The History of the Bowie knife

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There are many tools and objects that are associated with southern culture. One tool that has greatly influenced the culture of the South is the Bowie knife. The legend of the Bowie knife still influences our culture today. The use of the knife among many people has helped to solidify its place in history. The legend of the Bowie knife is deeply rooted in the Trans-Mississippi and has become known as a symbol of the South in general.

The legend of the Bowie knife began September 19, 1827, on a sandbar on the Mississippi River. Two men had gathered for a duel, and part of their entourage was a man named Jim Bowie. Both the men had fired twice, missing both times. The men shook hands and began to leave the dueling ground as Bowie and the other members of the entourage began to fight. Bowie was shot at and stabbed all the way through the chest by his opponent’s sword cane. Still fighting, Bowie grabbed his opponent’s coat and plunged his knife into his heart. Bleeding from at least seven wounds, Bowie had won the duel. The abnormally large knife commissioned for Bowie by his brother Rezin had come in handy and actually saved his life.²

Soon after the infamous sand bar knife fight everyone was asking for “A knife like Bowie’s”. Although the knife had no real description, the general consensus was that it needed to be large and come to a point at the end of the blade making it the perfect weapon for close quarters combat. Stories of Bowie and his knife were everywhere. One such story told of Bowie killing three hired assassins with his famous
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knife. The news of the Bowie knife and its killing power was spreading quickly prompting Tennessee to ban their sale in 1828.3

The knives began to be embellished and decorated with all kinds of precious metals and text. The Bowie knife wasn’t just for protection anymore. From soldiers to senators everyone carried a Bowie knife on their side. One person of interest that carried the Bowie knife was a man by the name of Davy Crockett who fought alongside Bowie at the battle of the Alamo, where they later died. Although Bowie was dead, his story and his knife lived on.3

The knife’s influence continued to spread across the South and even the country as a whole. In one state in particular, Arkansas, the influence of the Bowie knife reigned supreme. Arkansas began to be known for its widespread and gruesome knife fights. In 1837 the first and only killing on Arkansas’ house floor was by the Speaker of the House, John Wilson, who after taking offense to a comment made by J.J.Anthony swiftly pulled his Bowie knife and stabbed him dead. Fights like these broke out all across the state awarding it the nickname The Toothpick State. Arkansas was given this nickname because many people of that era would pick their teeth with their Bowie knife or “Arkansas toothpick”. Because of this, the state’s reputation was smeared due to its association with violence.2

Although still very popular, at the onset of the war between states the Bowie knife began to make a comeback. Many soldiers carried the knife into combat with them as it
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had already proved to be very effective and deadly. Around thirty years after the creation of the original Bowie knife, the design had changed to be much larger, to the size of a small sword. It was said to be sharp enough to shave, heavy enough to be a hatchet, long enough to be a sword, and wide enough to be a paddle. This versatility, combined with its combat capabilities, really helped to ensure its use throughout the war and even into the Reconstruction Period. Though mostly used by confederate soldiers, both sides of the war took advantage of the Bowie knife. One northern abolitionist known for carrying a bowie knife was John Brown, who had orchestrated and led the raids on Harpers Ferry and bleeding Kansas years prior. Nearing the end of the war, the Bowie knife began to be phased out of combat use by the cheaper bayonet and the more reliable six shot revolver. 3

Even after the war, the Bowie knife was very common in the South taking on yet another purpose, hunting. The knife had grown inferior for the use of self defense with the advancement of firearm technology, but nothing could compare with its ability to skin wild game. Due to this change in purpose, the size of the Bowie knife grew smaller from the ones during the war between states to around seven to eight inches. A large knife was no longer practical, as there was no need for many of the uses of the previous design. However, as the western frontier was settled and disappeared the bowie knife followed suit and faded from popularity. 3
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During World War Two the United States Marine Corps designed the 1219C2 combat knife also known as the Ka-Bar Mark Two. The design of the Ka-Bar mimicked that of the Bowie knife. The Bowie knife had come back to see combat again. Though it was the seven to eight inch hunting design, the Ka-Bar bowie knife worked great in the close quarters of the trenches. The Ka-Bar helped to bring the bowie knife back into the public eye after nearly a hundred and five years since its creation, making it the standard for most hunting and combat knives today.

Since its creation, the Bowie knife has helped to shape the South and its culture. From the bloody years as a dueler's weapon of choice to the best knife to skin a deer with, the Bowie knife has always had a reputation. A reputation that has spread all across the country and has made the Bowie knife a large symbol of the South and its culture as a whole. Even though the Bowie knife may fade in and out of popularity, its legend and the legend of its original wielder will always live on.