

# One in a Vermillion

## Meet William Schweinle

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"The knife sharpener will be here on Thursday."

It's a simple message that pops up on the Vermillion Area Farmers Market Facebook page from time to time. The announcements never include a name; the person is simply known, in the world of the local farmers market, at least, as "the knife sharpener."

These posts on the Facebook page serve as a clarion call to local gardeners and cooks to come to the market with their dull blades.

The man who returns a fine cutting edge to local knives and tools is William Schweinle, who, when occupied, as he describes it humorously in "the job that someone is paying me to do," is a statistics professor in health sciences at the

University of South Dakota School of Medicine.

"My undergraduate degree was in German literature at the University of Texas at Austin, and the best job I could get in Austin while I was working on the degree was in building supply," William said. "And it was an old German cabinet maker, Gunther Oswald, brought up through the old German tradition of apprenticeship, who would buy material from the store, and I spoke German, so we would speak in German, and finally one day I asked him, 'Could I come to your shop and apprentice with you on weekends?'"

Gunther agreed. On William's first day of work, he was told by Gunther, "Before you learn to dirty my shop, you're going to learn to clean it."

"So I shoved a broom around for several weekends, and finally when he was satisfied with that, he said, 'before you learn to dull my tools, you're going to learn to sharpen them.' So I sat around sharpening chisels and planes and things like that," he said, "to where I could get them pretty sharp."

"Years ago, my wife said, 'Do you think you could sharpen my kitchen knives?' and I said, 'Yeah, I probably could,' so I did," William said.

Three years ago, it was suggested that he bring his knife sharpening skills and equipment to the local farmers market, and he has occasionally set up shop there since.

The equipment William uses to sharpen blades hasn't changed for centuries. He uses a whetstone, with a bit of a modern twist – it is rotated slowly by an electric motor.

"My wife gave me this one year. It's essentially a wet wheel, a slow turning wheel that goes through a water bath, and it's more or less a man-made Japanese water stone," he said. "As it's sharpening, it's sloughing off a little bit of grit every time and the water washes that off and keeps fresh grit exposed," William said. "The water also helps keep everything cool so I can't burn the temper out of a knife. It does a good job."

That good job is confirmed by a simple test – William gently passes a freshly-sharpened blade through a patch of hair on the



skin of his arm. A small bare area that's left behind is testament to his success.

"If I run out of hair on my left arm, I switch to my left leg," he said, laughing.

William can sharpen nearly every kind of knife that's brought to him. He doesn't use his wheel to restore a sharp edge to serrated knives; those types of blades require a triangular-shaped tool made of ceramic that allows him work in between the serrations.

"I can do serrated knives, and I do a fair amount of scissors, and a fair amount of gardening tools. People bring their shears," he said. "The one thing I wouldn't do would be hair-cutting shears, or barber shears. There's something unique about the bevel on those that I can't duplicate with my touch."

That "touch" came from his experience while under the tutelage of the Gunther about 25 years ago. There are certain lessons from that time that William never fails to employ as he begins to give a blade a sharper edge.

"Number one – be patient with it, and another thing is as I grind the blade, to not use too much pressure. When you take the knife through, the angle doesn't need to be precise – that's what he (Gunther) always talked about. The angle doesn't matter, he would say – it's the feel."

The craftsman also taught William how to finely grind a blade while leaving a burr, or lip along the edge.

"Once I get that lip, and I can feel it all along the length of the blade, he (Gunther) then said his other trick was leather

strops," William said. "These are just pieces of leather glued onto wood, and each of these has a different abrasive on them."

He uses the appropriate strop to gently remove the burr left on a blade's edge during the sharpening process.

"Those are the tricks – go for a burr, be patient getting that burr, and then be patient polishing it off with a strop," William said.

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