THE BOWIE KNIFE

September 19, 1827- near Natchez, Mississippi.

It was a time where personal honor was worth more than life, and slights to it could be deadly. Several men came to a sandbar in the Mississippi River as a result of such a slight—for a duel, where two aggrieved men would settle their differences with violence; in this case, black powder pistols.

The main contestants had observers as well as “seconds,” who were essentially referees for the duel. One of those seconds this day was a Kentucky-born and Louisiana-raised slave trader, land speculator, businessman, farmer, adventurer, and international man of mystery named James Bowie.

There are many versions of the duel, which started off between two people and quickly involved the whole group, each with his own viewpoint, and we won’t go into that today. Suffice to say, this article can’t do justice to Bowie’s whole story and only covers the essentials of the duel.

Bowie got drawn into combat after both duelists shot at each other and missed and decided to shake hands and be done. The spectators weren’t so amicable. Unfinished business between two others there might have been a factor.

One “second” from the side opposite Bowie’s friend, Major James Wright, shot Bowie. Bowie promptly drew his “big knife,” a gift from his brother Rezin Bowie, and began to chase down Wright for payback.

During the chase he was shot again, hit in the head with Wright’s empty pistol, stabbed by two other men, and finally stabbed in the chest by Wright with a sword cane. Unimpressed and determined, Bowie disemboweled Wright and maimed another antagonist who had shot him.

Two dead and four wounded later, the “duel” ended, with Bowie still alive despite severe wounds and most of the opposite team trying to kill him. Bowie was not a man you trifled with, and everyone knew it going in. This explains everyone’s desire to neutralize him most.

All of this happened in an age without emergency medicine (or much medicine at all). So strongly were these men determined to support one another and preserve their honor as they perceived it that they risked grievous wounds that, even if not immediately fatal, very often would be later. This draws a sharp contrast with modern men and their tendencies in overcoming personal problems and differences, and behavior in general.

Word spread rapidly of the duel and the human juggernaut with the “big knife.” Soon, people wanted a knife just like Bowie’s.

The martial use of the knife, to include “big” ones, is not remarkable; the Gurkhas of Nepal with their famous Khukuri short swords and the Filipinos being examples of only two specializing cultures.

Contemporaries like the Arkansas Toothpick were common in period militaries when firearms weren’t reliable nor capable of high fire volume. Soldiers, after a volley or two, closed in and engaged with bayonets and blades.

Just what Bowie’s “big knife” really looked like and where it had come from was a big question immediately following the sensationalism. This complicated efforts by blacksmiths to make one just like his, and the results were interesting.

Arkansas knife smith James Black may have made Bowie’s original knife, which we have a possible example of here.

For these reasons an exact definition of what a “Bowie Knife” is has evolved over time; somewhat due to different understandings of what works best in such a knife as well as fresh ideas. At some

point, the following characteristics settled out.

1. *They're big*. "Big" is relative, and even the largest Bowies aren't swords. James Bowie's original knife may have been about nine inches long, which later would be considered something of a minimum length. A historical standard is that they are heavy enough to chop like a cleaver.
2. *They have a distinctive blade "clip point" profile*, with a sharp bottom edge, a blunt top edge, and the last third or so of the blade being formed into an usually upswept leading point. This lets the blade chop *and* stab.
3. *They have a swedge*. That last third on the top and the point forms what is called a "swedge" on the top edge, and is sharpened to make it usable for not only stabbing forward but delivering a "back cut" which uses the leading point and blade weight to deliver an unexpected, severe, and often fatal wound.

As the design evolved, probably through the violent progress we will discuss below, this began with the simple stabbing point and improved. A lot of "Bowie" knives have the right profile without the sharpening as manufacturers forgot why it was built this way. Few contemporary "Bowie knives" are built with a full understanding of the term.

A very lethal short-range weapon had arrived on the American scene during a very violent time period. Guns were expensive and, until the Walker Colt showed up, were insufficient to last the day in a short-range fight alone.

You had a pre-Civil War frontier already rife with danger and conflict, the Texas Revolution and Mexican Wars close together, followed by a bitter Civil War and immediately upon that ending, the continuing Westward expansion. Many aggrieved Confederates went westward.

The economy and culture around all of this, and along the busy Mississippi and Ohio rivers, attracted and engaged men possessed of a rigid personal concept of honor and purpose.

They were also disposed to short-term thinking as survival in this environment was often difficult.

Cattle drovers and steamboat crews alike along these vital commerce lanes put in long days and arrived at the end of the journey to get paid off amidst a destination with plenty of things to buy—including alcohol and women—and bars and gambling establishments to blow off steam in.

This culture subsidized and facilitated their violent behavior and often-short lives as it did so many other things and the Bowie knife evolved.

Many “Bowie Knives” would be made and used all over the United States, Mexico, and Central America—with the British importing some of the better ones here, as well.

During the Civil War, made-in-England Bowies were sold to both sides with the appropriate “Death to_____’s” engraved on them for the target market. Business is business, after all.

Bowie’s knife may have been one of the first examples of a weapon being mass marketed to consumers without them understanding what they were getting; we could mention the “assault rifles” and “plastic handguns” of modern times here to see this gimmick still works.

And like them, the “thing” would finally evolve over the years in several forms to perhaps resemble the original only in passing.

Which brings us to New Orleans, and possibly the last deadly stop in the Bowie knife’s evolution.

Different interpretations of the Bowie design, with some common characteristics. From top to bottom: the Von Tempsky Bowie (11" blade) is an older design figurative of the pre-Walker Colt era. The Cold Steel Laredo Bowie and the TSD Combat System Bowie (both 10.5") are more modern interpretations, as is the SOG Super Bowie (blade a mere 7.5" long) at the very bottom - originally based on the knife issued to U.S. Special Forces in Vietnam. [All knives from author's collection.]

Texas knifemaker Bill Bagwell was regarded as one of the best historians for and contemporary makers of Bowie knives. This authorized factory series Ontario "Hell's Belle" was a production version of a custom knife he often produced and may be close in style to what would have been seen on the Mississippi riverfront and in New Orleans in a "Gentleman's" belt circa 1870. A Bagwell original is now worth thousands of dollars. From author's collection.

The French Louisiana capital city of New Orleans was from 1718 a major hub for both above-board

and illicit activities ranging from shipping to piracy. Its position at the mouth of the wide, navigable Mississippi River from the Gulf of Mexico was ideal to line pockets from.

Goods arriving there could go all of the way up to the northern reaches of the United States, and the reverse, on the steamboats that plied the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers from roughly 1814.

New Orleans had two other things that mattered for our purposes: a highly refined French and Spanish concept of honor, and a tradition of dueling and sophisticated sword and knife fighting. It was very easy to find yourself in a fight here.

When the Bowie knife arrived in this place in the hands of people who were particular about how best to kill someone with it, along with all of the out-of-towners passing through, it was a match made in Hell.

All of the sword art know-how was promptly played forward, and it is unknown how many bodies littered the rivers and bayous over the next hundred years; the last duel was supposedly fought there in 1890.

No wonder Anne Rice thought the place was run by vampires. It probably still is.

Across the growing United States, the Bowie knife in its various incarnations was considered so lethal it drew special consideration under many laws. It is only recently that you could carry a "Bowie" knife in Texas without great restrictions.

Some states outlawed them or considered use akin to guilt of premeditated murder. Bowies, and men who could use them, spilled the blood and, often literally, the guts of opponents all the way from back alleys to the floors of state legislatures.

We don't hear anyone in Washington railing about banning knives these days, though; perhaps because of them lacking a thirty round magazine or even being firearms.

From the dearth of discussion about deadly knives on our streets today, perhaps American politicians think they are no longer relevant weapons.

This reflects, as my links illustrate, culture and economics versus the science of effectiveness.

Even on the frontier and in Texas, the Bowie knife shrank as guns became more useful and lethal.

Men of action don't like carrying any more weight on the trail than they must. But I say that the knife, and in particular, a properly designed large Bowie, is a very relevant weapon and deserves consideration for use, if only as a backup weapon.

It is true that the American criminal element, for various reasons, continues to be able to get and favor firearms—particularly handguns or shortened rifles, i.e., "stocked pistols" for their activities.

I would posit that the mentality and commitment of someone willing to take a blade and stab or slice another person's body and get their blood all over them is different from the mind of someone who will only shoot a gun from a distance; especially when it's mutual combat.

A well-handled Bowie knife, built in the proper configuration, is at contact distance every bit as lethal as a firearm and a superior combat knife all around. Further out, a firearm retains its superior effectiveness—if one can draw and use it in time.

For those interested, I offer the following links:

Cold Steel (in the Laredo CPM-3V Bowie, you probably have the best production fighting Bowie available today, from a company building some of the best hard use knives. (Smart TTP readers will, however, shop for better prices than on Cold Steel's home site)

James Keating- Comtech. He has some great combatives material, including some specific to the use of the Bowie knife.

Dwight McLemore: Big Knife Fighting System

Dwight McLemore: Advanced Bowie Techniques

Train hard with your guns, but never forget: When the ammunition runs out or the gun breaks… cold iron is still the master of them all.

Author's 10" custom Bowie with two Fleur-De-Lis in the guard.
Beware getting a knife so pretty you don't want to damage it.

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