

# Bob Dozier: A State of His Art

by Stephen Garger

Bob Dozier is a seminal figure in recent knife-making history and with nearly fifty years as a successful maker his perspective is far ranging and meaningful. Straightforward and candid, Dozier's views about the knife world run deeper than mere opinions and carry the weight of a genuine point-of-view fashioned by a life which embodies the expression "Been there, done that." While we spoke I took notes as quickly as possible because I felt that nearly everything he said was worth having a record of. In addition, I was being swept along in the wake of genuine excitement created by Dozier's zeal and his recent projects. "I enjoy the fact that I'm challenged every day of my life," said Bob.

Dozier is nearing his seventh decade and his dynamic view of the future called to mind a late 1970s book entitled *The Seasons of a Man's Life*. The volume presented a well researched theory of the adult male life cycle, validating that personal development does not halt in the late teens, but continues throughout life and with new challenges. The male mid-life 'season' has received a lot of attention, but there follows another phase the book's authors term the "Late Adult Era." Each 'era' is preceded by a transition period that when dealt with appropriately, allows the man to enter upon the next stage of life with an invigorated sense of renewed purpose. Not only would I say that Bob Dozier has successfully 'transitioned,' but his enthusiastic and forward-thinking attitude is contagious and especially reassuring in the context of my newly minted sixty years.

Dozier's grandfather taught him how to make knives from 1952 to around 1954. With that early beginning, he refined his knifemaking craft through years occasionally interspersed with employment as an ironworker, which at one point included honchoing about 90 ironworkers on a nuclear power plant project. [More detailed biographical information is available on Dozier's excellent website at [www.dozierknives.com](http://www.dozierknives.com).] At the time we spoke he was getting ready to open a new knife shop in a former church building near St. Paul, a small Northwest Arkansas town about an hour's drive from Dozier's Springdale shop.



Above, Bob Dozier's 1943 Fighter draws some obvious inspiration from the famous Randall Springfield fighters of WWII fame.

Here, a classic micarta handled drop point hunter pays homage to Bob Loveless. Photo by Weyer.



I've started a handmade leather knife line for the saddle making industry," reports Bob. "I'll be leaving the leather knife shop in town [Springdale] and having the new shop in St. Paul will give me more room for the leather knives." The addition of this new knife line emerged as a clear focus during our discussion, complimented nicely by Dozier's recent efforts to perfect his leather sheaths. "Bob Loveless told me once that if I ever wanted to learn how to make knives I should look him up. That was a long time ago, and a few years back I wanted to improve my leather sheathmaking skills and contacted him and asked if his offer still stood," said Dozier. "I ended up spending a week cutting leather out for Loveless and learned a lot. I saw him make two sheaths, but he wouldn't let me use his sewing machine, although he sold me one." The outcome of the visit to Loveless speaks volumes about the Dozier work ethic and persistence: "I came back; made fifty sheaths and then cut them open to see why they didn't work. Since then I've made 1500 sheaths. I'm getting better."

I couldn't leave the topic of sheaths without asking Bob about his horizontal Kydex version, which to me represents a nearly perfect piece of design work. "There wasn't a big demand for that sort of sheath [in the early 1970s,]" recalled Dozier. "I was at my first Guild Show about that time and Blackie Collins had made a little milky colored plastic sheath that was fabricated, not molded. It worked wonderfully, like everything Blackie Collins did. Next time I saw something like that was 1971. A local guy was making fabricated Kydex sheaths for divers and those were the first Kydex sheaths I ever saw. I got interested and Tom Maringer showed me how to heat and mold the Kydex."

Dozier's horizontal Kydex sheaths have a clip riveted to them that slips over the belt and is pulled very slightly away from the main

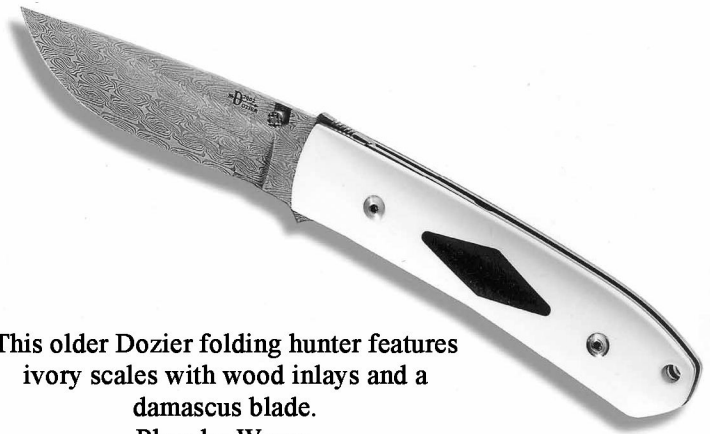
body of the sheath to remove the knife. "I first designed the clip for a top-down draw," said Bob. "It was easy to get the knife out but I would cut myself, so I had to figure out how to remove the knife from the top of the sheath, so the edge would come out first." Once the design was perfected, it didn't take long to catch on. "I originally developed the sheath to sell some of my youngest son's leftover kit knives into the Kydex sheaths, took a couple to a gun show, and they were all bought out the first day," related Bob. "This was in late 1987 when I had gone back to work for A.G. Russell until 1993 [Dozier worked for A.G. Russell in the early 1970s before a return to ironworking], and the bulk of my work for A.G. was to make the Morseth knives. I made those knives in my own shop and A.G. furnished the materials." Dozier continued developing his Kydex sheaths during this period. "I began to experiment with Kydex around 1989 and from then to 1994 I sold 4,000



Above, Dozier's stepson and right-hand man Daniel Crotts sharpening blades in the shop.

knives with Kydex sheaths to A.G.," said Bob. "I didn't start the Kydex sheath business, but over the next five to seven years everybody wanted a sheath like Dozier [made]." In addition to the horizontal belt version, Dozier has gone on to develop other Kydex sheath styles, including a vertical belt, military/divers vertical, shoulder and a neck sheath.

Bob is renowned for his D2 steel, which is utilized almost exclusively in his hunting, military/tactical, and "Dozier Classic" series of Arkansas Made knives, the name for Dozier's incorporated business which crafts knives priced with the average working man in mind. "I had a lot of D2 sitting around the shop, but my heat was initially terrible. The first 100 knives



This older Dozier folding hunter features ivory scales with wood inlays and a damascus blade. Phoo by Weyer.

[with D2] were horrible and I began to realize this was not working," said Bob. "I talked to a metallurgist and to people at a steel company and began to develop my own heat treatment." Given that it took 1500 leather sheaths for Dozier to feel he was 'getting better' one can only speculate about the time, effort and repetitions that went into the development of his D2 heat treatment. What does not require speculation is the result, which turns out good enough that Dozier has been referred to as "Doctor D2" and is responsible for popularizing the steel's use throughout the knife industry.

I was curious about how the idea of providing a handmade knife that the average person could afford first occurred to him.

Below, a group of finished Arkansas Made hunters ready to be packed and shipped to A.G. Russell Knives.





“My youngest son wanted something to sell at gun shows when he was young and not everybody can buy a \$1000 knife,” said Dozier. “I started with kits for him to sell and found out there was a big market that wasn’t touched. One of my heroes, Mike Walker is an unbelievable craftsman but needs fewer customers for his super precise, high dollar knives than I do with the lower cost working man knives. I sell nearly half of my products to A.G. Russell at a discount. In turn I don’t have to worry about selling a knife on my own in order to cover rent, payroll and other expenses. A.G. has 500,000 plus people in his database and they see my name, which contributes to my business big time.”

Providing a high quality and reasonably priced handmade knife gave Dozier access to a significant segment of knife enthusiasts who continue to provide the bulk of his sales. My guess is there are a good number of people in the knife world whose first handmade was a Dozier and many of them are still

using that same knife. I can attest from experience that a Dozier Arkansas Made riding in a horizontal Kydex sheath is an exemplary union of form and function whether in the woods, about town, or on a fishing boat. Bob reasons that “The Arkansas Made is a real toll and except for a collector, why would anybody need more?”

In addition to Arkansas Made, Dozier maintains a sole proprietorship business that carries the designation “Dozier Knives” and is the vehicle through which Dozier continues to enhance his knifemaking skills. “I did mirror polished knives in the ‘70s and was one of the good ones back then; did some in the early ‘90’s and stopped,” Bob related. “Three years ago I started mirror polishing once more and struggled with it. I put together my own techniques and it was hard work but I started to get good again.” He uses a variety of steels for the Dozier Knives line including all of the powder metals. “CTS-40CP is clean, polishes beautifully and just cuts and cuts,” Bob noted in response to a query for an example of a powder metal he prefers. The mirror polished blades are part of Bob’s “Dozier Knives” line, which also includes his popular folding knives. “I’ll probably make a hundred folders this year,” estimated Dozier. “I enjoy making folders but do not want to do that 100% of the time.” Bob’s continued growth as a knifemaker is an outcome of considerable experience; his high standards and sincere hard work. “I’m as honest with my knives as I can make myself,” says Bob.

Since he had previously mentioned his admiration for Michael Walker, I asked Dozier about some of the other makers he regarded highly. “Ed Henry was the best knifemaker in the business at that time, with about 90% of his attention directed toward the bowie. Henry was a meticulous maker and just precise, precise, precise. He was as good as he thought he was,” declared Bob. “Buster Warenski come out of the [Harvey] Draper shop and I first saw Buster in 1972 at the Guild Show in Kansas City. Buster was a primo and that had nothing to do with the engraving and jewels that came later.

I saw a couple of his plain little, brass guarded daggers at the Show and his knives were just so perfect. And there's Steve Johnson, who first made knives in Gil Hibben's shop and worked in Draper's shop, where he learned meticulous finish work. Then Loveless taught him how to make knives quicker and still be good."

The highest praise was saved the last. "Harry Morseth is the greatest knifemaker who ever lived," holds Dozier in his characteristically direct fashion. "Morseth would buy his blades from Norway, regrind them and they would out cut a Randall 2 or 3 to 1," said Bob.

"Morseth handles did not rely on epoxy but were drilled and broached with a rectangular hole to fit the tang and then precisely fitted with small wooden shims which were driven in for a perfect fit. Harry could disassemble a handle and then repair it." Dozier learned this method



**From the Dozier Classics line, this Skinner model combines stacked leather and stag for a very traditional look. Blade steel is of course, D2.**

I would have been remiss to not ask Dozier to assess Dozier's knifemaking skills. "I do not think there are very many makers better than me," opined Bob. "I have no interest in art work and those kinds of embellishments but I can match anybody's quality." To get to the level Dozier described, there has to be a pretty strong motivation. I asked him about that. "I like a challenge," said Bob. "I do not have a 'passion' like some makers. The type of work I do is very plain, and to do it in superb fashion is a challenge. And Daniel is very critical and my biggest asset."

The "Daniel" Bob is referring to is his stepson and fellow knifemaker Daniel Crotts. "Dan is of the utmost importance to me, is managing everything and is a very important part of my business," emphasized Dozier. "I worked hard to build this business and spent fourteen to fifteen years grooming Daniel." Bob owns the

and is the sole proprietorship Dozier Knives. "Daniel will be brought in on Arkansas Made as part owner of the corporation," reported Bob. "Eventually it all will land with Dan but there is order worked out for that yet."

"This is a competitive business and to make a living I have to have help because it takes a lot of inventory [to make a good profit]," said Bob. Dan Crotts and the excellent staff that Dozier surrounds himself with go a long way to providing that 'help' and in making the business a success. Other major factors in that success are the long standing connection with A.G. Russell and Bob's collaboration agreements with Boker Knives, who manufactures the Dozier design "Boker Plus Anchorage Pro Skinner" and with Ka-Bar, who produces several versions of Bob's folding knives.

Bob Dozier has a lot happening in the new decade of the century and his life, including opening a new shop; expanding the leatherworking knife line; crafting the higher end Dozier Knives; and maintaining the successful Arkansas Made Corporation, including provision for the continuation of that entity with Daniel Crotts. Given Bob's competitive attitude and energy level he will certainly persist and succeed in meeting the challenges he sets for himself; always head-on and with the same set of values he brings to all his endeavors. "Diligence and hard work are the most important elements that go into the business," concludes Bob. "I then make it a point to be honest with my customers, as they are the key to any successful enterprise."

For more information contact Bob Dozier Knives, P.O. Box 1941, Springdale, AR 72765, phone 888-823-0023 or visit the Dozier website at [www.dozierknives.com](http://www.dozierknives.com). After all these years, A.G. Russell remains a major dealer in Dozier-made knives; they can be reached at 2900 S. 26th Street, Rogers, AR 72758, phone 800-255-9034 or point your web browser to [www.agrussell.com](http://www.agrussell.com).