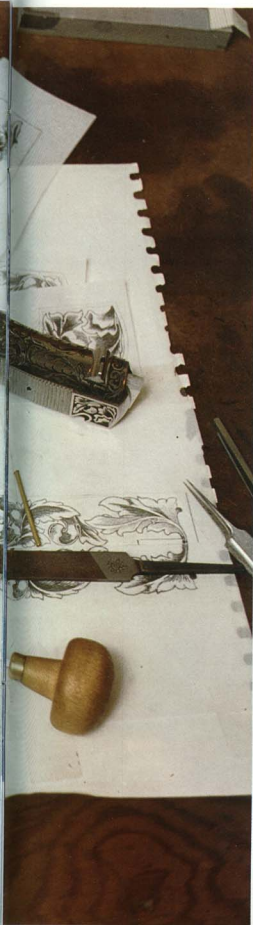




Gun is nearly finished, but must await other jobs. Tools of the trade include hammers, gravers, chisels, scribes



the Graven Image

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PHOTOS BY JON FARRAR

Background, interests and opportunity changed Steve Lindsay from a nail filer into a gun engraver of exquisite quality

OF ALL THE MANY forms of art that people participate in, perhaps the most difficult is gun engraving, which requires patience, strength and imagination in addition to a particularly demanding art talent. Gun engraving is considered so difficult because it means working with hard steel. Because the work is small and delicate, it also requires good vision and steadiness, plus specialized equipment for holding and actually accomplishing the cuts. Also, because there are so few people involved in this exacting art (only about 200 nationally), acquiring experience and tools is very frustrating.

How Steve Lindsay of Holdrege began engraving probably goes back to the time when he was put to work filing nails—carpentry nails, not the finger type. That was in his parents' jewelry store when he was about 12 years old. His parents, Frank and Betty Lindsay, thought it was about time Steve started learning the craft, especially metal work. Filing nails into square shapes probably didn't seem very constructive at the time, but then





Blown up to show detail of Steve's work, these bolsters are on high-quality custom knives (opposite) popular with collectors



there must be something worthwhile involved.

About that same time, Steve did some work on an engraving machine, one of those things with the motor and router bit which carves names on trophy plates, charms and bracelets. While these machines are fun to run, they do not allow much creativity because they are guided by templates.

Some families tend to be more artistic than others, and Steve was fortunate in this regard. His great grandfather, A.R. "Doc" Weaver of Harvard, was a watchmaker, jeweler and engraver. Steve's grandfather, Frank Lindsay of Hastings, was a fine artist who taught classes and did designing. And, his father is a quiet, multi-talented man—a master goldsmith and diamond setter who has designed and created many beautiful pieces of jewelry. He is also a fine watchmaker and trained gemologist, and has some innate mechanical knack which enables him to design and machine equipment.

Thus, when Steve was about 12, he spent much of his spare time drawing animals, comic characters and people. It was also at the age of 12 that Steve began hunting, and from the beginning he loved the sport and guns. When he showed an interest in and aptitude for art, his father was delighted.

With an apt pupil in the shop, Frank doubtless devoted much time to developing these abilities in Steve, but it was several years before Steve first took up a hand graver. Such equipment was always in the shop, and one day he "whittled" some initials on a brass plate. While hardly a masterpiece, the task intrigued and attracted him, and from that time on he was a serious student.

In 1975 he telephoned an expert engraver, John Rohner, who invited him to visit his shop in Boulder, Colo., and contributed much to his interest by giving him advice and training. Meeting such a notable in the trade was a memorable experience for him, Steve says, but there was still much more to come.

To learn more, he read and reread *The Art of Engraving* by Bruce Meeks, and eventually phoned him to ask questions. This was later followed by a visit to him in the summer of 1975, and more knowledge was garnered—along with some advice to get as much background in steel working as possible.

Not wasting the advice, Steve enrolled at the Milford campus of Southeast Community College in the tool and die section. He graduated in 1979 totally committed to being an engraver, that decision finalized following two other meetings. These were with two of the finest engravers in the U.S., Winston Churchill and Lynton McKenzie, both of whom he met at a National Rifle Association convention in Cincinnati in 1978. Both men were supportive and helpful, and certainly Steve has been no disappointment to them. His work now, after only a couple of years of serious practice, appears to need no more improvement.

Much more effort goes into the design than a casual viewer would imagine, as it must be tediously drawn and reworked and integrated into the shape of the object to be engraved. In fact, the basic design to be carved is unbelievably detailed and difficult, but is so critical to the end product that the effort is justified.

The size and shape of the area to be decorated are major considerations. The engraving must be appropriate in size, character and position. Then, the design must be transferred into the metal via a painstaking means—by hand. At this point some very practical considerations come into play. A firm yet undamaging means of grasping the work piece is critical. The work must be able to rotate to expose all surfaces, be well illuminated, and rigid.

It is not possible to go to the corner hardware store and pick up such equipment. Even professional gear is of limited value or extremely expensive, but that didn't deter the Lindsays. Discussing what was needed, the vise and most other equipment was designed, then home built—a



major accomplishment itself.

One can readily appreciate how difficult it is to cut a deep design into a hard metal. The traditional method is to use an extremely hard graver, tapping on it with a small hammer, thus removing a chip or thread of metal at a time. Here again, however, the inventive experimenter came through with a modern alternative.

Years ago, Frank Lindsay started dabbling with a small, hand-held, powered chisel for intricate jewelry work. Later, they learned that with modifications, steel engraving could be done with this handpiece. It permitted maneuverability for tiny details, yet power enough to cut deeply—although only a little at a time.

This development made it more of an art than a craft. It did not make it any easier or faster, though, Steve says. In fact, it became more difficult and time-consuming because with the better control of this device, he was challenged to surpass the quality of bank-note engraving.

During the early stages, Steve tried to do engraving in his spare time, but interruptions and the problems of developing equipment made it tough to concentrate. After some soul searching and financial sponsorship from his folks, Steve made a big decision. He joined an elite corps, one of the most limited professions in the world, about one year ago. Since then he has devoted most of his

time to custom knives, which presently are much sought after by collectors. He is also nearly finished with his first handgun—a Browning automatic—which has taken more hours to complete than Steve cares to admit. While worth many thousands of dollars when finished, that will not return much per hour. It is, however, a masterpiece, and hopefully will be followed by many more.

No two pieces of engraving can be the same, and most engravers probably prefer not to duplicate designs. While it would be easier, it somehow lessens the creativity.

As with other art forms, success requires exposure to as many people—potential customers—as possible, with as good a product as possible. Art is much different than a manufactured item, which is made as good and as cheaply as possible from the start. An artist tends to improve within the confines of his "style," up to his full potential. That may be achieved rather quickly, or it may take years. In Steve's case, it appears he has reached a high level within a short time, and improvement from this point on can surely be only slight.

Becoming one of a handful of gun engravers, and attaining such amazing quality so quickly, must bring satisfaction. It certainly will bring him fame, as well, for he seems destined to become a familiar name in this exciting trade.

Steve still uses hammer when preparing for inlaying gold within an engraved design





Before actually starting engraving on any knife or gun, Steve makes detailed drawings (below), themselves a work of art, for each area

