

The Art of Gun Engraving

PART V - KELLY LASTER

By: Smith n' Jones



Kelly Laster is an interesting person. I've never met anyone quite like him. He is aggressive, ambitious, confident, outgoing, somewhat forward, and extremely talented. I met Kelly at the first Annual SASS Convention, held in Las Vegas, Nevada, the first week in December 2002. I was sitting at the SHOOT! MAGAZINE booth when he walked up and introduced himself. First impressions being what they are, the first thing I noticed was that he was very well dressed for the occasion. Dress shirt, puff-tie, frock coat, and black hat, he fit right into the SASS scene, even though, as I found out later, he was rather new to SASS and cowboy shooting. After a short introduction, he told me that he was in the engraving business and wanted to know if I was interested in looking at some of his work. Of course I was, so he showed me a pistol that he had done recently and asked what I thought. I told him what I tell everyone when asked about gun engraving, which is that I know what I like, but to say that I am any kind of an expert in the field would be a gross

overstatement. However, I admitted to Kelly that I did like what I saw in his work. The lines were clean, the scrolling was uniform, and his floral design really stood out, and when he told me that he had been engraving for less than a year, I was really impressed. We talked about

having him do a gun for me and perhaps me doing an article on his work. We immediately started the process of deciding which gun I would like him to do. We talked about the Colt SAA, but decided that everyone does those. I showed him a Cimarron 1872 Open-Top, but realized that there was not a lot of surface area to work with. The '66 Winchester is a great platform, but we had just done an article on a '66 engraved by Conrad Anderson (see SHOOT! MAGAZINE Vol.19 pg. 10), and I currently have a '73 being engraved by Jim Downing. In a moment of brilliance, Kelly asked if I had seen many engraved '97 Winchester



Close up of the engraving on the left side of the receiver.

ter shotguns. As a matter of fact, I had only seen one that had full coverage on the receiver, and after a few minutes of contemplation, I



The '97 Winchester shotgun engraved by Kelly Laster.

decided that I would send him my recently refurbished '97 for him to work on. The rest, as they say, is history. The gun went out soon after I returned from the convention. Kelly asked what I would like him to engrave, and I told him that I would leave it up to him. "This is to be a sample of your best work and I'll leave it up to you as to what the final pattern is." What I got back in early March is nothing less than a work of art.

Kelly Laster, now age 40, has been in the jewelry business for the past 20 years. About a year ago, he decided he wanted to include engraving as part of his business endeavors. His desire to engrave firearms started about three years ago when he bought a gravermeister and began the slow process of teaching himself something about engraving. The fact of the matter is that Kelly has no formal training in the art of gun engraving at all. His skills are self-taught with the aid of a few good books and some videos. "It was very difficult at first, but with time it got easier." He started by cutting on old throwaway barrels and gun parts. Then in January 2002, a friend saw his work and trusted him to engrave a nickel S&W model 60, which turned out quite well, and that gave him the confidence he needed to go on. According to Kelly, his skill level grew quickly, as did his need for better equipment. Later another friend let him engrave and do some gold inlay work on a western-style gun. "I really like the western 'cowboy' stuff," admits Laster. "The cowboys really know great-looking guns."

Well, you never know when lightning will strike. Laster went to the Shot Show in Las Vegas in February 2002 and happened to meet a man who collects Colts. He made a deal with the man to engrave a Colt for him, in trade for a Colt. The fellow loved the finished product and after one year Kelly had more work than he could handle. "I love traveling to shows and meeting all these great people," said Laster. "This is the best bunch of people in the world. It's the way it should be."

As I said earlier, the '97 I received from Kelly was a real work of art. When I asked Kelly why he selected the patterns that he used, he told me the following:

"I chose the patterns used on your '97 to bring the old and the new together so they work as one creating a great look. The amalgam's first influence is a simple early-period Winchester design depicted by the curvy relief border running through the middle of the piece that frames the buffalo and floral artwork. The next is the overall pattern inside the Winchester pattern and outside borders. This pattern was influenced by one of my favorite engravers, Winston Churchill. The third are the floral patterns. The floral work is all me. It's a design I came up with when I first started. The design looks good, flows well, and can fill a good-sized area with relative ease. Lastly is the buffalo. I wanted it to also represent the early period of Old West firearm engraving. After I finished this piece, I knew I would need the final touch of a great bluing job. What separates the men from the boys is the prep work before bluing. As you can see Lonnie Meyer at Run-N-Iron Customizing takes that extra step to get it perfect."

Kelly told me that to him, there was a natural transition from the fine hand engraving on gold and silver that he had learned while doing jewelry work to the work he does on firearms. He is planning on studying under one of the masters this summer to take his skills to a higher level.

For more information about Kelly Laster Engraving, give him a call at 270-236-4700.



The full view of the right side of the receiver.



Close up of the engraving on the right side of the action.



Close up of the buffalo on the left side of the receiver.

