

FRANK KETHCART

50 YEARS IN CUTLERY

BY DENNIS ELLINGSEN



Dunlap was a middle-priced brand of Sears, Roebuck & Co.



Frank Kethcart said that Camillus continued to supply Sears during the War with knives suitable for agriculture and trades. This was one of the prime exemptions to the wartime restrictions on the use of “strategic materials” for civilian knife manufacture. These WWII knives were supplied to the military. During WWII the stockman pattern was made available to the farm industry.

This article was originally written in 1986 after I had interviewed Frank Kethcart. After the article was completed, but before publication, Frank asked me to hold off for a little while. I sure did, as this interview was lost until now 35 years later. It had been a memorable meeting and is still one worth sharing today. Frank Kethcart died in 1996.

In the early days of knife manufacturing and selling, the jobber was the true customer. The cutlery manufacturer was never directly governed by the end user. When the jobber made up his line of cutlery catalog items, he carefully selected those patterns that he felt would sell. For this reason the cutlery buyer had to be in tune with the market and also the products that were available. At one time someone stated that you could tell where a person lived by the pocketknife that was carried. Thus was the sole awesome buying power of the jobber who must predict the saleability of a product.

Frank Kethcart lived in Denver, Colorado, in 1986. A chance meeting carried us through many hours of conversation concerning his first-hand knowledge of the cutlery industry. It was clear to me that Frank had a love

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This blister pack Kingston appeared after 1945 and before 1947. Frank Kethcart told me the firsthand story of Kingston during WWII. He also suggested that the introduction of the blister pack ended the personal aspects and changed the culture of cutlery sales.



Frank was adamant that Remington actually made all the patterns listed in their catalogs. He suggested that they might have made only as few as 25 dozen, but they were made. Amongst collectors this is a rare knife. Remington shipping to Spanish speaking countries would make this knife difficult to find in the U.S.



LF&C (Universal) used a handle material which they referred to as stag. Well, sort of. Read on in this article to discover the real truth.

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affair with the industry in which he had been actively involved since 1936. Yes, 50 years. Frank sparkled with excitement as he unfolded his experiences, which for the most part covered the pocketknife field. I suspected that it wasn't often that he had the chance to recall and talk about the past days of cutlery, so my eagerness to listen was equal to his sharing.

In 1986 Frank was still working for

Imperial - Schrade and was primarily overseeing Sears, Roebuck and Co. stores in the greater Denver area. In addition to that, he designed products and was into the marketing aspects of Schrade. I had thought that I traveled a lot, but Frank spoke of his trips to New York like he was a daily commuter. We chatted in his Denver office, and the nostalgia of the early days was visible in the many photographs on the walls dating from 1936 to 1950. Frank pointed out a group photo that was taken December 6, 1941. It was a Sears Roebuck sales meeting that found them waking up to the news of Pearl Harbor. Over on the other wall was a picture of the first manufacturing facility of Imperial. He talked about the people whom he felt were the leaders in the cutlery world during his earlier years. Of especial note was his admiration for Henry Baer of Schrade. And why shouldn't he have respect for these people? They were the reasons the cutlery industry was not only profitable, but fun too. Especially fun, as it was a person to person business then as opposed to the impersonal nature the business had become today.

I have always had a curiosity about Kingston Cutlery, as no one seemed to have a clear-cut answer about this company. Frank knew exactly, and his "that's easy" attitude suggested a first-hand knowledge. "It was a billing name," he said. It seems that during World War II the War Production Board needed a specified number of knives which no single manufacturer could supply. As several of the cutlery companies were specialists in various aspects of knife production, a joint effort was made to supply the government with the needed items. Imperial was good at blanking, heat treating, grinding and polishing; while Ulster was noted for their assembly. So the knives were supplied as a joint venture. Since neither Imperial nor Ulster could submit the billing, the billing name of Kingston was decided. Frank thought that Kingston was a small town in the general area of these companies, thus providing the answer to the mystery of Kingston. Kingston Cutlery was started in about 1942 and was dissolved in 1947. Most of the huge amount of knives made were for the military; however since there was a good supply of knives following the War, many "civilian" type pocketknives were made and

sold right after the War. Frank showed me many of these knives that he had which included a scout/utility type knife with the MUMBLE-T-PEG instructions attached.

World War II also added some interesting twists to the civilian cutlery industry; since steel and brass were in limited supply, allotments were very common. Few civilian pocketknives were made then; however the War Production Board did recognize that the 4" three blade stockman pattern knives were needed. Frank said that Camillus continued to supply Sears during the War with knives suitable for agriculture and the trades. This was one of the prime exemptions to the wartime restrictions on the use of "strategic materials" for civilian knife manufacture.

Frank first became involved in the cutlery world in 1936 when he went to work for Sears Roebuck. He was a cutlery buyer, and it was his task to learn all there was about this industry. One of his jobs was to visit every single cutlery company in the United States. This monumental task took him two and a half years to accomplish. The purpose was two fold: he was required to learn everything there was to know about cutlery, and secondly to arrange for the purchase of knives for Sears Roebuck. Frank was particularly impressed with the openness of the cutlery companies at this time. To maintain their respect and openness, he admitted that "you didn't discuss your travels with the other cutlery companies." As Frank put it, "I never carried stories." During the time prior to 1940, Sears used brand names such as Dunlap, Kwik-Kut and Sta-Sharp. The Dunlap name was the middle priced brand, and the Kwik-Kut brand was the economy line. The Sta-Sharp brand was top of the line both in quality and price. It was around 1940 that the name Craftsman was adopted as a name for the knives sold by Sears. During the time Frank was there, pocketknives were supplied by Camillus, Imperial, Schrade and Winchester.

The cutlery buyer for the jobber dictated the trends for the cutlery industry as far as products were concerned. This individual needed to be extremely knowledgeable about products. It was the job of the cutlery factory salesperson to cater to this person. Frank told of the knife roll of salesman's samples that were vital to the presentation of the pocketknife lines. The salesman arranged his

knife roll in a very meticulous manner; all the two bladed knives faced one way and the three bladed knives faced the opposite. The various handle materials were selectively segregated in the roll. In this way a buyer could methodically examine a line of knives. He could select those which he wanted to sell and picture in his catalog. This is the reason that certain patterns of knives, along with certain brands of knives, are more prevalent in some geographical areas of this country. Typically this would be prior to the 1950s. After that time the trends of cutlery buying and marketing changed drastically. Your traditional hardware giants were long gone or changing directions. Gone were the Simmons Hardware, the Shapleighs and others that were considered the largest suppliers of pocketknives. With their demise in cutlery, also went the demise of trends that had lasted so long. The world of cutlery changed from a hardware catalog to the blister pack. Progress and time tend not to stop. Today your hardware stores are Ace, American and True Value, which generally do not describe themselves as large dealers in pocketknives. Gone also are the cutlery specialty buyers and jobbers. Gone also are the fantastic selection of patterns that each manufacturer offered.

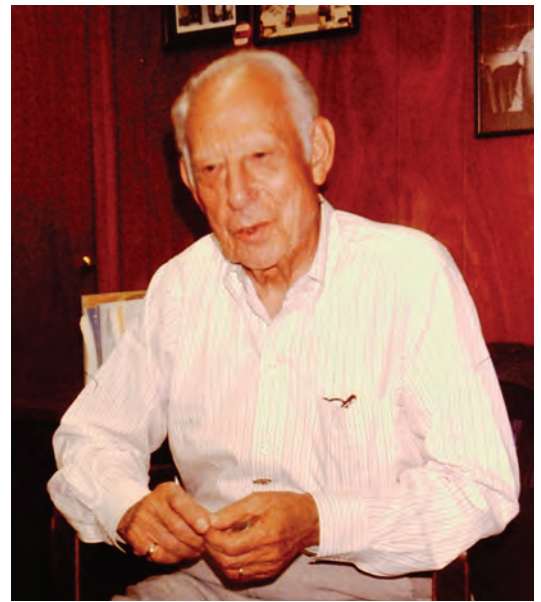
When we talked of patterns of pocketknives offered versus patterns actually made, Frank was adamant in his statement that he was certain that all patterns shown were actually manufactured. I am certain that I displayed a certain amount of astonishment at that statement and showed my disbelief by asking whether he actually thought Remington had made all 828 patterns as listed in one of their catalogs. His answer made a believer of me.



A low priced Sears & Roebuck brand.

He did admit that they may have only made as few as 25 dozen of a certain pattern, but he was confident that they were all made. Dig in collectors, there is new hope that they are still out there.

According to Frank, Remington was the leader in making and selling pocketknives. No other cutlery company was as tenacious or aggressive as Remington. No other manufacturer was able to control the knife distributor as well as Remington could. Remington had an edge because of the other products that Remington sold through distribution, like their firearms and their typewriters. One would hardly jeopardize these good lines by not also promoting the cutlery lines. Hard nose marketing is how Frank termed it. Remington also used heavy advertising and good stock supply to the distributor. Remington manufactured well, and they were the "Kings of Modularity." As many of the blades were able to be



Frank Kethcart, 1986, Denver, Colo.

interchanged, their costs of manufacturing were reduced, and their ability to make huge quantities easily and quickly went up. This would easily account for the fantastic quantity of pocketknives that were made on a daily basis at Remington.

Frank and I both asked the same question, "Where did all those knives go?" We didn't know. At one time Remington made one million advertising knives for Wrigley Gum. Where did they all go? I suspect that many a collector may have paid an outrageous price for a knife and asked the same question. Frank shook his head back and forth, as he

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commented that it never entered his mind to save anything from those early days in cutlery.

Salesman's samples and rolls were rarely returned to the factories but instead were given away to customers and friends. Frank was convinced that he had given away a fortune in knives that at the time had no collector significance to him. This also included a gold pocketknife that was made by Schrade in the early 1950s. This knife sold for \$100.00, and the first production run started at 5,000 knives and increased to 22,000 knives. Frank doesn't have a one of them; and we again asked, "Where have they all gone?"

It is always fascinating for me to have the honor to discuss the past with people who were there. Their opinions are based on their experiences and are not prejudiced by a writer who weaves fantasy with fact. Not only are they interesting, but they make us understand that which seems so perplexing to us now. I think that we can see the future through the eyes of the past. I delight in going "back to the past" through the courtesy of a gentleman like Frank Kethcart. It is a precious ride, but one that always returns me to today. I couldn't ask for more.

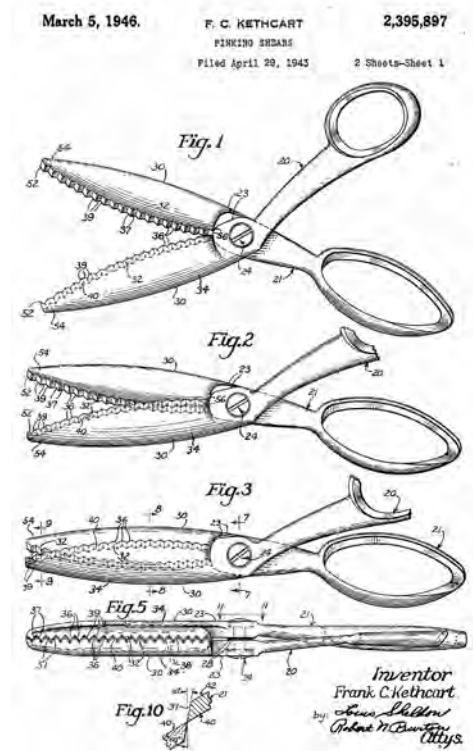
The little facts and trivia that are always gained from these meetings are the gems of wisdom that I am allowed to take as my own. For example, I was always curious what the handle material was that made up the Universal (L.F. & C.) "stag" handled knives. Frank cleared up the mystery. They were made of stag. Well, sort of. Stag



Sta-Sharp, Sears' top of the line brand.

dust was mixed with an acetate binder, and the synthetic handle was made. It was a very popular handle material in its day. Frank recalled that Sears Roebuck was very interested in these knives but quickly passed on them when they found out they wouldn't pass their flame test. I had not been aware that these knives were like celluloid in their ability to burn. When Frank spoke of celluloid, he recalled that Imperial would receive celluloid in huge sheets and would store it in separate buildings because of the high combustible factor associated with this product. I was hoping that Frank could give me some insight when it was officially banned in the cutlery industry; but, no, I found no answer to this puzzle.

A subject near and dear to me was the manufacturing of Official Scout knives. The companies that made these knives for the official scouting organizations rarely found them profitable to manufacture. To be sanctioned to make them was more an honor, a point of prestige. Through the association would come related sales, so the marketing



In 1946 Frank Kethcart was issued this scissors patent which was assigned to Sears Roebuck and Company. Super knife sleuth Brian Huegel of Country Knives found this patent.

value was by affiliation.

I had really learned more than I imagined I would in the few short hours that I had with Frank Kethcart. They say that when you are walking through life you are blessed with meeting some very special people. It happened to me in Denver, 1986. □