

LON HUMPHREY PIONEER CAMP KNIFE

By Kevin Estela



Lon Humphrey Pioneer Camp Knife.

LON HUMPHREY is a Journeyman Smith in the American Bladesmith Society. He produces knives by forging and a combination of manual and hydraulic hammering and grinding. He makes knives in a manner replaced by bar stock removal and computerized grinding. He does it the hard way, hands on. Handle any of his knives and you will understand why he has a very loyal following on YouTube, Facebook, online forums, and in the knife community as a whole. When I was given the chance to test and evaluate one of his knives,

the Pioneer, I couldn't resist. I would find out why this knife is worthy of its name, how well his knives perform and just how much value is packed into each of his functional works of art.

I first met Lon in Michigan back in 2012 and instantly appreciated his style. Lon is the type of guy who tells it how it is. He is a tattooed, cigarette smoking, forge with a .45 holstered on his hip kind of guy. Lon is also someone who is approachable and the type of guy who listens as much as he speaks. He could

brag about his knives but he doesn't. He lets his work speak for itself. The knife he sent to me for testing and evaluation is one of his most popular, the Pioneer. Approximately 16 inches overall, ¼ inch thick and a 9.25 inch blade, "Pioneer" is only somewhat of an accurate name for his work of art camp knife. The design harks to a time when a knife was more than tool, it was a companion used for everything from daily survival needs to self-defense. Lon's Pioneer is a big blade but it is very nimble in the hand. My first impression was how lively it felt and how comfortable the grip was. While not

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With just a snap cut, the Pioneer dug an average of $\frac{3}{4}$ inch into seasoned wood.

designed as a “fighter” the Pioneer sent to me had a handle which felt very much like a Filipino Barong. This handle would eventually prove to be excellent for retention while chopping and draw cutting.

TESTING OVERVIEW

To test the Pioneer, I decided to use it as intended as a camp knife and subject it to some controlled tasks. Camp knives are generally knives which serve as “Jack of all trades” and multi-purpose blades. Over a period of approximately 6 months, the Pioneer was carried in tow and used while camping in various environments. These included the far Northern woods of New York on the Canadian border to the property where I run my survival clinics in the Berkshires. The trips took place in various weather conditions from absolute rainy nastiness to blue-bird skies. I used this knife in conjunction with other traditional gear in my tucked away bushcraft camp. Furthermore, when I was unable to make it out, I used the knife in my kitchen in place of my standard kitchen knives. In any knife review or test, I place the knife in realistic scenarios and treat the knife as intended. I even ran the knife through traditional Filipino Martial Arts lines of cutting patterns and found it extremely responsive. I will say Lon’s knives have survived torture tests before (just look at his ABS tests on YouTube and you’ll see what I mean!) and there was no need to prove how far it could be tortured before breaking.

CUTTING TESTS

Aside from regular camp duty, I put the Pioneer through some tests just for fun. After visiting a hardware store, I took the knife to a long length of manila cord. Pushing down through the cord to cut it, I turned it into short fibers. Manila rope, like cardboard, can quickly ruin an edge. The Pioneer did not show

much wear or dulling after dozens of cuts. The blade still cut just without the hair popping sharpness it had prior.

In using the knife like a chopper, the blade cut cleanly through smaller saplings. The portion of the handle nearest the self guard is narrow allowing for a good wrist snap. Also, the high primary bevel did not bind in the wood but allowed for the blade to sink deeply. The blade is just light enough to be handy but sturdy enough to handle heavy duty tasks. How heavy duty? Cross grain batoning through dead seasoned and standing wood is not something for lesser quality blades. The brute handled it with ease.

Of course, testing knives is more than just bashing the edge into wood and watching chips fly. Don't get me wrong, that is fun but it doesn't require as much skill as using a big knife for more delicate tasks. I used the Pioneer for food prep and sliced various meats, fruits, and veggies like a high end kitchen knife. The extra length of the Pioneer blade allowed for clean slicing with a single pass as opposed to a sawing motion necessary for use with small knives that results in less than favorable presentation. Also, while sitting around the fire with friends, I used the Pioneer to carve basic elements of bushcraft. Notched pot holders, spatulas, and Paiute Deadfalls on request were all managed with this knife.

COMFORT

With and without gloves, Lon's knife was secure in hand and comfortable to use. The maple handle held up well and didn't crack, shrink, or expand to a noticeable degree. Lon finishes his spine by rounding and polishing it. This does not aide in scraping a fire steel but it does make using the knife with two hands (one on the handle and one on the spine) as a draw knife more comfortable. In a pinch, and against better judgment, the edge could be used to spark a ferro rod



Lt. Mike working the Pioneer against seasoned wood while on a recent camping trip. After hard use, the edge was undamaged and still shaved wood easily.



The Pioneer has a keen edge capable of making very fine fuzz sticks for fire lighting. The extra length of the blade means uninterrupted shaving strokes.



The Pioneer has a rounded spine which makes use with a support hand very comfortable.





The tip of the Pioneer is in line with the axis of the blade. This makes thrusting very accurate when used as a fighting knife.



The sheath provided with each Pioneer is made from hollow riveted kydex.

but at the expense of some sharpness. Remember, the Pioneer Camp Knife is designed as a camp knife and it is assumed the user already has a primary belt knife with a sharpened spine. Also, if the user is carrying a large knife, he/she is likely able to carry a small scraper for fire steel use as well. In a choked up grip, the knife is extremely comfortable and the rounded spine does not bite into the webbing of your hand while carving. Overall, the only sharp edge you will find on the knife is the one you are working with and shouldn't grab anyway.

EDGE RETENTION

The Pioneer Camp Knife retained a working edge despite cutting and chopping very dense woods including maple, beech, and hornbeam. The blade developed a yellow and blue colored patina from exposure to various acidic foods. The 5160 steel Lon uses is a proven carbon steel. It will bend before it breaks and even when there was a noticeable bend as the blade followed twisted grain, the spring steel returned to its original shape once tension was taken off. In all honesty, the knife did become less sharp but the edge was always working. If any other knife tester tells you he or she only needed a light stropping to get the edge back to original sharpness, you have to wonder how much testing was truly done with the blade. A combination of wet/dry sandpaper in various coarseness (600, 1000, 1500, and 2000 grit) applied to a leather backer served to give the edge a toothiness and the combination of black and green stropping compounds brought the edge to mirror finish again. Sharpening was easy as the 5160 is not a very hard steel. Anyone who is accustomed to using 01 will likely compare the two and say they are very similar in retention and ease of sharpening. Since the Pioneer knife was used in food preparation, I used cooking oils to keep it from taking on rust.

OVERALL OPINION

I believe in America. I believe in the values and tenets central to its core and I am quick to support Americans earning an honest living. In an age when outsourced work can save dollars, there is still the demand for American made products made by American hands. In the knife industry, there are many quality knives made in countries all around the world.

When I interviewed Lon for this review, I asked him what he wanted people to know most importantly about his knives. His answer was simple, "Value." Value is not the same as price. Price is merely a monetary amount placed on an item. His knives are more valuable than the going price. Value is what the item is worth. For the amount of time and effort Lon puts into his knives, the user is receiving great value for their dollar. You are receiving a handcrafted knife from an honest, hardworking American. That is usually more than enough for me. But for those not convinced yet, when you buy one of Lon's knives, you are receiving a blade which would cost many times more than his going rate if commissioned by another maker. Lon realizes people may struggle financially; he just wants good blades in the hands of the everyman.

If you have ever wondered if you could afford a forged knife, the answer is simple. Yes you can. Lon's knives, from his smaller bushcraft models to the Pioneer and even his new fighter are well within the fair asking price. Try out one of his knives and you will see you are not only purchasing a hard working knife, but a work of art which you can pass down to your loved ones and increase the value even more. 🏕️

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Camp duty includes kitchen knife use. The Pioneer made very quick work of these London broils fresh off the grill.



Tony M. remarked how well the Pioneer worked to serve up his world famous, or at least camp famous, steaks.

