

Weasel's Katana Story

Spring 2021

In early May 2021 I included the following in the Gun Thread:

I have been watching a bunch of restoration videos on YouTube lately, covering everything from Swiss watches to antique bench vises (viceii?), when it occurred to me I have an item that could use some TLC. It's a sword handed down to me by my Dad and it's been in the family longer than I have. Since I have had it I've always meant to have it looked over. The story of how he acquired it isn't particularly exciting. In the late 1940s he was working at a service station as a teen and had to take the back seat out of a customer's car for some reason. The sword was under the seat, the customer wasn't interested in it, and gave it to my dad. That's it. That's the story. No hail of gunfire and samurai charge and taking it off a dead Jap on Iwo Jima or anything. Frankly, it's a little anticlimactic, but perfectly normal for my ancestors who are a notorious bunch of criminals, liars and cowardly scoundrels. Tennoheika Banzai!

So I started doing some research. I could tell it was old, and of the Japanese samurai katana style, but that's all I knew. I quickly found out that the rabbit hole for swords is not only every bit as deep as it is for guns, but much, much deeper. Bigly deep. I began by poking around on the internet and learning what I could about how they were made, some of their history, and most importantly how to take proper care of them. The basic rules I have found are don't touch it, keep it oiled, and for Pete's sake, don't try and clean it or 'sharpen' it yourself!

Until the other day, the sword was sporting an obviously unoriginal handle, or tsuka, which I have since removed to see if the tang (nakago) is signed. Although it's not signed by the maker that I can tell, it does have a series of faint crosshatched file marks on both sides in the Higaki Yasuri pattern. Other than that, it's in the same shape as when my Dad received it about 70 years ago.

There are very few people (togishi) in the U.S. who hand polish swords. By hand. As in, not with machines. I managed to find one of them, sent a bunch of photos of the blade, and asked for advice regarding my options. They tentatively identified the sword as from the Mino School and estimate it's age at, get this, 400 years or older. I knew it was cool, and old, but 400 years old? Holy crap! I thought my '03 Springfield made in 1909 was old! Just to make sure, I have since had the assessment confirmed by others who specialize in the field of Japanese sword making. That's the good news.

The bad news, is I need to have it polished, and to have that done by an expert ain't cheap. The correct hand polish is a process that takes weeks of work to perform, costs around \$100 per inch, and the wait list is measured in years for a top polisher to begin work. I also need to have a new custom shira-saya, or storage handle and scabbard mounting made for it. What the hell, right? It's only money, and what am I going to do, start buying guns and ammo?

So I'm on the wait list, now currently estimated at 23 months. When it's my turn I box it up and send it to the West coast. The polisher I've chosen seems confident the blade will restore nicely, as the oxidation is all on the surface and has not pitted the steel. I've given it a nice protective coat of oil, and have promised myself to treat it a little more respectfully now that I know its age. I have no idea what it

is worth, and frankly do not really care. I'm going to have it restored to its former head-opping glory in the traditional way because I think it's the right thing to do. There are other much cheaper and faster alternatives for shining it up, but someone who doesn't know what they are doing can easily ruin a blade. Since Weasel-san is now pretty much a samurai warrior, it needs to be done properly and in the ancient manner.

What would you do? Git 'er done with a grinder yourself, or honor the blade, its maker, and all of its previous owners?

Update May 2024

Fast forward to last week, when my togishi (sword polisher) contacted me to let me know my long wait was over and he is ready for me to ship the blade to him. I have opted for a full polish in the traditional method which as I indicated earlier can take two or three weeks to accomplish using only hand stones sourced from Japan. To say I am excited to have this done is an understatement, and I consider myself very fortunate to have found the right person to do the work and also to have the means to have it treated properly and quite frankly, respectfully.

In Japan, swordsmithing and polishing are considered sacred arts. A long time ago someone went to a lot of effort to make the blade, and it was then passed down through the generations until it landed in my lap. The story of its journey has been lost, but out of respect for the maker and all those who have owned it over several hundred years, I plan to take care of it in the very best way I can. I sort of feel like I have a responsibility now that it's in my hands. Does that make any sense at all? Anyhow, my togishi has promised more information once he is able to personally examine the blade and maker's marks and I will pass that along as well as photos of the finished product.

So what would you do? Would you spend the money to have it restored traditionally or look for a more economical solution? Alternatively, would you simply wipe it with oil periodically and call it good? Please let me know in the comments!

Update June 2024

Week before last I carefully boxed up the blade and mailed it to my togishi or sword polisher, following his carefully detailed instructions. Why so careful and detailed you ask? Well the objective is twofold; a) to protect the blade, and 2) to protect the people handling the parcel. The blade has both sentimental and economic value and I do not want to see it damaged. Also, I don't want to get a call from the Postal Service informing me a Package Transport Engineer was fatally skewered by the still exceedingly sharp blade sticking out the end of the box. With me so far?

So the recommended methodology is to secure the blade to a 1" x 3" board using electrical wire through the peg hole in the tang, and then complete the process of protecting the blade with heavy paper and strong tape. The whole thing is bubble-wrapped and placed into a shipping tube. Regrettably, I did not photograph the finished package because it was complimented by not one but two postal workers. With insurance it was about \$50 to ship by registered mail, and a few days later I received the following from my togishi.

I've had a good chance to study your blade. This is an absolutely authentic antique Japanese blade. It probably dates from the mid-1600's. It looks like it is from Mino province, possibly from the town of Seki which was a major sword production center for centuries.

The blade is a traditional forging and it looks like it has a complete hamon (temper line) and boshi (temper line around the point), so it should be completely restorable. There are a few small defects that will not be completely removable such as a small open weld spot, about 1/8" in size, about 1" up from the tang on one side and a visible black weld line about 3/8" long about 4" up from the tang on the other side. These may be improved significantly by polishing, but probably cannot be completely removed. This is common and to be expected in an authentic hand forged blade of this age.

I should be able to start on your blade next week. It will probably be about 3 more weeks after that to get it finished.

So now I wait, and to say I am excited to see the finished product is something of an understatement. Again, the polishing restoration is done completely by hand which is why it takes time. Frankly I am a little amazed someone has the capacity and dedication to work on something like this for so long, but again, this is for a museum quality restoration. After lengthy conversations with the togishi we agreed this is the proper way to treat this antique item of art. I have asked for some photos of the process to share here, but evidently they will likely not show much and was cautioned as follows to manage my expectations:

I will try to make some in progress photos but they are generally not too interesting. Just variations of shiny and scratchy right up until the last few days.

So sit tight everyone, shiny and scratchy photos to follow!

Update June 09, 2024

This is the blade after initial straightening. The first step in sword polishing is to get the blade as close to perfectly straight as possible. This involves carefully mapping out all bends, wobbles, and variances in thickness, etc. and then counter bending where possible. This process takes about half a day of very meticulous work. Some irregularities in geometry are actually original hammering or grinding flaws that cannot be fixed by straightening. These can only be corrected with new precision foundation shaping. A careful balance must always be maintained of trying to remove flaws and improve the shape as much as possible, while removing as little steel as possible to best preserve the blade.