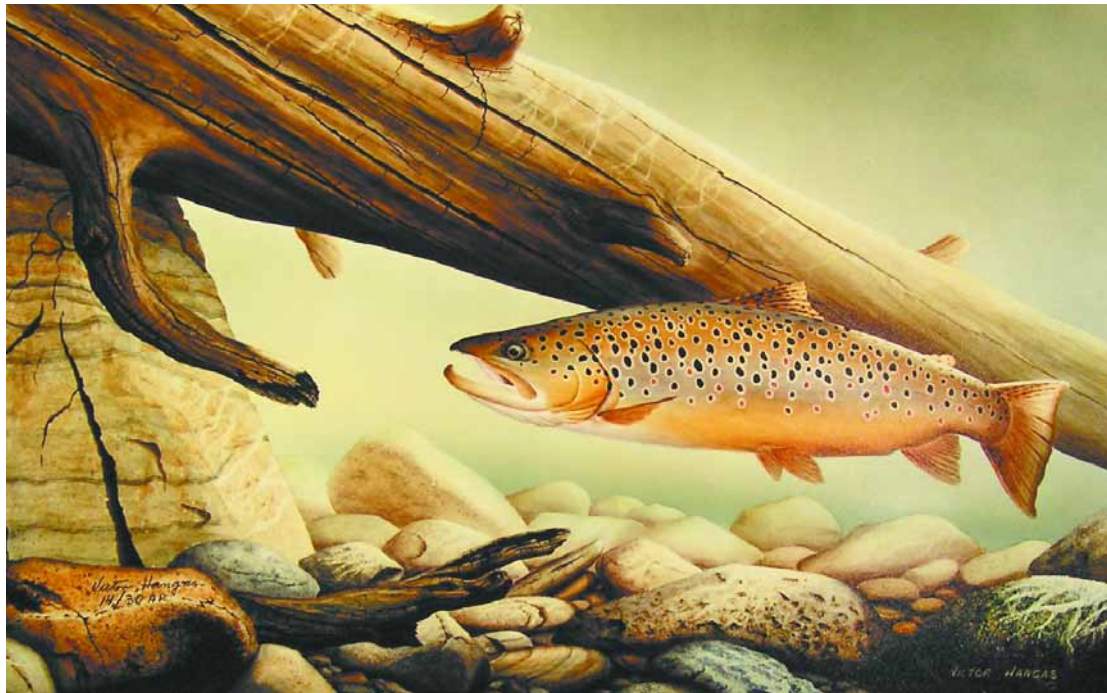
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An example of Vic Hangas' "other" artwork.



A non-catalog Ruana with the author's dogs scrimmed on elk horn by Linda Karst-Stone.



One of three folders ever made by Vic.

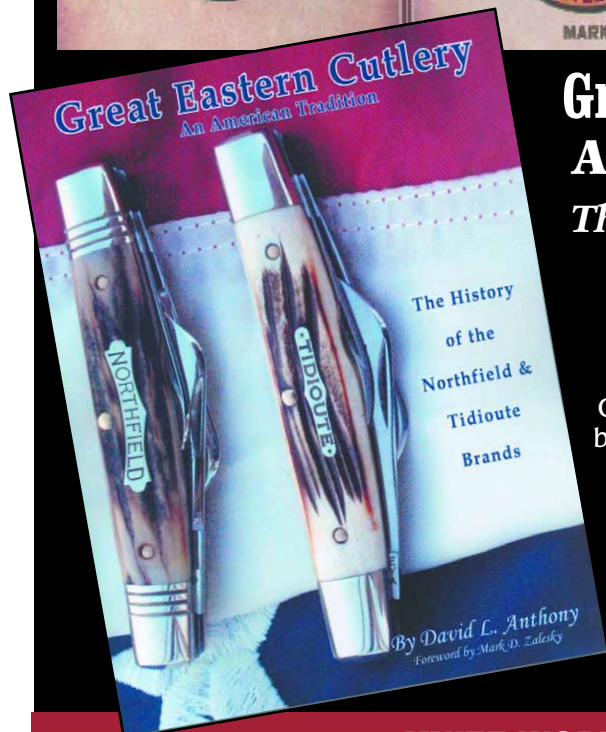
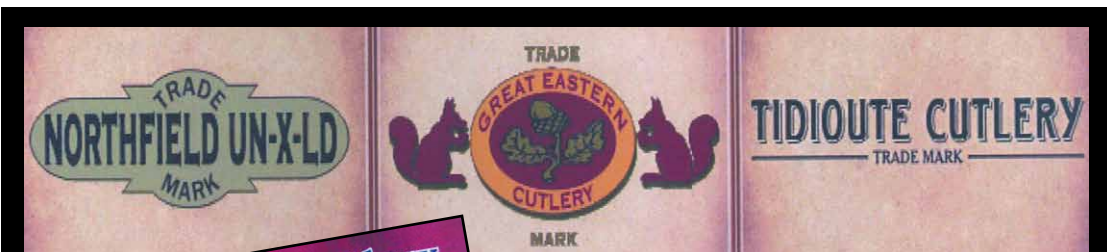
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 "Toward the end though he told me 'You're the best hammer man I've ever seen' and that was the finest compliment I ever got from him!"

While he had planned to retire in 1968 Rudy stayed fifteen years past that. "It was because we took on dealers when I started and with them came more work," explained Vic. "I could always tell there were more orders when I saw Rudy coming back from the post office because he'd have a bounce in his step. At one point though we had too many orders and it was getting overwhelming. Because high quality was a big thing we made a choice to stay small." That choice is also tied to a

determination to pretty much stick to one particular style of knife, rather than offering a wide selection of blade patterns or various adornments and I asked Vic for his thinking behind that decision. "There are three things about our knives that are key to what works," said Vic. "First, they're functional; second is quality; and third is they are comfortable to handle." To my eye at least there is also something very 'clean' in their design, best described by Ilona who observed "They have a simple beauty."

Over the 46 years that Vic has been making knives the shop has not seen too many modifications. "If it's working,

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## Great Eastern Cutlery An American Tradition The History of the Northfield and Tidioute Brands

by David L. Anthony

A detailed history of Northfield Knife Co., Tidioute Cutlery Co., and modern upstart Great Eastern Cutlery, the current holder of both trademarks. With much new research, stories from those who made the knives, countless historical and knife photos, and a reprint of an 1869 Northfield catalog. Also includes many GEC factory photos and a complete list of the company's production numbers through 2009.

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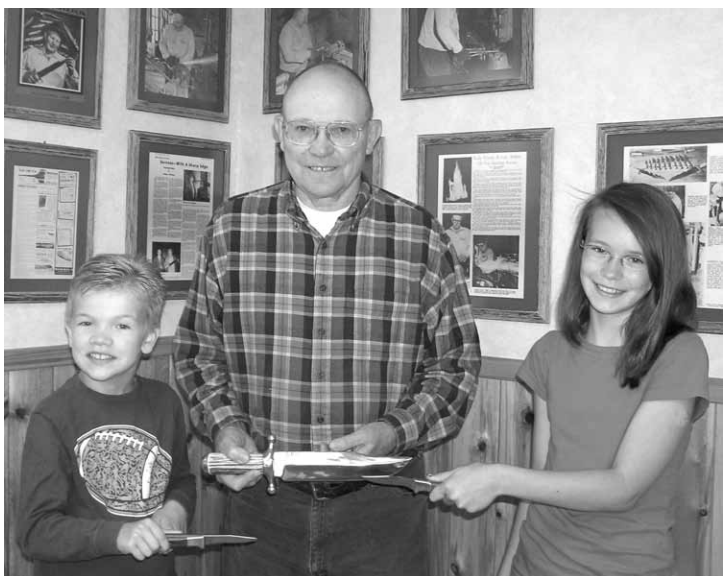


**Vic Hargas rough grinding a hand forged Ruana blade on a stone wheel.**

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there's no reason to change," stated Vic. "We [Rudy and Vic] refined some of the processes like grinding and tempering to speed things up and I had to be a little bit of a psychologist to get those done." 1095 high carbon steel is still used in the Ruana "sticker" and "skinner" knives, with a 5160 chrome alloy for the bowies. "We went to 1095 in 1962 because of its cutting quality and it is still the best cutting steel around," opined Vic. When I asked about using stainless steel, he shook his

head and commented that "Stainless does not lend itself to forging." Perhaps the most readily recognizable feature of Ruana knives is the cast aluminum handles. "The cast aluminum is unique to us and the elk horn inserts are traditional," agreed Vic. "Rudy was always hell for stout and we really refined the casting process. It's a bitch of a job – hot and heavy and there are still days when it doesn't work. I think it may be barometric."

I was curious about how the rest of the Hargas family became involved in the



**Vic Hargas with his grandkids (Rudy's great-grandkids), Jack and Kate.**

business. "Ilona went back to work in 1978 to be sure we had a financial fallback plan and she also worked with me in the shop handling correspondence and shipping," said Vic. "Mark came on when he was eighteen in 1976 and is such a fine detail person in his polishing and grinding. In fact we really had good production going back then when Rudy, Mark and I were there. Matt was part time [he no longer works in the shop] and Mike joined in 1984." Mike started out with bookkeeping, and today maintains the computer side of things; makes knives with his father and brother; and oversees the new showroom/store which has various Ruana pictures and artifacts on display as well as accessories and an occasional knife for sale inside a glass case counter. "Mike received his MBA and had several good job opportunities," Ilona proudly noted. "But he decided he wanted to raise his family in this area and be a part of the business."

Given the history of Vic's family with knife making, it intrigued me that

a slight alteration of the trademark used on knives and sheaths, from "R.H. Ruana" to simply "Ruana"; as so often the case with this long-standing business, there was 'no reason to change.'

Given his nearly fifty years as a knifemaker, I had to ask Vic what he regarded as the major developments the knife world has undergone during that time span. "The number of makers has certainly grown," he said. "Then the mechanization and finally the damascus phenomenon. Damascus is nice, but time consuming stuff." When the shop does turn out a special knife with a damascus blade, the steel is provided primarily by Gerome Weinand, a highly respected Montana bladesmith.

At 73, Vic has begun backing off his knife making and focusing more on the shop's leather work. "I still do some blade grinding, but not very much heavy stuff," he said. "Leather work is probably what I most enjoy. For years we got our leather from Muir and McDonald

working on ideas for a "Limited Edition 75th Year Anniversary Knife" coming up in 2013. Mike Hargas informed me that they are also continuing discussions with American companies and bladesmiths about developing a series of folders and possibly kitchen knives that reflect the traditional Ruana design and quality. "This will only occur if the quality can be maintained and the product is completely produced in the United States," averred Mike.

What does the future hold for this historic Montana small family business? Mark Hargas, mid-way through his fourth decade as a knifemaker, is fifty-two and he and his wife Michelle have no children. Forty-six year old Mike and his wife Kirsten have an eleven-year old daughter, Kate, who appropriately vacillates between wanting to be a knifemaker or an actress; and a son, Jack who at eight and despite his lineage is too young to have given the matter thought. "It would be great to keep it in the family, but



**This custom skinner sports ironwood inserts in place of the traditional elk horn.**

"Hargas" was never formally added to the company's title. As it happened, when Vic bought the business he talked about that with Rudy, but ultimately the decision was made in 1984 to incorporate as Ruana Knife Works, Inc. "I was born a Ruana," said Ilona. "That's the name we decided to stay with even though as my father got older, Vic and Mark made thousands of Ruana knives and sheaths that he never touched." Vic nodded agreement, adding: "Ruana" was the recognized brand name we had helped develop over the last twenty years Rudy worked in the shop and we also wanted to honor Rudy while carrying on what he had started." So aside from

Co. in Oregon and they went out of business after 175 years. Now we get leather from Wicket & Craig in Pennsylvania, which is the best we can buy."

Given Vic's lessening role in knife production I wondered what business decisions were being made to compensate for what is essentially a one-third reduction in the work force. "We're using the internet more and developing some limited knife runs," Vic said. The company is also planning to introduce the Ruana Damascus Sidekick as one of those 'limited runs,' which will be the second collaboration with Weinand. Other collaborative knives may follow and the family is currently

there is no guarantee that will happen," reflected Vic. We'll ultimately do what we feel is appropriate and until then continue to make knives to the best of our ability for the indefinite future." As our conversation drew to a close and Vic, Ilona, Kathy and I got up from the table, I knew that no matter what, those 'hell for stout' knives would be around a long time. They are 'the real deal' and so is the family that has always made them.

Interested readers can contact the Hargas family by writing to Ruana Knife Works, Inc., P.O. Box 520, Bonner, MT 5982, or phoning 406-258-5368; the Ruana website is located at [www.ruanaknives.com](http://www.ruanaknives.com). □