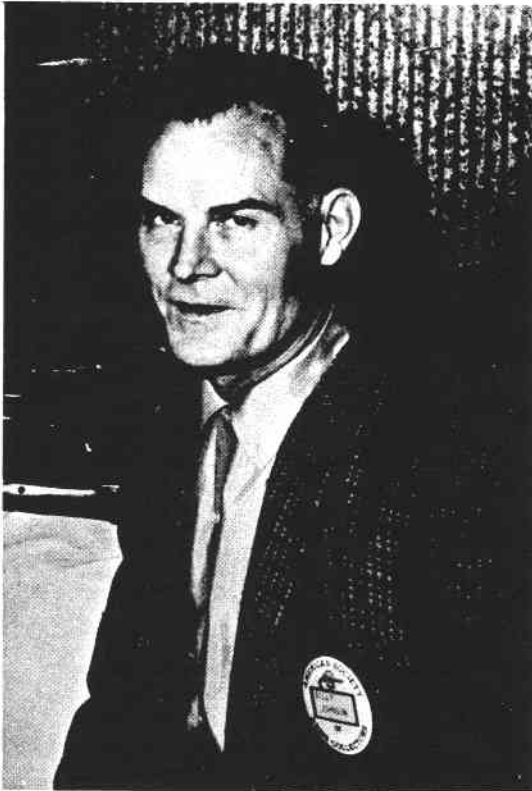


JAPANESE EDGED WEAPONS
COLLECTING FRONTIER

By William A. "Billy" Johnson

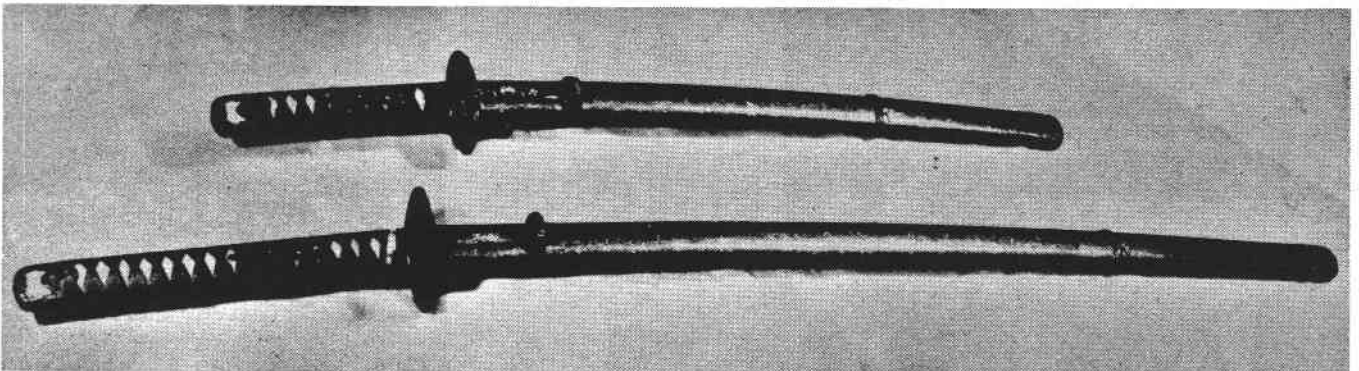


WILLIAM A. "BILLY" JOHNSON

Any serious study of Japanese history will quickly reveal that the sword has held a unique place in the lives of it's people. From the earliest days male children born in Samurai, or warrior families, wore charm swords or small swords, the hilts or scabbards of which were covered with brocade. At five years of age the boy was dressed in his first "bakama" or pantaloons, and another sword was given to him. When the Samurai reached manhood he carried, as a general rule, two swords. The larger one was called a Katana, the size and shape which changed with the fashions of the times, as well as with the tastes of the individual smiths. The lengths of the Katana varied from slightly over 39 inches to 34-3/4 inches. The Wakizashi, or smaller sword, was fixed in length about 1670 at 12-1/2 inches. The two swords formed a pair or Daisho. The Wakizashi was the only sword allowed by custom to be worn in houses - it was necessary for the Samurai to remove his long sword on entering a house. A sword rack was provided at the entrance of every dwelling for this purpose. If a visitor wished to show deep respect for the person he was visiting, both swords were removed before entering.

In Japan the sword and it's associated fittings have for centuries been regarded as an expression of the highest art, in fact, the Japanese people have always been unique in their awareness of beauty and things of an aesthetic nature, so it is not surprising that this is reflected in the sword and its fittings. I think perhaps it is this characteristic of beauty and fine art that has captured my interest even more than the historical use and place of the swords as a weapon.

If you will recall, immediately after the War with Japan, there was a general disdain for anything Japanese. We were cautioned as gun enthusiasts, that the Arisaka Rifle was not worth converting to another caliber. Even as you, at times I came into possession of Samurai swords as they were included in deals relating to firearms. I hardly looked at them. Some I gave away - others I sold for anything I was offered.



"Daisho," meaning pair. This pair worn by Samurai and match in every detail. Katana (long sword), Wakizashi (short sword).

Immediately after cessation of hostilities in Japan, hundreds of thousands of swords were called in by the occupation forces as confiscated weapons. The average G. I. knew nothing about the weapon - he merely saw in it a nice relic to take home. It has been estimated that Americans alone brought out over half a million swords before the Japanese officials prevailed upon authorities to let them retain certain Museum and Temple swords as objects of art. Prior to World War II there were approximately one and one-half million swords (including factory made ones) in existence, nearly one-third of which were over two feet in length. At present, there are no more than one hundred thousand swords in Japan. In fact, there are more Samurai swords in the

United States today than there are in Japan. About 70% of the long swords in existence today are in the United States. When the atomic bomb fell on Hiroshima, the Samurai sword lost its prestige as a weapon, but it still remains the most perfect steel sword in the world.

About three years ago, I was called upon by a woman who had lost her husband in an automobile accident, to help her dispose of his gun collection. There were two Japanese swords which I bought just to fill up wall space in my new den. One night I casually took them down and looked them over. The thing that really caught my eye was the guard, or Tsuba, as it is called. It was made of iron, yet it had some of the most intricate metal work I had ever seen. There were at least four different colors of metal which proved to be gold, silver, copper and brass.

As you may know, being a manufacturing jeweler, I work with precious metals and this tsuba, in my opinion, was real art! When I examined the other sword, I discovered it had a brass tsuba and was hand chiseled to appear as a piece of rotten or driftwood, an amazing accomplishment! As I turned the piece to withdraw the blade, the scabbard slipped very slightly, only about two inches I would say, and in my attempt to catch it, I touched the blade. Mind you, I barely touched it - and almost severed the end of my thumb. It was at this point, I suppose, that I really took my first look at the Japanese sword. It was polished to a high lustre, and as I wiped off the light grease, I noticed that along the cutting edge it looked frosty. As I turned the blade near a reading lamp, the bright body of the sword and the frosty edge where they meet, seemed to move! I suddenly had the feeling it was alive. I could almost see the molecular movement in the metal. I decided that I had to know more about this weapon.

Within a couple of months, I had with the help of the Librarian at Samford University, enough material to reveal some astounding facts.

Japan had been up until 1868, a nation involved for a thousand years in feudal wars but with no great extent of invasion from the outside world. The Japanese sword had evolved as a definite type as early as the 6th Century. The bronze age for Japan ended in the 2nd Century B. C. When you consider the fact that they had as their only source of iron, an inferior ore bearing sand, one is amazed that the finest edged weapons man has ever known were developed. We now know for a fact that the Samurai sword surpasses even the Toledo and famed Damascus blades. There is no other blade in the world made as this sword is made. After smelting the ore, and obtaining the crude iron, it was beaten into a billet of rectangular shape. After heating and pounding to an enlarged surface, it was folded and the process repeated.

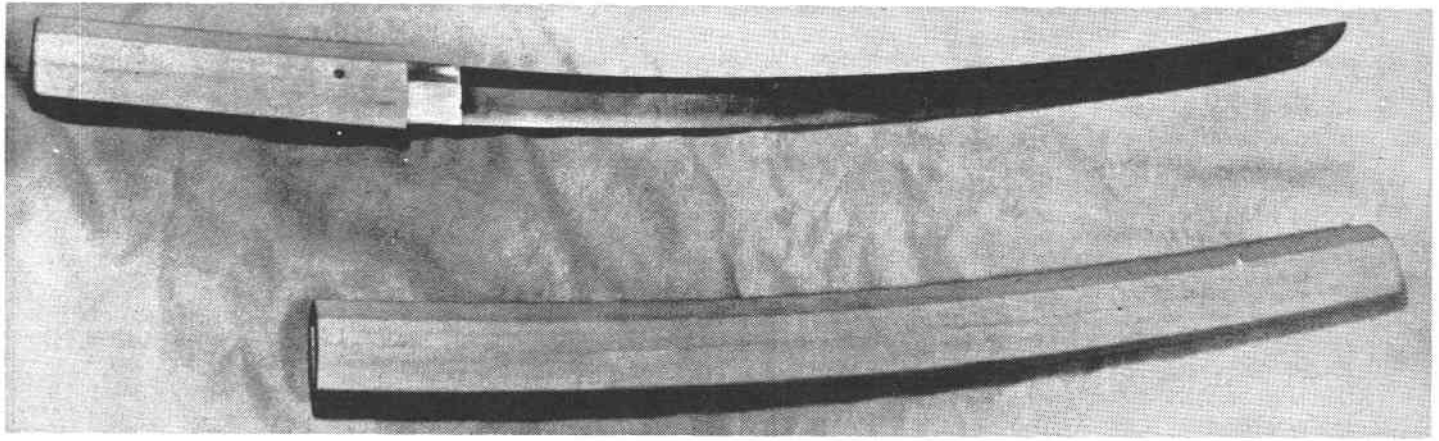
This went on for approximately 20 foldings, resulting in a lamination of over 200,000 layers. Some smiths united these billets with others and folded five more times, resulting in a lamination of over three million layers. All swordsmiths, regardless of the place or time, have been confronted with the same problem - that of creating a blade which would neither bend nor break and yet would cut well and the unique Japanese solution to this problem was the development described a moment ago of the folding and forging of the metal.

Traditionally, Japanese swords are classified into five schools or methods named after the province in which they originated. The Yamato, Yamashiro, Bizen, Soshu, and Mino, listed in the order of their historical appearance. They were, simply, different paths to the same goal, differing only in their techniques. By the 10th Century schools of sword making had spread all over Japan. I noticed an amazing similarity with Kentucky Rifle schools in America. It seems they had many of the same problems.

As I mentioned before, one of the things that caught my interest was the polish on the blade. This was an art carried out by professionals. After the swordsmith had spent sometimes months on one blade, living a life comparable to that of a monk, eating no meat, abstaining from any homelife, praying to his Gods to guide him, and many times destroying his work when it was finished. We can realize something of what was felt by a Samurai who was fortunate enough to own such a piece. After a smith had succeeded in producing a blade he thought worthy of his signature, he then chiseled his name, his village, province, and the date, sometimes even the month and day. It was then turned over to the polisher. This process is so precise that up to 17 operations is involved, using as many as 12 different grits of hones and several finely powdered abrasives. No grinding was done, and it took 40 to 50 hours for a plain blade and several weeks for those with grooves and engraving on them.

Such meticulous care taken on the blade would naturally bring on a demand for proper fittings. Almost with the development of the polish, which brought out the beautiful molecular structure of the blade, schools of sword fittings sprung up wherever they were needed, and this was almost everywhere.

I mentioned to you the designations of two of the swords usually carried by the Samurai warrior. The Katana - the long sword in excess of 2 feet, the Wakizashi at slightly over a foot in length and then there is a third designation - the Tanto, which is a dagger less than a foot in length. Most Japanese swords are mounted in such distinctive patterns that one can almost tell a Japanese edged weapon from a great distance. The grip is usually covered with Rayskin which is then wrapped with a flat tape of silk or cotton. This wrapping almost invariably holds two talismen, one on each side - called Menuki. The Tsuba or guard is held to the grip by the tang of the blade passing through into the grip and secured by a bamboo peg. The hardware is so beautiful in its makeup that it makes a distinct contribution to the beauty of the mounted sword, and many collectors find this field enough to satisfy their interests.



Short sword of Wakizashi and storage scabbard. Blades were usually removed from working hardware and put away in their cases. This blade is described and authenticated in the oragami picture.

Although the Samurai took great pride in his sword furniture or hardware, having as many as five complete changes of tsuba, scabbard, grips, etc., the Shirasaya (pronounced Shear-a-see-a) is the natural and permanent housing of a blade. The fancy scabbards are for use outside the residence. Shirasaya wood is grown in one tiny mountain section of Japan just for this purpose. Its name is HO wood, closely related to our magnolia.

Touching on the handling of blades, which I found to be very important the hard way, one must take care never to turn the cutting edge of the blade toward anyone who happens to be near him. One is especially required never to touch the blade with his hands. If someone asks to examine a sword, it must be handed to him upright, held by the extreme end of the grip, with the blade turned toward yourself, so that it may be safely and easily grasped by the one who is to receive it. If by some accident the blade should slip, the person receiving the blade would be less likely to be injured. Blades are always withdrawn from and replaced in a scabbard with the cutting edge upward, so that the weight of the blades will not cause them to cut the scabbard.



Oragami, "certificate of authenticity" - The blade is fingerprinted by rubbings and attached with a seal and described in English and Japanese. The lower right tsuba has the appearance of drift wood and is described in talk.

After two years of buying almost every sword I could find and seeking out the organizations related to Japanese swords, I ended up recently with over 100 pieces. After joining the Japanese Sword Society of California I started to really learn a few things to my great surprise. This thing of collecting Japanese edged weapons was well under way. The Society had been successful in bringing over a professional sword polisher and appraiser from Japan.

I had learned in some of my reading, that even though I may have a beautiful sword, it could have a counterfeit signature. As a matter of fact I had been warned that perhaps only one of eight blades might be authentic and desirable as a collector's item. I just couldn't believe the ratio was that bad, but how wrong can

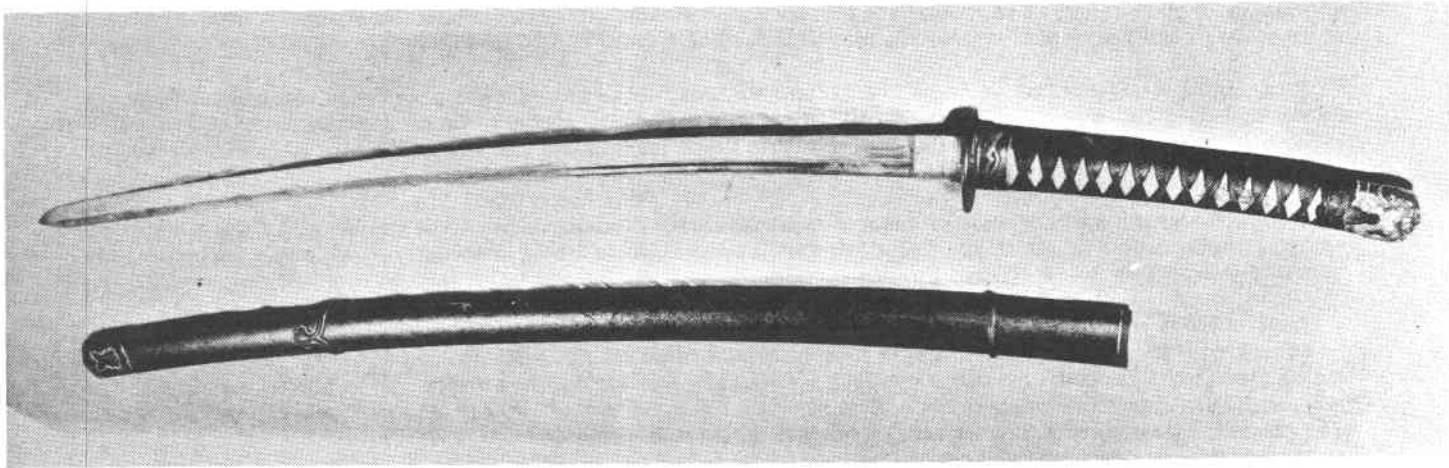
you get? After much packing and arranging I sent out 12 blades to be polished and appraised and out of 12 blades, four were accepted for polishing and Origame, or a certificate of authenticity. The rest was junk so far as a collector was concerned. They looked O. K. to me - I was learning! These appraisers are for real. It is an occupation of the most exacting requirements, and until about a century ago, was an occupation strictly handed down in a family for over 1000 years. Their opinions are recognized without question. A certificate by a licensed appraiser is accepted by all Japanese. His knowledge is almost uncanny and most can tell a genuine or a fake at a mere glance. When I say fake, I am not speaking of the blade - but the signature. Ironically, some blades with counterfeit signatures are superior to the blades made by the smith whose name has been faked. Usually the faking was done at the same time and period as the original was made. When a village had perhaps 200 swordsmiths at work and only one or two had become famous, you can better understand why the unknown or unrenowned was tempted to sign another's name to his work.

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Out of about 30 blades I have sent to California I have come up with about 8 that I could be proud to own. And incidentally, I understand that I have been luckier than many others who have started in this field. At present I have about 40 blades that are considered desirable.

About blades that are unsigned. They do exist despite a Royal order that all were to be signed. The Samurai sword has such characteristics in its fabrication that the maker can be determined even without his signature. The appraiser in many cases will attribute the blade to a certain maker, and then affix this swordsmith's name in gold and silver inlay on the tang along with his own name. Some of the finest blades in existence today have no signature. Some were never signed - some lost their signatures when the blade was shortened, which was done occasionally at the whim of the owner. Many daggers and short swords were once full length swords.

The first known maker to sign his work was Amakuni in the 8th Century. There is a sword signed by him in a Temple in Nara called Kogarasu Maru (Little Crow) about 709. Just as the Kentucky Rifle had its golden era, so did the Samurai sword. The peak of perfection was reached between the years 900 to 1450, diminishing and rising from time to time until the 17th Century when it went into a deep decline. Around 1790 a certain Masahide, a very studious man of remarkable knowledge of the history of the sword and also of its making, set up a school with the idea of reviving this almost lost art. It was so successful that he emerged as one of the finest swordsmiths in Japan, past or present. He chose to go back and produce blades of the old masters. One of these blades was a copy of the famous Kogarasu Maru (Little Crow), and with the usual good luck of Billy Johnson, I found this blade in the possession of a farmer in South Alabama who had been a fighter pilot during the war and who had done duty in Japan. I have been told that there is only one other copy of this blade in America. It is very unusual and could only have been made by a master craftsman. I would be proud for you to examine it.

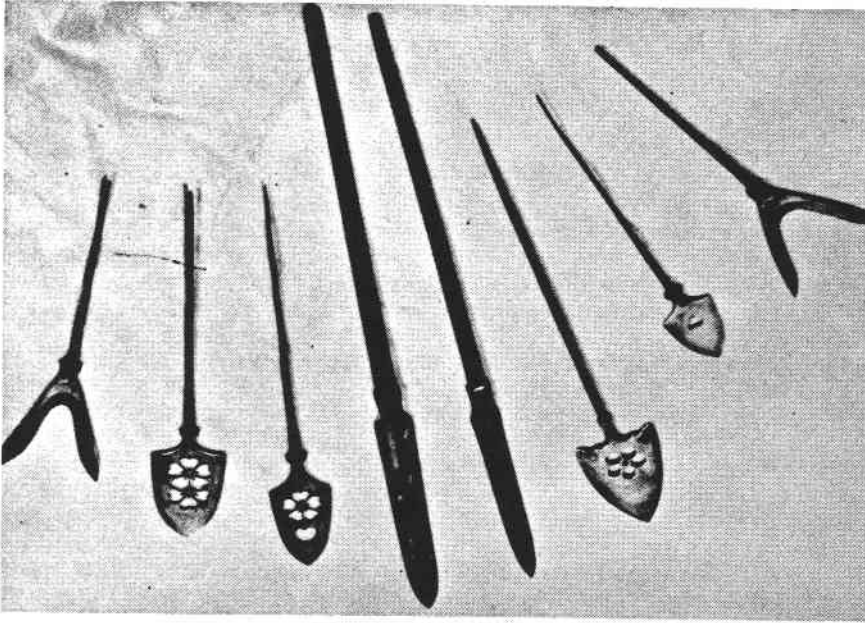


A copy by Suishinshi Masahide made by special order in 1808 of Amakuni's Kogarasu Maru (meaning Little Crow) which was originally made in A.D. 709.

One other point of interest concerning the making of the sword. There was a practice in Japan that was carried on for many centuries - that of sword testing. Most Samurai could not afford the high price exacted by a professional, however, his unique position as a warrior gave him certain privileges over the peasants. They would simply hide in a dark place and as some unsuspecting victim came along, the Samurai would spring out and cut them down. This was done with immunity to themselves, and as a result, I might add, it became quite difficult to find a candidate for testing!

At first criminals were used as the victims and later on cadavers were used. The story is told that when one robber was told that he was to be executed by the sword, he asked by which method he was to be cut down. When he was told he was to be cut from the left shoulder anglewise to the right hip he said "If I had known that before, I would have swallowed some rocks and spoiled your blade." As terrible and uncivilized as this sounds, it too is a part of the sword history of Japan. Blades are found today with the tester's signature along with the other information. Some may read "2 bodies, 1 stroke" or as high as "5 bodies, 1 stroke." You must realize that to do this, it had to be sharp as a razor and in strong hands!

I have mentioned swords and the hardware - both worthy of a collector's interest. There are many more facets of collecting in Japanese edged weapons. Archery is and has been a part of Japanese history. The arrowheads are steel and like the tsuba, are a work of art and collected by many. I might say that right here in Washington, a Mr. Goodspeed has the finest private Japanese arrowhead collection in the Western world.



Japanese arrowheads . . . Robin Hood was a "Johnny come lately" compared to the Japanese. Japanese bows were very long and easy to use but had amazing range. (George Missbach collection)

There are few frontiers left of any kind these days. I remember so well what I personally feel was the golden era of gun collecting for me, as I think of the trips I made to Texas to join with such men as Harry Knode and Red Jackson and many more, back 15 years ago. You could just about find and buy any of the items we find on display here at this meeting and in abundance too! If you have wondered why I feel that Japanese weapons is a new collecting frontier - I can think of few, if any, areas of arms collecting today, that has the exciting promise of this field about which I have been talking.

Inasmuch as the Japanese sword has not changed to any noticeable degree since it evolved as a type over a thousand years ago, it can be a thrilling thing to acquire a sword from the

antique shop, gun dealer, pawnshop or at a gun show and as you withdraw it from the scabbard, realize it could be from 50 to 500 years old or older? It may also be worth from \$35.00 to \$2,000.00!

I can think of few items of arms accoutrements today that have such fascination as the tsuba, the arrowheads and general trappings that go with the blades. Bernard Baruch was an avid collector of tsuba and a Philadelphia dealer told me he sold him a single tsuba for \$350.00 and I'll wager Mr. Baruch knew what he was doing.

I have found the study of ancient Japan a most fascinating world - a world of people with such a highly developed appreciation of all things beautiful, that it even reflects itself in something so deadly as the Samurai sword. I find that as never before, I am inspired to greater perfection in my own work.

Last but not least - where today can you pursue a hobby where there is no repetition? You will never find two of a kind. Mr. John Yumoto points out in his book that through the mist and fog of great antiquity, there remains the Three Sacred Treasures of Japan - these are still held in reverence by the people - 1. The Sacred Mirror 2. The Comma-shaped beads 3. The Sword - the three most highly prized national treasures in Japan. The Samurai sword remains in Japan and throughout the world as an impressive example of highly skilled workmanship culminating in fine art.