

Local bladesmith's swords respect their history

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Jack Hathman's interest in knives and swords began when he was 14 years old. While working on a science project, his penknife slipped, leaving him bleeding profusely. But the power of a single sharp blade sparked an epiphany of sorts, and later that year, Hathman made his first knife.

"I haven't cut myself since then," Hathman claims, "despite no shortage of sharp objects."

Hathman is Columbia's own bladesmith. He operates his company, Draco-Sinister Blades, from his home on 7th Street. He shows and sells his work at various Renaissance festivals, medieval gatherings, science fiction and gaming conventions. Though some of Hathman's creations result from the trial and error of his craft, he pursues sword making with a true respect for its history.

"No one really needs a sword anymore," Hathman said. "What they are looking for is a tangible connection to the past."

Hathman sees the sword as a "noble weapon," one that was used in fair combat between two people. Those who make swords should understand not only the blade's functionality, he said, but the principle behind it. "If someone comes up to me

and wants a costuming knife for a 14th-century nobleman, I know just what he's talking about," Hathman says.

Hathman consults the Knifemaker's Guild, the American Bladesmith Society and other blade-makers he meets at fairs and other places. His philosophy, traded down from an old master, is "learn it, use it, and spread it."

Even if they're destined to end up on a mantle somewhere, Hathman's creations are functional. Before he parts with a sword, it is put to the test. Hathman repeatedly bludgeons his new pieces, which are made from a variety of types of recycled steel as well as new steel, with oak rods and sledgehammers. "I much prefer that I break it before a customer buys it," he said.

Hathman wears glasses, gloves, ear protection and sometimes even a mask when he works. He uses a grinder to shave down and sharpen the metal. For high-temperature forge work, "the best protective gear," he says, "is to get the hell out of the way."

Hathman works with a local machinist, Shawn Reading, who handles the welding. Hathman's other partner is his wife, Shanna, who was an art minor in college.

"I want it to go through a car door," Hathman said. "She wants it to look nice."

Generally the blades Hathman sells aren't

very sharp, but have a good, strong edge. Hathman maintains that the weapons aren't dangerous in themselves. A sign on his wall reads, "Swords don't kill people; people kill people."

Some of Hathman's customers have been motivated by the need for home defense, without owning a gun. Hathman isn't sure it's such a good idea for them to own a sword, but unlike a gun, he says, swords "do not impart with them a mystical ability to use them."

Hathman is a member of the Society for Creative Anachronism, an international organization dedicated to researching and re-creating the arts and skills of pre-17th-century Europe. The society holds reenactments of various Medieval eras, and although they are rarely open to the public, the lack of "consumerism" at such events allows more emphasis on historical accuracy.

"It's incredible what you can learn," he said. "If we had to rebuild society from the ground up, I'd want these people."

Jack Hathman's blades are on display at Itchy's Stop and Scratch Flea Market, Ice Chalet Antique Mall, and Midway Antique Mall. His online catalog of handmade and manufactured blades can be accessed through his Web site: www.dracosinister.com.

Fun facts about swords:

- It's customary to mount a horse on the left because your sword is worn on the right.
- A lady should always walk on the left side of a gentleman so, if he were prompted to draw his sword, she won't be injured.
- The term "best man" in a wedding comes from the term "best swordsman": a man hired to make sure the bridal procession didn't come under attack and the bride wasn't kidnapped.
- Opposing sides in the British House of Commons sit at least two sword-lengths apart.
- The tradition of shaking hands began so that enemies could not draw swords.
- The words "forte" and "foible" for strengths and weaknesses of character refer to the sharp and dull sides of a blade.