**THOUGHTS ON BECOMING A GUNSMITH**

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I often have people ask me what it takes to become a gunsmith. This is about like asking what is involved in building a custom rifle – there are so many different aspects and possibilities that there is no way to easily answer this question.

The term “gunsmith” can cover a wide range of skills and what a gunsmith does can mean a lot of different things to a lot of different folks. There are gunsmiths who do general repair work, some who can fabricate and make parts or components when needed, some who work on only rifles, or handguns, or shotguns, or muzzleloaders, some who do high-end wood stock fitting/finishing/checkering/carving, some who build bulletproof tactical rifles, some who build and fit custom shotguns or specialty handguns, some who specialize in rebluing and refinishing old guns, and others like myself who specialize in building highly accurate competition and hunting rifles. Most gunsmiths do more than one thing, but quite a few develop a niche in a particular area of expertise and specialize in that.

A surprising number of people are not employed full time as a gunsmith, but work part-time or are do-it-yourselfers or hobbyists who repair and customize their own guns, which I think is great. I am an avid do-it-yourselfer so I understand this very well. Over the years I have seen some extremely competent work produced by people doing things themselves, as well as more than a few jobs done by full time “gunsmiths” that were obviously done by people attempting to do something that was way over their head.

Often trying to do your own gunsmith work can be a real learning experience and is usually OK except in things that could be real safety issues like chambering barrels, trigger work, etc. These advanced things should only be done by competent gunsmiths or by individuals who thoroughly understand what they are doing.

There are quite a few gunsmiths who may be very good in one or more areas of expertise, but who are not at all competent in other areas. Just because they are a gunsmith or claim to be a gunsmith does not make them able to do anything you think they should be capable of doing – this is purely an individual thing and there are all levels of competence here that are directly related to the individual’s training, experience, and his own attitude.

There are some excellent instructional books, videos, and short courses of instruction on quite a few aspects of gunsmithing that can really help teach the proper ways to do things. Some people, myself included, are blessed with the ability to read some instructional material and then go out and do it. Other folks are more visual and learn better by seeing these techniques in a video or best of all by hands-on instruction from a competent instructor. One prime example of an excellent instructional book is *“The Complete Illustrated Guide to Precision Rifle Barrel Fitting”* by John L. Hinnant. This is a very informative book that covers all the basics extremely well and makes it very easy for a beginner to understand exactly all the steps and details involved in rebarreling a rifle, and the first edition of this book is one I have used myself way back when I was first striving to find better ways to fit and chamber barrels.

Several years ago I started to conduct some classes in my shop in some specialized areas of gunsmithing like championship quality rifle barrel chambering, action blueprinting, pillar bedding, bore lapping, etc in which gunsmiths and interested individuals with access to a lathe can learn an extremely accurate and very safe way to chamber rifle barrels and accurize rifles. There are other classes available around the country on various aspects of gunsmithing that you can attend and learn a great deal from.

One well known series of classes are the NRA summer gunsmithing classes available at several of the gunsmithing schools around the country – see the list at the end of this article or the NRA websites for info. These are generally one or two week classes in a specific area of gunsmithing. I’ve taught these classes for several years back in the late 1990’s, have taken some of these classes myself, and can attest to the quality of instruction that is normally available through these classes.

The path to becoming a gunsmith is about as diversified as the gunsmithing field itself. One of the most ideal ways is by attending a gunsmithing trade school for a couple years (see list of schools at the end of this article). Most of these have one, two or three year programs designed for learning a wide range of general and specialized gunsmithing techniques, but one of these schools, Murray State College, is also just starting up a first-of-its-kind special two year program strictly devoted to working on high grade double guns. In all of these schools you will learn how guns are designed, how they function, how to repair them, and how to do quite a bit of customizing to them. You will have a lot of both classroom learning as well as an abundance of hands-on instruction. You will learn most of the normal and generally accepted machining techniques needed for gunsmithing. By the time you graduate you will have a very good working knowledge of most types of guns and ways to repair and customize them. You will at that point not be an expert in anything, but you will sure be on your way!

There are also home-study courses in gunsmithing that can be very good. I took a two year home-study course through Modern Gun School before I started gunsmithing and it helped me to learn a lot. You will not have the advantage of having an instructor looking over your shoulder answering your questions, and the hands-on work will have to be strictly on your own. You will not have a well equipped gunsmithing and machine shop in which to learn basic gunsmithing and machining techniques unless you have equipment and machines of your own or have something available to you locally. But most of the same information is there and it will sure take the mystery out of how guns are designed, how they function, and the basics of how to do most repairs and some customizing.

While there are several ways to get the training, knowledge and experience needed to become a good gunsmith, the one thing that is absolutely essential to become better than just good or average, to attain the very top levels of expertise in any endeavor, always comes from the attitude of the individual himself. You must continually strive to become the very best you can be, and not be willing to just make do with marginal work, or cut corners just to get the work out the door as fast as you can while you try to make as much money as possible. You must always keep trying to learn better ways to do things and not be afraid to think outside the box a little.

One company you will need to get very familiar with is Brownells, the best known gunsmith supply business in the world. I have been dealing with them since I started my gunsmithing business back in 1987 and I’m sure I will be dealing with them until the day I die. They have been absolutely indispensible to me with their extremely large array of tools, supplies, parts and books (I learned so much when I started just by reading their Gunsmith Kinks books), but I also often call and talk with one of their Tech guys when I run across a problem or something I’m not sure how to do properly. Most of the time one of their Tech’s can answer my questions or they find out and get back to me with the information. Brownells is heavily involved in giving back to the shooting sports by being involved in and supporting the NRA, police training, helping gunsmithing schools and their students, as well as many other venues of the shooting sports. I have personally seen a little of how they help the industry when they donate prizes at theVarmint Hunter Jamboree and our Iowa 1000 Yard Benchrest matches, as well as many other shooting disciplines around the world.

You will over time purchase a lot of specialty tools and probably some machine tools to be able to work on guns properly. Make sure you buy the best tools you can afford since you will be “stuck” with using these tools for many years to come and there is nothing worse than trying to do good work with poor quality tools. If you use cheap, poor quality tools, your work and your satisfaction most definitely will reflect this! Good high quality tools are a pure joy to use and make doing high quality work so much easier!!

One example of a specialty tool that really stands out by immediately becoming totally indispensable to me in my custom rifle work is the Hawkeye borescope. When I purchased my Hawkeye a number of years ago, I learned so much about what was going on in the bore of a rifle, both while I was building it as well as during the life of the barrel. What I learned has completely transformed the way I chamber barrels, how I clean barrels, and how I evaluate barrels for problems. This one tool has done more for me in this regard than almost any other tool I own (I am in the process of writing another article about using the borescope since there isn’t room for that in this article).

One thing I see most budding gunsmiths do if they decide to set up a business of their own, and I’ve done it myself, is not charging enough to be able to stay in business. Part-timers won’t see this so much since they usually have another job to make a living from, they often operate without liability insurance to protect themselves or their customers, so consequently they don’t have to produce enough from their gunsmithing work to pay all the bills plus their wages. Part-timers or beginners often feel they need to work very cheap to attract customers, and then when they try to transition into a full-time business with all the added expenses this entails, they end up losing so much money that they soon go out of business, which is a shame. Or, when they finally do start to charge enough, they are so far behind financially, it is almost impossible to catch back up again. This is a hard thing to know how to handle correctly in any business endeavor, but seems to be especially prevalent in the gunsmithing profession.

Anyone who works on guns for other people, no matter whether you do it full-time or part-time, should buy liability insurance, which is not an insignificant cost, but you are sure doing yourself and your customers a disservice by not doing so. In today’s litigious society, if something goes wrong and you aren’t covered by insurance, the customer is left to hold the bag, and if it is wrong enough, you will find yourself directly lined up in some lawyer’s sights, and it will not be good for you. Just something to keep in mind!!

Another thing to make sure you do is obtain a Federal Firearms License (FFL) from the BATF. It is required if you work on other people’s guns and charge them for your work. You will need a regular dealer’s FFL if you just do general gunsmithing work, but you’ll need a manufacturer’s FFL if you get into serious custom work. The cost for a dealer’s FFL is $200 for the first 3-year license and $90 for every 3-year license renewal after that, and the cost for a manufacturer’s FFL is $150 for a three year license or renewal. You can get most of the info you need at the ATF website: [www.atf.treas.gov](http://www.atf.treas.gov) .

Now you have to figure out how to market your business. Customers won’t come to you if they don’t know where you are or what you can do for them. Getting word out to prospective customers costs money, and it is very easy to spend way too much in the wrong places, but if done correctly this is money well spent. Every business and situation is different so I can only relate what has and has not worked well for me in the past 22 years.

I found inexpensive classified ads in local newspapers worked very well for me. I tried local radio ads back when I had a retail gun store, and found it cost me a lot of money, but my sales did not increase enough to pay for the ads. Some shops I’ve talked to over the years get a lot of sales from radio ads, but it didn’t work for me. If you make it a habit to continually ask your customers how they heard about your shop, you will soon learn what advertising is working for you and what is not.

I have often volunteered to help teach local hunter education classes, given talks at local schools and church groups, taken youth groups from local churches out to the range and let them shoot my guns, held informal rifle matches for local youth groups and boys clubs at my range, and often let interested individuals shoot my 1000 yard rifles. I have also invited a number of individuals along several times when Lee Fischer and I have been out shooting at prairie dogs at over two miles.

I volunteered at our local Marion County Sportsman’s Club to run registered BR-50 rimfire benchrest matches and later on I assisted a couple other guys in setting up 200 yard varmint rifle benchrest matches which are still going strong today at this club. I then founded and was co-owner/operator of the Iowa 1000 Yard Benchrest Association ( [www.iowa1000ydbenchrest.com](http://www.iowa1000ydbenchrest.com) ), where we held IBS registered 1000 yard rifle matches until 2010.

The one thing that has worked best of all for me was advertising in the Varmint Hunter magazine and volunteering to assist them with different things over the years. I started advertising shortly after Varmint Hunter came into existence - in issue #5 - and really don’t plan on ever stopping. I immediately noticed an increase in my gunsmithing work that was generated by this international exposure. I soon volunteered to be a part of their Gunsmith’s Advisory Panel and then volunteered to help with their Custom Gun projects by building and donating Custom Gun #5, the wildly painted and extremely accurate AR-15.

Then I attended the very first Jamboree where I volunteered to assist in any way the VHA staff could use some help, telling them that I ran a benchrest range back in Iowa and had experience running rifle matches. They asked me if I would be willing to be the Rangemaster, which I said I would love to do - and I’ve been the Rangemaster for every Jamboree since then. I also early on volunteered to write an occasional technical article to be published in the Varmint Hunter magazine, and this is something I still do. I also often volunteered to be a featured speaker at the Jamboree symposiums, which I find I enjoy doing, plus it helps the VHA and its members.

What I’m trying to tell you here is to please not be afraid to volunteer your services or expertise to individuals or organizations that may benefit from this. You will probably be surprised how volunteering to help others will come back to help you too, sometimes in ways you never imagined. If you only do things to directly benefit or enrich yourself or your business, you will never know what you are missing out on!

So, in conclusion, I just want to say that gunsmithing in its many forms is a thoroughly fascinating endeavor. Whether you decide to do it as a full time profession, or just work at it in your spare time, you will find it to be very interesting and rewarding. When you’ve just done some work for yourself and it came out great, when you see your customer’s eyes light up as he sees the quality of the work you’ve done for him, or hear the excitement in his voice when he calls to tell you he just won a big match, this makes your day and this is truly what it is all about!!!

**Brownells** (gunsmithing tools, supplies, parts) 1-800-741-0015 [www.brownells.com](http://www.brownells.com)

**Gordy’s Precision** (custom gunsmithing, classes, DVD’s) 641-780-5085 [www.GordysPrecision.com](http://www.GordysPrecision.com)

**Gradient Lens Corp** (Hawkeye Borescopes) 1-800-536-0790 [www.gradientlens.com](http://www.gradientlens.com)

**John L. Hinnant** (gunsmithing book) 210-561-0665

**Joseph Chiarello Co** (insurance) 1-800-526-2199 [www.guninsurance.com](http://www.guninsurance.com)

**List of in-residence gunsmith schools** as listed in Brownells catalog: Colorado School of Trades ([www.schooloftrades.com](http://www.schooloftrades.com)) , Lassen Community College ([www.lassen.cc.ca.us](http://www.lassen.cc.ca.us)) , Montgomery Community College ([www.montgomery.cc.nc.us](http://www.montgomery.cc.nc.us)) , Murray State College ([www.mscok.edu](http://www.mscok.edu)) , Pennsylvania Gunsmith School ([www.pagunsmith.com](http://www.pagunsmith.com)) , Piedmont Community College ([www.piedmont.cc.nc.us](http://www.piedmont.cc.nc.us)) , Pine Technical College ([www.pinetech.edu](http://www.pinetech.edu)) , Trinidad State Jr. College ([www.trinidadstate.edu](http://www.trinidadstate.edu)) , Yavapai College ([www.gunsmithing.org](http://www.gunsmithing.org))

**List of correspondence schools**: American Gunsmithing Institute ([www.americangunsmith.com](http://www.americangunsmith.com)) , Modern Gun School ([www.dlilearn.com](http://www.dlilearn.com)) , Sonoran Desert Institute([www.sonoranlearning.com](http://www.sonoranlearning.com))

**List of schools that hold NRA Summer Gunsmithing Classes**: Murray State College, Trinidad State Jr. College, Lassen Community College, and Montgomery Community College. You can find info on these schools and classes at [www.nra.org](http://www.nra.org), or [www.nragunsmithing.com](http://www.nragunsmithing.com)