

Candidly Speaking

by Dennis Ellingsen



The study of pocketknife can openers encompasses history, marketing and design improvement. Every pocketknife manufacturer wanted a can opener that was unique to their company. Marketing wanted a distinctive tool that had ease of operation and was safe. Studying the can opener allows one to examine the evolution of changes.

"How's that for openers?" he asked, as he started his sharp and cutting comments concerning pocketknife can openers. Yes, I'm sure that you all get the point and can handle it; but I trust that I haven't made anyone edgy over my puns. After that, I suppose I should get my nose to the grindstone and whet your appetite concerning the intended purpose of this article. So, our story unfolds and opens.

In the early 1800s Napoleon Bonaparte offered a reward to anyone who could find a way of preserving food so that his troops could survive in remote battle areas without having to pillage and plunder for rations. Enter the man Nicolas François Appert, who claimed this prize (1810), and started a business which processed food for preservation.

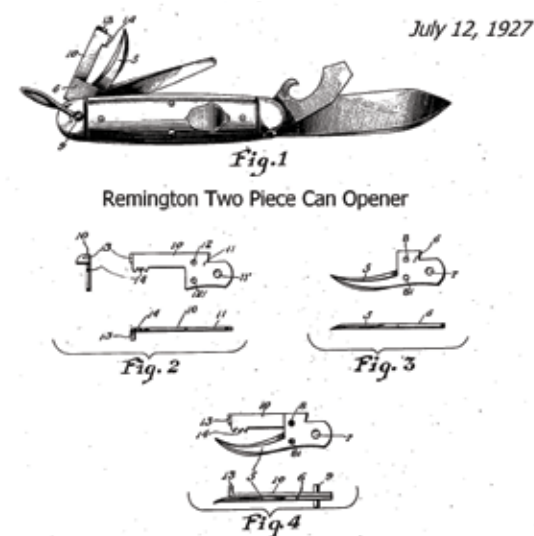
The first long term storage of foods was done in glass containers; but this had its problems as breakage was inevitable and great care was needed to transport the containers. So, with the classic statement, "Can it Mister," the tin can (1812) was conceived. However, for every new discovery a new problem occurs; how does one open a can to get at the contents? Man's creativity inspired many a nightmarish opener concept until 1858 when a can opener was invented. Without attempting a treatise on how many ways there are to open a can, which in itself would open a can of worms, I thought that I would focus this writing on the pocketknife can opener, which started somewhat at the turn of the 1900s with the adoption of the boy and girl scouting programs.

The common pocketknife proved itself to be a most noble and versatile tool; and it was a natural thought to equip it with other most handy and essential items, such as a leather punch, a screwdriver and, oh yes, a can opener. A real picnic affair, wherein you could open your can of food, cut the meat and apples and cheese, fix your car; and, when you had thus engorged yourself,

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Remington used the popular "D" (Style 1) can opener in this Red White and Blue Patriotic Knife (left). After 1924 a patented two-piece can opener was used as shown in this Girl Scout utility knife (right).



Remington two-piece can opener patent, approved in 1927.



This four line Camillus can opener dates to the 1940s as a work around the Imperial patented safety device. It is pretty close to the safety design, but uses a two piece construction. This style can also be found on 1950s Boker knives.



The classic style Broken D (Style 1) can opener was used by New York Knife Company (NYKCO) in two configurations. Note the cap lifter combination and also the broken shotshell extractor tab.

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you used your trusty leather punch to poke holes in your all too small belt, which was a result of the predicament that your handy dandy pocketknife got you into in the first place. In 1910 scouting took wing (or foot as you will), and hiking to remote and far off places required the carrying of foods. Since pillaging is not a scouting technique, the can accompanied the scout in his battles with the mysteries of the wilds. There is little doubt in my mind that, as usual, the biggest battle was the task of getting the can open.

The first inventions of portable can openers were somewhat stable in design from 1910 until 1924, at which time modifications and improvements seem never ending until 1945 when the safety can opener design was patented.

By and by, my own struggles with the can opener seem just as manifest, when you consider that this article started many years ago. It also stopped about that same time. Only now, as I look back with a forced chuckle, does the writing again proceed; however, it is void of the R&D concept that was used those many years ago.

My interest in scout/utility knives was initiated because of my son, Raymond, and proved to be a fascinating father-son project. Raymond, after the youngster stage, had escalated to newer and bigger challenges in life like girls, school, girls, some more girls, communication (talking to girls) while I had the burden of less meaningful chores like knife collecting and writing.

Back in Raymond's more studious days (or was it day), the challenge to scientifically ascertain which of the pocketknife can openers was the easiest to use seemed a rather minor project. After months of accumulating tin cans, which were always in the way, we elected to spend a Saturday experimenting and documenting our findings. Twenty utility knives, with can openers extended, were neatly arranged around the mountain of half opened tin cans. My note pad and pen were poised for action, as it was Ray who had lost the toss to determine who would be the manipulator of the magic openers.

The first can fought back defiantly, but finally succumbed under Raymond's persistent attitude and fine control in the use of descriptive words. Half open was good enough we contended, as that at least would have exposed the contents. The second can faced the can opener of the vintage 1940 Cattaraugus. This unique design and super sharp can opener edge assured ease of penetration and quick opening.

"Tell me again, Raymond, just how it was that you got such a nasty cut on your thumb?" asked the doctor as he finished his last stitch. Four hours in the emergency room, untold dollars and great frustrations made this scientific endeavor come to a screeching halt. The memory of this episode still weighs heavily on some of us; as he was somewhat reluctant, even at this date, to share his thumb for examination to verify the scar and count how many stitches the doctor had used.

Wisdom most certainly comes with age, as now my treatise will deal with examination, good guessing and logically deduced



Style 2 type can openers resemble stubby knives and were an assortment of designs used exclusively by each company to set themselves apart. Upper row, left to right: Cattaraugus, Case, Robeson; Lower row, left to right: LF&C, Schrade. Style 3, the half moon design, was used by Camillus on most competitively priced can openers prior to 1940. To identify this strange tool at the time, the word "can opener" was stamped into the blade.

answers. A no touchy think piece.

The procedure of using the can opener was simple: poke to penetrate the can and, by virtue of the tab on the side of the opener, use the edge of the can as leverage to cut the lid. I like to refer to this concept as the up cut, counter clockwise opener; because the cutting was achieved on the to-the-sky motion and the direction of cutting was counter clockwise. If a tab on the blade was not evident, a pin was used to serve the same purpose. Another modification of this up cut, can opener was the use of a half moon cut out on the blade opposite the cutting edge. This half moon notch served the same purpose as the tab, a rest for leverage to cut the lid.

Only two operations are used, up cut and down cut or, even more simply, counter clockwise and clockwise. I will categorize

four styles though and will deal with the modifications of these basic styles. All styles will open cans, but ease and safety play a big part in this tool's effectiveness. The first style is the Broken "D" concept which is simple to manufacture and easy to understand. The sharp point is a hazard and penetration of a human's outer covering is a possibility. Style 2 would be aptly described as a mini or stubby knife blade with a pin insert for rim riding. Napanoch pre-1920 seems to have been the first company to have used this design, and Winchester also used it in the transition period

after they purchased Napanoch. Case, Cattaraugus, L.F.&C. and Robeson also used this stab design. From a safety standpoint, DANGER-DANGER-DANGER, sez Robbie Robot and Cut Thumb Raymond.

In the '30s another style emerged which was a modification of Style 2. Style 3 was the sharp edge, half moon shaped blade. This was a boon to manufacturing, as it was a straight forward, single, simple blade to manufacture. The economy variety of pocketknives of the day generally sported this style can opener and it can be found on Imperial, Kent, Kutmaster, Utica



Ray with stitches in his thumb, 10 years old (May 1975)

and other such competitive lines.

Style 4 would be the safety design which came in the early 1940s. It was a patented design made by the Imperial Knife Company and was patent #2,391,732 of Dec. 25, 1945. This design was simple and safe to use and is in use still today.

Manufacturing is a funny duck, and competition is a realistic motive for new concepts. Remington was a competitive company. They were seeking a modification of the "D" style opener. Remington in 1924 came up with a two piece design, which resulted in a hardened cutting edge on the one part and a softer spring steel for holding on the other part. Certainly an edge for marketing. The adoption of this design gives the historian valuable clues to date periods of manufacture or, better said, historical dating. Four distinct periods can be identified in Remington's twenty years of cutlery manufacturing; all of which concerns itself with the can opener changes.

Around 1940 Pal purchased the Remington Cutlery operations and used Remington designed parts in their pocketknives. In my observations, such pocketknives made by Pal were always marked Pal Blade Company. In some cases the Remington stamp can be found on these transitional models. In reference to the can opener on these knives, all of the Remington new designed can openers used by Pal in the pocketknives bear the tang marking Pal Blade Company. In no instance have I observed the Remington design can opener on a pocketknife marked Pal Cutlery Co. The markings and references here regarding Pal Blade and Pal Cutlery can provide clues in that company's history. Pal Cutlery used the variations of early type can openers and then changed one more time to the clockwise Style 4 safety can opener.

The New York Knife Company was the first company to manufacture the Official Boy Scout Knife; and their design for the

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Style 4 safety can opener proudly displays its patent number on this Imperial Davy Crockett Knife (1954-1955). The same patent number appears on a Kutmaster Official Girl Scout knife which suggests that Kutmaster had a licensing agreement with Imperial.



Pal Blade purchased the cutlery division of Remington in 1940. The can openers on these Pal Blade utility knives were Remington designs. Pal Cutlery Company (1945) emerged, and two new design can openers were used.



Cattaraugus recognized brand recognition with a potpourri of can opener designs. Two of these designs carried the stamping of PATENT APPLIED FOR. An actual patent number was never granted.



Napanoch patented this unique design. The Napanoch design can also be found on very early Winchester knives. Note also how this compares to the Robeson can openers.



The Cattaraugus Whitt-L-Kraft knife has a can opener that is often overlooked. The scraper edge used in wood carving can also be used to open a can. By allowing the pin to ride on the edge of the can, the can opens easily.



During WWII Camillus, Imperial, Kingston and Ulster made pocketknives for the military. The most notable was the Ulster Ski Patrol knife. I can only imagine how many tin cans were discarded across the global areas of war. The diversified history of the can opener can be seen in these WWII bone handled military knives.

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can opener pattern remained unchanged, save for the occasional incorporation of the can opener and the cap lifter on the same blade. There was a slight modification of this broken top "D" style opener; since

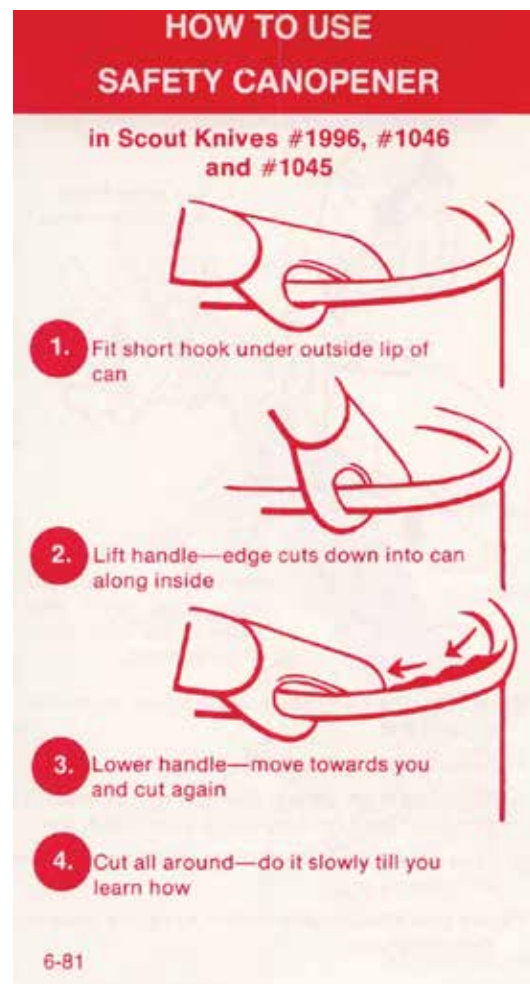
some were fatter in concept, some sleeker, some trimmer, some longer, some shorter, some... but basically all pretty much the same.

Imperial Knife Co. used the Broken "D" Style (Style 1) sparingly on utility knives pre-1944, while the half moon, up cut style



The Imperial safety can opener was the device that could safely "open a can of worms." The patent number is proudly stamped on the blade, as is the description, should anyone not know this device's purpose.

(Style 3) was used in abundance on their economy priced knives. Imperial suggested that this style was dropped pre-1940 which would coincide with the War years. Imperial submitted their safety style can opener design for patent protection on November 7, 1944. After that date, Patent Pending stamped on the blade would alert any other company not to manufacture the design. Other companies could not use it until the patent issue was resolved. However it was World War II, the government recognized that this was a safety device and allowed other pocketknife makers to use this in-

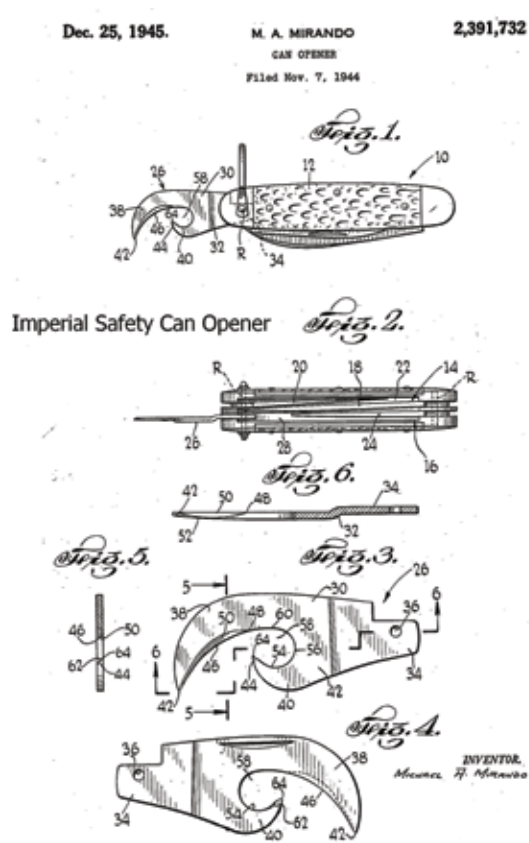


vention during the War years in spite of the patent pending disclosure. On December 25, 1945, a patent number was issued. This advised consumers of an innovative new idea. After the War the patent was

Imperial's 1945 patent for the safety can opener with its distinctively hooked shape. Note the patent number, seen on the red knife on p.31.

protected for twenty years.

Similar designs (not patent infringements) along this line were found by Boker, Camillus and Pal Cutlery, which at tests to the superior opening ability of this

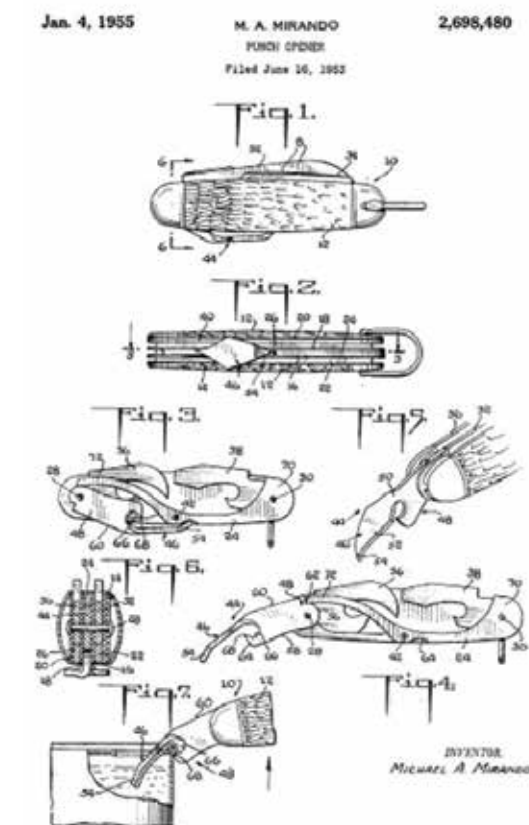


design over the other styles. For historical pigeon-holers (self included), we can now earmark and categorize half moon can opener styles (Style 3) and specifically date safety styles that say Pat. Pend. or those which have patent numbers on them. One can see what the can opener can open up, both materially and historically.

Ulster Knife Company also shows an evolutionary design change, but no specific patent dates can be pinpointed. The broken "D," with the bent tab, progressed to the modification of a separate rounded pin placement to replace the tab. It appears to be not only distinctive but also easier on the fingers when opening the can opener blade. The rounded pin style is evident on all World War II knives made by Ulster, a photo in a 1933 scouting book shows the pin. It is my guess that the round pin lift might also serve to start a drift pin when dismantling firearms that had removable pins. For simple conjecture on Ulster knives, we could call bent tab designs (like the broken shell extractor tab) pre-1932 which gives clues to date Ulster's knives.

Cattaraugus scout/utility knives use only can opener Style 1 and 2 while a curious modification of Style 2 can be seen in the Whitt-L-Kraft knife (made for wood carving) in which the scraping blade will also function as a can opener.

If you have ever lifted a can opener lift tab and noted it to be quite sharp, there was a reason. That little tab sometimes lays in a cut out of the handle material and is so hidden that it gets a bit difficult to lift up. This is a shotgun shell extractor. In the early days of shotgun shells, the hulls



Patent for the beverage opener below.



Before the advent of the pop tabs for aluminum cans, glass bottles were it for beverages. An alternate opener for metal cans was the triangular shaped opener that pierced the can allowing one to drink from the can or pour the liquid into a glass. And then, there was one more invention for the utility knife.

were made of paper. If the shell became wet, the normal extraction of the brass portion could pull loose from the paper case/hull leaving the paper in the chamber. If that happened, the can opener tab would go into the shotgun chamber, catch the paper with that sharp tab and extract the stuck paper. This little tool was eliminated from a pocketknife in the late 1920s as the shotgun shells were then mainly made of plastic.

And of course there is the one can opener that is not a can opener. It is the beverage can opener. Before the tab top opener cans, one used a beverage opener to make a triangle shape in a can lid so one could imbibe the delectable drink. I recall this tool being used on coffee creamer cans and of course beer cans. Look to patent #2,698,480 by Imperial.

Some insight into can opener modifications, some historical information to the changes in manufacturing, some curiosities, ah, knock it off. "Can it, Mister," he said candidly; as he put the lid on it. □

Can Opener Patents

- General can opener
174,123 • 2/29/1876
- First claim on a pocketknife
201,931 • 4/2/1878
- Combination can opener
278,951 • 6/5/1883
- Harris can opener
436,659 • 9/16/1890
- General can opener
1,471,857 • 10/23/1923
- Remington
1,635,649 • 07/12/1927
- Beverage can opener
2,019,099 • 10/29/1935
- Imperial
2,332,656 • 10/26/1943
- Imperial safety can opener
2,391,732 • 12/25/1945
- Imperial beverage opener
2,698,480 • 1/4/1955