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PHOTOS BY ERIC J. SHELTON | HERALD

Sean McVicker works on engraving a customer's hand gun July 14 in Harker Heights. McVicker has received several awards for his work. Each piece is unique and most take hundreds of hours to complete.

STORIES IN STEEL

Master gun engraver uses hands, head and heart

BY JESSICA PEARCE
KILLEEN DAILY HERALD

Sean McVicker is "packing," but not in the usual sense. His tiny workshop is filled with ornately engraved guns ranging from long-arm rifles to pistols, their scrolled artwork visible under strategically placed spotlights.

On the surface, Sean's life seems an ordinary one; he and his wife, Bonnie, live in a small Harker Heights home with their two dogs, enjoying a semi-retired life. Scrape below the surface, though, and the years fall away, revealing the life of a master engraver.

McVicker grew up in Belfast, Ireland, with his family, who owned a commercial printing press. He began engraving and printing at age 10, and became "indentured" as a craftsman apprentice at age 14.

"It's common," he said. "If your family has a business, you have to learn a trade."

During his five years as a craftsman,



McVicker attended art and technical colleges, learned to run the printing press, set type and engrave. Following his training, he completed several two-year "extensions" to develop additional prowess in gold inlay, painting, animal anatomy and Greek mythology, skills designed to master the art

PLEASE SEE **GUN ENGRAVER, E2**



Several guns with Sean McVicker's engravings are seen July 14. See more photos at KDHNWS.com.

GUN ENGRAVER: One-of-a-kind product

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of engraving.

McVicker was a young man during the violent Northern Ireland conflict of the 1960s, in which he was inextricably swept up. He found an escape in an abiding love of music, especially American rock. He began touring with his band in and outside the country, singing, playing guitar and piano. While on tour in Canada, his music struck a chord with Bonnie.

"We met through his music in Montreal in 1971; we've been together ever since," she said.

The couple moved to the United States in 1978, partly to leave the past behind, but mostly, to start a new life. Sean McVicker worked as a professional entertainer, raising his family of five on his music and compositions. All the while, he accepted commissions for custom-engraved guns. After living through a triple bypass heart surgery in 2013, he officially retired as a musician and took up gun engraving full time, moving with Bonnie from San Diego to Harker Heights to be near their son and extended family at Fort Hood.

Over the years, McVicker has received numerous accolades for his engraving and several notable commissions. In 1955, he created the engraving and print detail for the \$1,000 Canadian bank note. He received the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, and lectured at the Gene Autry Museum. In 2013, he was inducted into



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Sean McVicker holds a gun that he recently engraved for a customer July 14 in Harker Heights.

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the Former Texas Rangers Association after donating an engraved bowie knife for a fundraising event.

In his workshop hangs a signed picture from Lee Erme, star of "Full Metal Jacket," for whom he engraved a knife. McVicker is working on an engraved handgun for Johnnie Aycock, former Texas Ranger and politician.

The engraved guns in McVicker's workshop reflect many distinct styles, including the tightly scrolled "banknote" style popular in Italy and Europe, "bulino" Italian-style etching, and the dramatic "American" style.

McVicker is careful that his engraving style matches the time period in which each gun was made. He would never mix an American Civil War piece with art nouveau technique, he said. His commission rates

vary by the number of hours and level of detail involved in engraving each piece. A smaller gun with an average amount of detail usually takes between 40 and 50 hours to complete, he said. If he is adding gold inlay it can take hundreds of hours per gun. If the piece is an original firearm, McVicker has been known to spend thousands of hours on one piece.

He consults with each gun owner to discover the essential elements they want engraved, then allows his artistic eye to guide the rest of the detail.

"I have to guarantee that no two guns are the same," he added.

After each gun is engraved, Bonnie McVicker, who acts as his business partner, issues each owner a certificate of authenticity. As of 2004, there was an

average of only 320 master gun engravers in North America, Sean McVicker said. "They've got lasers now, but the way I was taught, I knew what I was doing.

"Forty to 50 percent of vendors at a gun show think engraving destroys a gun," McVicker added. "For me, you're not taking anything away — you're restoring it."

He described the feeling of accomplishment he gets seeing the "finished effect (of the engraving) on someone's face."

"It's the solitude of it," he said, "the idea that I can create a brand new design in the old style."

While he is grateful to have the use of his hands, it is love that drives his craft, McVicker said. "You have to have it deep inside your heart."

For more information, go to www.storiesinsteel.com.