

KROOKED

By Rich T.

KEN MOTTER

The finest lines from the crookedest spine

For years, Krooked Ken Motter served the forces of multinational commerce as an Integrated Supply Specialist. He was seriously managerial — wore a suit and tie, made good money, and hated every minute of it. Today he does something he likes: Ken is an award-winning tattoo artist, a street-shop inkslinger, and a sought-after and dedicated conventioneer.

Ken gets his Krooked moniker not from shady business practices but from his backbone. “I was born with scoliosis,” he said. “When I was a kid, things were okay for me because of my parents. I think I was raised pretty damn well — not to really give a shit about what anybody said or thought about the way I looked. I played baseball religiously, and nobody ever said, ‘Oh no, don’t do that. You’re going to get hurt.’ Usually I had fewer problems out of the kids and more problems from the parents.

“They were like ‘Don’t go near him, you’re going to hurt him,’” he said. “I wore a brace for 18 years, a Milwaukee

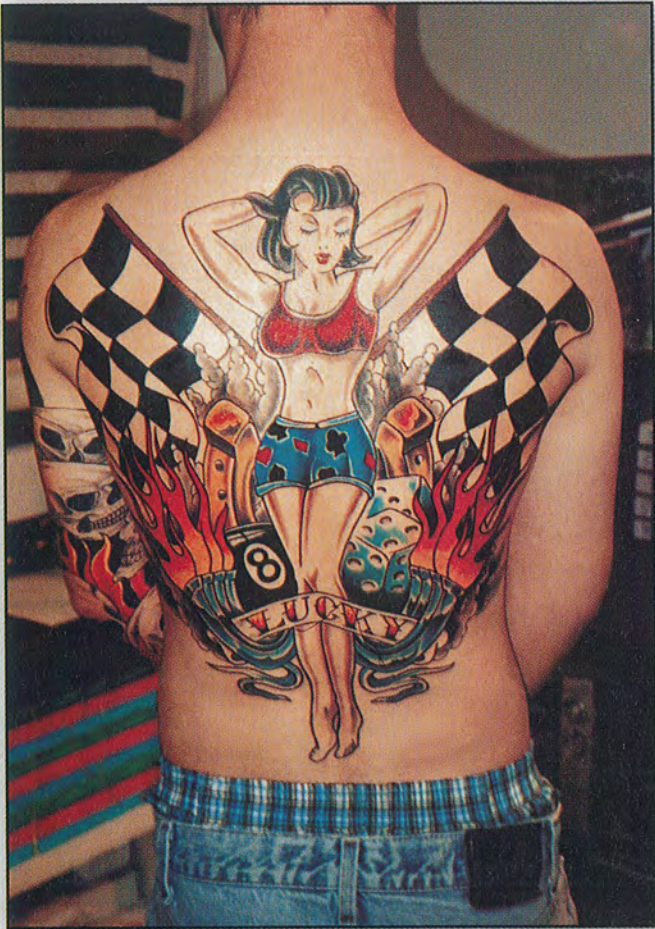
walking brace, they called it, that held your head and hips and everything in line. I was always the class clown to kind of keep people lighthearted around me. They never really bothered me. I still did whatever I wanted to do. Actually I got away with a lot more because of that. I would play off of it and maybe still do. I have a good relationship with my parents. They are both still living and support me 100%. They don’t live far away so I get to see them frequently.”

It was family as well that keyed Ken’s early interest in tattooing. “I had an uncle Wallace who was a submarine guy in the navy,” Ken said. “He was covered in tattoos from his neck to his ankles and he would come over to visit. He was this real rough-and-tough guy on the outside, but he was the first one to scoop you up and put you on his knee. It kind of gave me the feeling that geez, these people who are all tattooed up are really cool, you know, ‘cause he was always so nice to me. I was really small when he passed away. I



Photos of Ken by Chris Pfouts





just knew I had to get tattooed.

"I got my first tattoo on my 21st birthday from Little Gary in Dover, Delaware," Ken said. "It was a little sunburst with clouds around it. My first relationship with a tattooer was a positive one. He was super cool, too. My second tattoo was done by Tom Painter and that was also real positive. So no matter what show I went to if I saw him or Gary it was just like one big family.

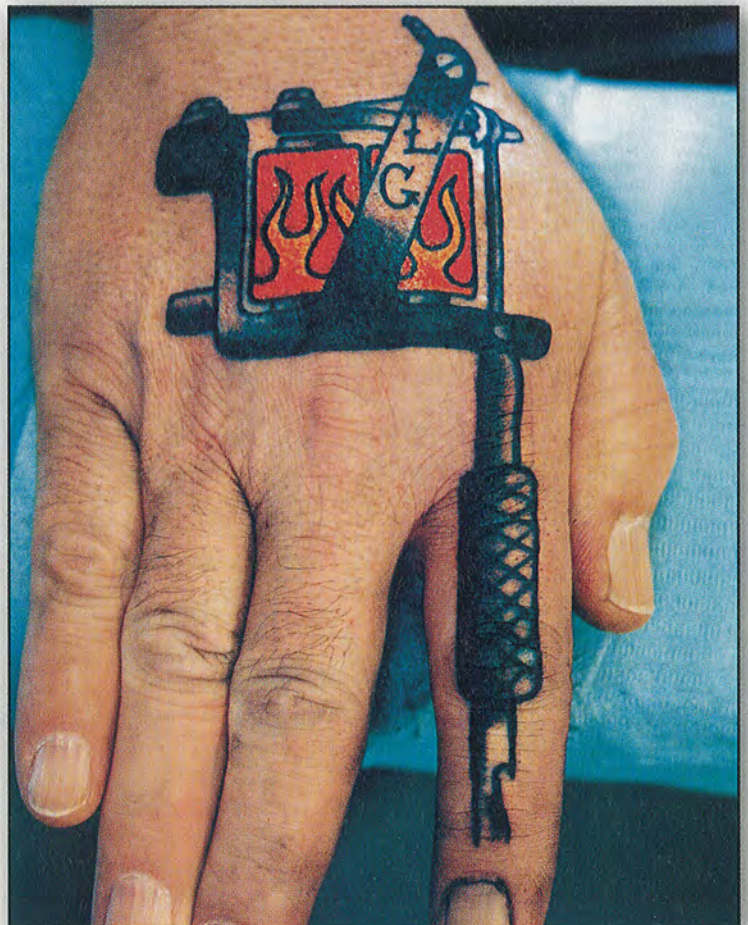
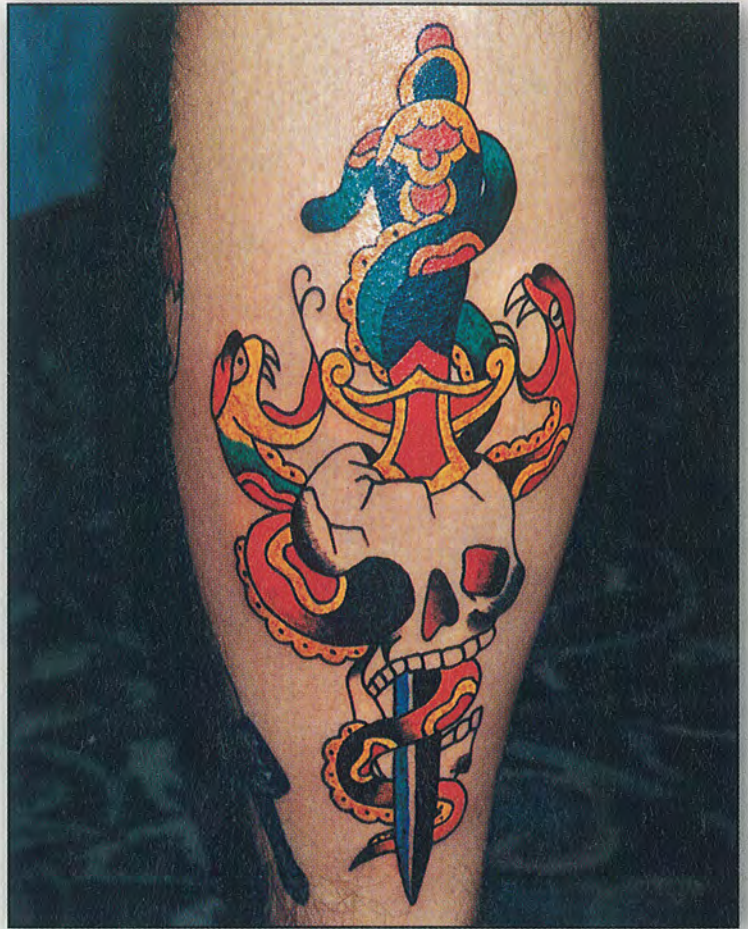
Ken had always enjoyed drawing, and he took a full four years of art in high school. "[I] did my own thing drawing reapers and panthers and stuff," he said. "So I started drawing some of my own tattoos and taking them in and getting them tattooed on me. After that I started going to tattoo conventions because Gary had a lot of the posters up for the conventions and so, geez I don't remember what year it was, I think it might have been like '94. I was in Richmond and hit the Am Jam and started going to those."

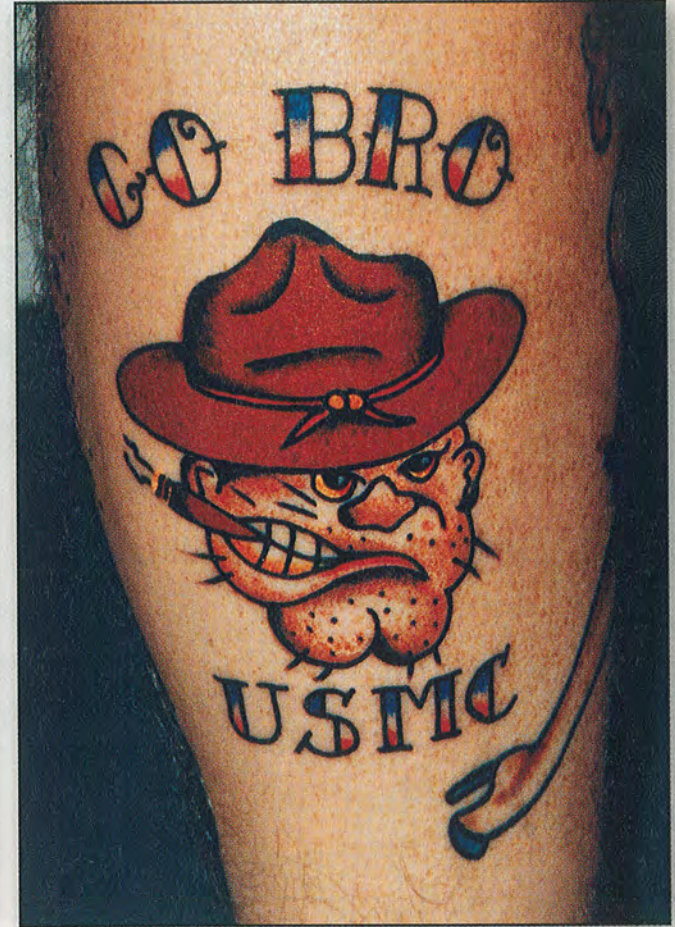
During this period Ken developed a friendship with Bill Galloway, who worked with Little Gary. It became a pivotal relationship for the artist who would come to be known as Krooked Ken. "I'd plan my tattoo day," he said. "I'd take off from work, because I used to travel a lot. I was an integrated supply specialist for a company out of Philadelphia, and my contract was with a large tobacco company. My job was to make sure every factory from Virginia to Maine to Illinois had every nut, bolt, and bearing it needed. Of course I didn't do it by myself. I had 300 employees and I mean the stress was terrible. I never knew what it was like to enjoy a job. The corporate world is just horrible. It's dog-eat-dog and no matter what you do you don't win."

Getting tattooed was a much-needed reprieve from the corporate grind. "I would set up my times to get tattooed on days that Bill worked," Ken said. "We would go out afterward and pretty much stay up all night drinking and carrying on, just having a good time. Like I said we became real good friends. There was another guy working at Gary's at that time, George Keeler, who was real friendly too and again it almost felt like a family. There was no animosity. There were never any hard feelings. I was always drawing and bringing stuff into these guys and showing it to them and they would critique it.

"I had mentioned to my wife that tattooing would be kind of a neat thing to do," he said. "Not have to work for some big corporation. But tattooing was not something I thought I would ever do because I was making good money where I was. Being around Gary, I knew people did real apprenticeships.

"My wife didn't have any idea that was the way it worked," he said. "She just thought that she would do me a really big favor and buy me tattoo equipment for my birthday. At first I was upset, like, this stuff is no good to me. [I didn't know that] she'd talked to Bill about me tattooing.






Bill filled her in: It's not something you just do."

Bill suggested that Ken should think about doing an apprenticeship. Ken was worried about talking to Gary. "I've always put Gary on this pedestal," Ken said, "because he's been like a father to me in the tattoo business. He only apprenticed one other person and that was George Keeler." After settling his nerves, Ken stopped back by the shop. Gary surprised him by saying, "I'd be more than happy to apprentice you. I'd like to have you around."

"And so that's where it took off," Ken said. "My apprenticeship started in the spring of '95. When I got into tattooing I was into new school, more or less. I liked the bold aspect, the heavy black lines and heavy black shading. My love for traditional tattoos didn't come till a little later on. I was fortunate though. Gary had been tattooing for so long that I got to see tattoos from being brand new to being 30 years old right away.

"So early on in my apprenticeship I was able to learn what makes a good tattoo, what makes for longevity, and what makes an image," Ken said. "The customers I have who collect the really hardcore traditional sought me out from seeing other pieces I'd done. I love working with a limited color palette. Black and red or black, red, yellow, green. To me that's how you get that old image. I want people 50 years from now to say 'He had all those colors, and he used three of them and it looks great.'"

Krooked Ken has a solid handle on what works for him in the art. "To me, it's imagery," he said. "That's what fascinates me about tattooing. Not the bells and whistles and shit that's attached to it. If I see something that's across the street I'm like, man, look at that eagle. Man, look at that pin-up girl."

Without solid imagery, the impact is diminished: "If I look across the street and say what the hell is that, there is no imagery there. My first impression is I don't want to cross the street to see it. I want to know what it is before I get there." 

Krooked Ken can be reached at Obbey Tattoo, Rt. 13 South, Delmar DE 19940; tel: 302-846-2966, or on the Web at <http://krookedken.i.am>.

