

FALL HUNTING

Brighton Township knife maker also big-game hunter

BRIGHTON TOWNSHIP, Mich. (AP) — Greg Flake can turn a set of deer antlers into some of the sharpest trophies a hunter could want — custom-made knives.

At a small shop on his farm in Brighton Township, Flake makes knives with Damascus steel blades and handles honed from the antlers and bones of animals ranging from deer and elk to camel and giraffe.

"A customer will come to us and say they want to make a knife out of their deer antlers. Depending on the size, we can make two, three or four knives out of it," Flake told the Livingston County Daily Press & Argus. "When you think about how much it costs to mount a deer, you can have four knives made for less money. That gives you four things to remember that hunt. It's really neat stuff."

On Flake's 12-acre farm where he raises sheep, rabbits, chickens and fish for food, a former pole barn has been divided into two parts — a shop where he makes his knives and a trophy room featuring many of the

prizes he's bagged on about 30 safaris in Africa.

The trophy room's walls are filled with the heads of kudu, impala and deer native to Africa. A zebra hide covers the center of the floor, and a stuffed lion stands at attention nearby.

Flake said he took the 240-pound female lion — later named Helga by his daughter — while on a safari in 2009 in the Kalahari of Botswana.

"At about 65 yards, the lion locked in on me," he recalled. "I pulled the trigger at 9 yards and hit her in the chest."

While on the safari, he said his hunting partners would often see a lion's tracks on top of boot prints they had made earlier in the day.

"As we were hunting the lions, the lions were hunting us. It's a spooky, spooky feeling," Flake said. "It's not something I think you want to do a lot, but it's really thrilling."

Flake, 51, made his first knife to get his metal-working merit badge as a Boy Scout.

"My dad owned a sheet

metal shop. All of the other kids had been making ashtrays and bowls, but I wanted to build a knife," he said.

Years later, Flake began making a set of knives with his father each year for hunting season. About five years ago, one of his own sons told him he should try to sell a few of his knives on eBay. They sold quickly, and it wasn't long before Impala Knives & Products was born.

Now he travels to gun-and-knife shows across the state, selling his knives and sharing his experiences.

His wife, Ela, and his three grown children — sons Timothy and Nicholas and daughter Jessi — help out in the shop. Jessi makes all of the leather sheaths for the knives.

"It's a lot of fun," said Jessi, 22. "I grew up spending most of my time with

my dad. I'm not a girly girl. My dad is one of my best friends. There's usually just the two of us in the shop, so it makes for a fun time."

Flake's full-time job as an executive for Federal-Mogul Corp., an automotive company based in Southfield, allows him to travel all over the world and find materials for his knife-making.

To cut the cost of production, Flake has discovered ways to get some raw materials in bulk. His brother-in-law is a structural steel engineer who supplies his Damascus steel, he gets buffalo horn and camel bone from slaughterhouses in India, and a deer rancher in Texas sends Flake all of the antler sheds from the ranch in exchange for knives.

During another safari in Africa last month, he worked out a deal with the

property owner for 20 full-sized giraffe leg bones that weigh about 60 pounds apiece.

"Giraffe bone is the densest bone of any animal," Flake said. "Denser than ivory."

Flake said his entire family will occasionally gather for a weekend at the farm, building a number of knives for Flake to later polish and hone to perfection. The Damascus steel blades are inserted into the antlers or bones and held in place with pins and aircraft-grade glue. The finished blades are typically from 3 to 12 inches in length.

Each of the last two years, they have made about 500 knives.

"From start to finish, in a 12-hour day I can make eight very, very nice knives," Flake said.

Some knives are more unique and have more

meaning than others. He recently was working on a drop knife made from a white-tailed deer's lower leg and hoof.

"The customer insisted on it," Flake said. "He's a 66-, 67-year-old guy, and his first deer last year was this doe. How could I turn the guy down? I hardly had the heart to charge him for it because it was such a great story."

He said he's also made custom knives as wedding gifts for groomsmen. The knives are specially engraved for the event.

His standard knives sell for \$80 to \$120. Custom-made knives go for \$120 and up.

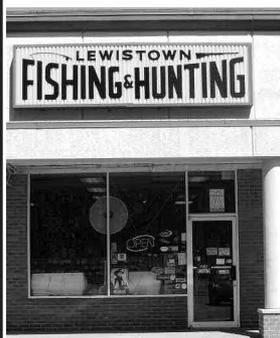
"I don't do it for the money. I do it because I like it," Flake said. "I'm going to work for maybe another five years. After that, I want to make probably 1,000 knives a year."

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