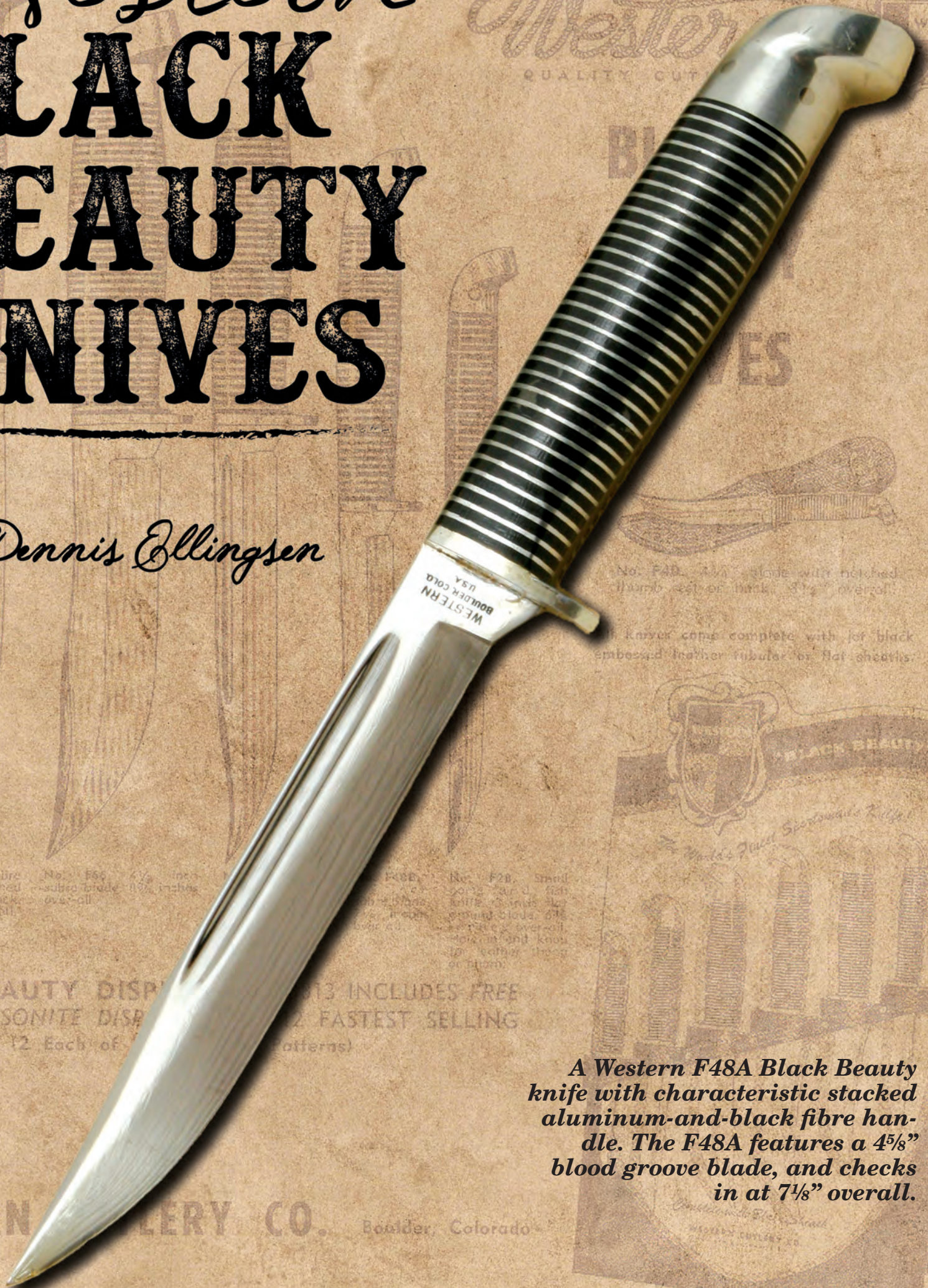


Western BLACK BEAUTY KNIVES

By Dennis Ellingsen



A Western F48A Black Beauty knife with characteristic stacked aluminum-and-black fibre handle. The F48A features a 4⁵/₈" blood groove blade, and checks in at 7¹/₈" overall.

WESTERN CUTLERY CO. Boulder, Colorado

No. F29. 5 1/2 inch blade. No. F50. 4 1/2 inch blade. w/ thumb notch. thumb rest on back. 3 1/2 inch overall. 2 1/2 inch overall.

No. F28. Small 3 1/2 inch blade. No. F28. Small 3 1/2 inch blade. No. F28. Small 3 1/2 inch blade. No. F28. Small 3 1/2 inch blade.

No. F48. 4 5/8 inch blade with notched thumb rest on back. 7 1/8 inch overall.

Carver knife complete with jet black embossed leather tubular or flat sheath.

BLACK BEAUTY DISPLAY SET #13 INCLUDES FREE 3-COLOR MASONITE DISPLAY CASE #12 FASTEST SELLING KNIVES 12 Each of (various patterns)

Considerable Stock Shown
WESTERN CUTLERY CO.



This rare Western Cutlery heavy duty F3914 “Camp Axe and Knife Combination” set is still in its original box. It features the company’s “Black Beauty” handles made of aluminum and black fibre spacers.

The first sheath knife I ever remember purchasing for myself was a Western Black Beauty knife. I bought it at a general store on a trip to the Kern River in California. As near as I can recall, the year was 1962. It was not my first sheath knife, since I had several traditional Norwegian knives that had been given to me when I was a child. I still have those Norwegian knives; however that first Black Beauty has been handed down to my son, Ray. This ritual act was performed in 1973, and in the spirit of his father, he still has it and still uses it.

One of my favorite pictures of Ray was taken in 1973 while he is standing on the top of Mt. Fuji (Oregon) with Waldo Lake seen in the background. Proudly dis-

played is the Western Black Beauty knife on his hip. When Ray climbed the other Mt. Fuji (in Japan), he did not have the Black Beauty knife with him.

So, as it is with all my interests, I started to accumulate all the patterns of the Black Beauty knives, including the slight variations of these knives. I attempted to use my connections at Camillus Cutlery, which had purchased Western, to learn about the history of the Black Beauty knives; however the light had been getting dim for the longevity of Camillus Cutlery. And then in 2007 the light went out for the Camillus Cutlery I knew. As a result I have very little documented information on the Black Beauty knives.

As nearly as I can figure the introduc-



This photo of my son, Ray, was taken in 1973 from the top of Oregon’s Mt. Fuji, with Waldo Lake in the background. Proudly displayed on his belt is the Western Black Beauty knife I had purchased in 1962.

tion of this style knife was about 1955-1957. A good friend told me he recalled the Black Beauty knives in 1957 which had been a time of his life he remembers all too well. There was a Black Beauty ad which appeared in *Outdoor Life* in 1959. Also of note was 1956 when Western States changed its name to Western. In 1991 Camillus purchased Western, but Camillus did not revive this knife style. I have located a Western price list dated December, 1980, that listed only one pattern of Black Beauty knife. This suggested the last knife made would have been during 1981, which would mean a production period of about 25 years for this line of knives.

The knives were named Black Beauty because of the aluminum and black fibre handles and the jet black, tooled sheath they came in. The handle proved to have a good gripping surface with its arrangement of spacers. Although this pattern of knife first appeared in the mid 1950s, the blade patterns were not new for this knife. Several sheath knives, which have similar blade shapes, can be found which had been manufactured in the 1940s. The handles were of leather, wood and red, orange and ivory colored composition material. The composition handles were a plastic resin compound, of one sort or

174





BLACK BEAUTY KNIVES

No. F39. 5 inch sabre blade with notched thumb rest on back. 9 1/2 inches over-all.

No. F66. 4 1/2 inch sabre blade. 8 3/4 inches over-all.

No. F48A. 4 1/2 inch blood groove blade. 8 inches over-all.

No. F48B. 3 5/8 inch sabre blade. 7 1/2 inches over-all.

No. F28. Small game and fish knife. 3 inch flat ground blade. 5 1/2 inches over-all. Hole in end knob for leather thong or chain.



No. F40. 4 1/4" blade with notched thumb rest on back. 8 1/2" over-all.

All knives come complete with jet black embossed leather tubular or flat sheaths.

BLACK BEAUTY DISPLAY NO. BB13 INCLUDES FREE 3-COLOR MASONITE DISPLAY WITH 12 FASTEST SELLING KNIVES. (2 Each of Six Different Patterns)



WESTERN CUTLERY CO. Boulder, Colorado

*This 1960 ad, from the book *The Knife Makers Who Went West*, shows all six patterns of Western's Black Beauty knives along with a counter top display for the line.*



Two Black Beauties with typical jet black sheaths adorned with a tooled oak leaf design. If you find a Black Beauty knife in a brown sheath, it's more than likely the sheath came from a different pattern Western knife.

another, which Western called plastic in their ads. They were not celluloid.

Western used a catalog system which assigned the first character as a reference to the handle composition:

- F = Black Beauty
- L = Leather
- 6 = Stag
- W = Hardwood
- S = Delrin
- 2 = Pearl Composition
- P = Tenite
- S = Stainless

Sheath knives always had a range of



A variety of different tang stamps found on Black Beauty knives from the late 1950s through the early 1980s.

catalog numbers that were between 28 and 88. The following relate to the various numbers in the Black Beauty series and their lengths. I have yet to make sense of these numbers.

- F28 = 3" blade
- F48B = 3⁵/₈" blade
- F40 = 4¹/₄" blade
- F48A = 4³/₈" blade
- F66 = 4¹/₂" blade
- F39 = 5" blade

The key to the dating of these knives would be the book *Knifemakers That Went West* and the 1960 ad for the full series of six patterns that were offered which is reproduced here.

In 1956 the company name was changed to Western Cutlery Co. In 1957 they moved to a new facility on Western Avenue in the new industrial district in Boulder, Colorado. In 1961 Western started stamping Western U.S.A. on their tangs. They moved from Boulder to Longmont, Colorado in 1978 and became Coleman-Western in 1984. In 1991 Camillus

bought Western Cutlery. In 2007 Camillus Cutlery closed the doors on their New York factory and the brand was sold to Acme United, who still utilizes it today.

When dating Western magazine ads, one milestone to watch for is the addresses noted on them. Prior to December, 1957, the address was 1609 Broadway in downtown Boulder, but then changed to 5311 Western Avenue, in the Boulder industrial park. Thus an advertisement with the name Western Cutlery, but with



the Broadway address would be 1956-57.

The Western Black Beauty knives have some unique characteristics associated with them. At first the knives had the model numbers on the reverse tang but later had this number stamped into the aluminum guard. The full line was available in 1960, and it seems like they dropped one pattern after another until December, 1980, when the only pattern shown was the F48B.

In 1978 Western started placing date codes on their knives. This coding is as follows and continued into the 21st century:

- Western U.S.A.
- A 1977
- B 1978
- C 1979
- D 1980
- E 1981
- F 1982
- G 1983
- H 1984

I have seen only one Black Beauty knife with a code, and it had an "A" meaning made in 1977. There have to be later dates which, when found, will solve the mystery of when these knives were last produced.

Western also made Black Beauty axes which had the catalog numbers of F14 and F10. The F14 was the heavy duty hand axe that had an end knob that

At left, a closeup of the guard area on a Black Beauty F40, showing the location of the model number marking after it had been moved from the reverse blade tang. Later, it was moved to the front tang for a time. Above, late and rather early tang stamps along with a good view of the 'jimping' on the F40's blade.

looked like an animal hoof. The axe was also of dropped-forge construction. The F10 was the lightweight version with the same handle and end knob design as the knives. The F6610 was advertised as the Axe - Hunter combination, and the heavy duty F3914 was named the Camp Axe and knife combination. The 66 and the 39 numbers indicate which knives accompanied these sets. The axes had sheaths as did the knives, and they were looped together to make the sets.

I am sure there were additional variations of these sets, although they appear to be rare variations. The one I knew about but could not find until recently was the F10 style with the F14 end knob cap. This also came in a one piece jet black sheath that housed both the knife and axe. Another feature was the F14 axe that could be used without removing the protective sheath. It could be used like a hammer when the sheath was in place. That certainly would be a safer option

when driving tent stakes into the ground, for example. The F14 was the only hand axe that had a nail puller built into it. It was also touted as having a solid I-beam



Three Black Beauty knife-axe combination sets. Left to right: F6610 with standard pommel F10 axe, F6610 with 'animal hoof' pommel F10 axe, F3914 with F14 heavy duty axe featuring "I-beam construction."

construction for heavy use.

There are some interesting points to bring up about the Black Beauty knives. All sheaths were in jet black tooled leather which made for a matching set. If you find a brown sheath, it is more than likely that it came from a different pattern Western knife. The steel used for these sheath knives was high carbon chrome vanadium steel which excelled in cutting quality but made them susceptible to corrosion. The most difficult pattern to find is the F28, the smallest version of this series. When found, they show they were heavily used. Why not? It was a handy size.

The F28 was the only knife that came with a hole in the handle for attaching a leather thong. There was an F48A and an F48B knife; but the reason escapes me why the numbers were the same but the patterns were totally different. There were also variations of these two numbers, too. The F39 and the F40 were the only ones that had a notched thumb rest on the back of the blade.

So why did Western stop making the Black Beauty knife? The reason is simple. The market was saturated, and people were looking for new ideas, patterns and development in knives. Even the original iconic Volkswagen Beetle didn't last in production forever. The Black Beauty was truly a great utilitarian pattern knife and a great tool. That probably accounts for the prices of these knives when they are found today. □