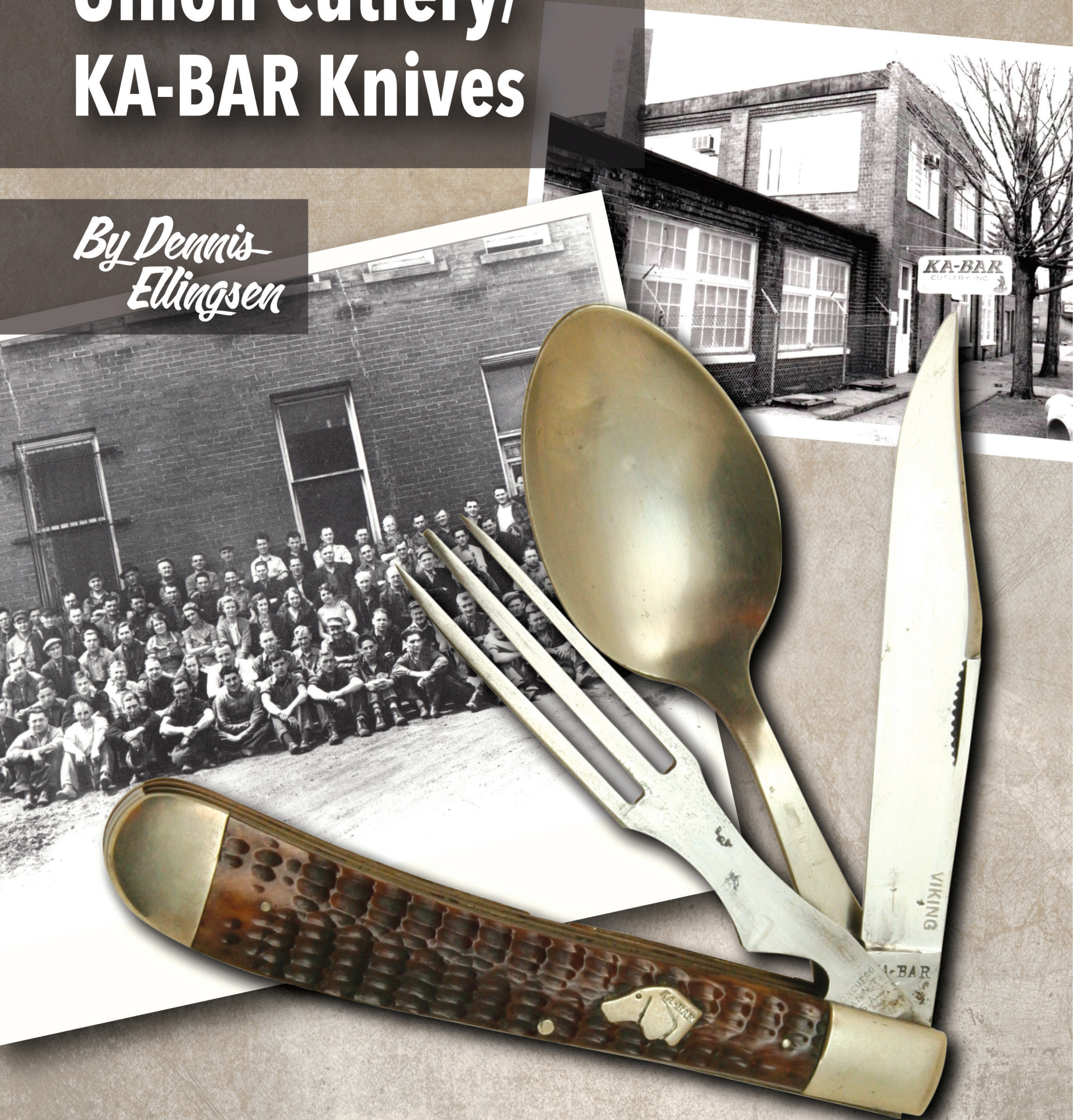


Some *Interesting* Union Cutlery/ KA-BAR Knives

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Utility/Scout knives are my main collection theme and interest, but these have morphed into HoBo knives, camp knives, knife tool-type knives and other unique KA-BAR products. This article is about Union Cutlery and KA-BAR marked knives that I consider unique.

KA-BAR was a name that evolved over time. It was not even an idea when the company first started on April 29, 1897 under the name Tidioute Cutlery Company Limited in Tidioute, Pennsylvania. In 1902 the name became Union Razor Company. In fact, the name KA-BAR wasn't known in January 25, 1909, when the company name became Union Cutlery Company nor in 1912 when they completed relocation to Olean, New York.

Sometime in and around 1923, the infamous letter story evolved about a trapper that used his Union Cutlery knife to "Kill-a-bear". This came to be the KA-BAR brand name, and the logo of a hunter using a knife against a grizzly bear. As an aside, it seems logical (as Spock and dear Elayne would say) that this evolution of "kill" to "Ka" is reasonable as is "bear" turning into "Bar." Phonetically speaking, of course.

The name Union Cutlery Company was used until May 07, 1952, when the corporate name was voted to be KA-BAR Cutlery Company. The only other major change of note is the use of the "Kabar" tang mark that appeared in the early 1950s.

Union Cutlery made more variations on a theme of utility knives than any other company that I have researched. In fact they made so many variations that it almost appears that they wouldn't give up until they got it right. And right (of course) in the marketing world is "sales." We collectors sometimes forget that knives were a business for companies and making money and providing work for employees was the name of the game. Providing collectibles for the collector wasn't even a glimmer in their eye. Because of these many marketing variations, it is fairly easy to date many KA-BAR utility pocketknives.

The Prest-O-Lite tank key wrench is the square hole found on the screwdriver blade of a utility pocketknife. Although other knife companies placed these square hole wrenches in their knives, KA-BAR never missed an opportunity to do it on their utility knives. For those of you scratching your heads wondering what in blue blazes is a Prest-O-Lite tank key wrench, let me explain. In the old days, before electric headlights appeared on cars, acetylene or other gases were used to power automobile headlights. The tanks that supplied this gas were often made by the Prest-O-Lite company. If you lost your wrench for opening or closing the valve on the tank, you could reach into your pocket and use the handy dandy Prest-O-Lite tank key wrench that was on your handy dandy Union Cutlery/KA-BAR utility pocketknife. The advent of the electric headlight appeared about

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The 1920s were the camping and outdoor recreational heydays. This camping set exemplifies this trend.



My father was an addictive fisherman who had this knife in his fishing box for years. It is patented #1,788,656 (1/13/1931) and had those destructive yellow celluloid handles. My inheritance. I had Michael Yoh restore the handles with smooth bone handles. The stainless was impervious to the celluloid gassing, so I now have a fantastic looking KA-BAR fish knife to pass down to my fishing-less family.

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1915, and these soon replaced the gas headlights on cars. I believe that Union Cutlery made this tool available as late as 1925. Therefore, if you find a Union utility pocketknife with the square hole in the screwdriver blade, you can assume it was made prior to 1925. With this same thinking, we can assume that a knife with all Union-only marked blades was prior to 1923. Since the name KA-BAR came to be in 1923, the tank key blade is also found on those tang marked knives. You now know that this is not a "skate key wrench," as it is erroneously called in some writings.

Neither Union Cutlery nor KA-BAR three or four-bladed pocket utility knives were ever sanctioned by any official boy or girl scouting organizations.

In 1938 KA-BAR made three sheath knives. The 1553 - 5" blade with leather handle; the 1554 - 3½" blade with leather handle; and the Voyageur with cocobola handles and a 5½" marlin spike. The official Boy Scout yellow celluloid-handled slip-apart camp knife first appeared in 1938 and consisted of a knife, fork and spoon. This pattern was also supplied as an official Campfire Girl knife. I have never seen an official Girl Scout knife of this pattern made by KA-BAR.

Prior to 1920 the New York Knife Company was the only company sanctioned to produce officially sanctioned Boy Scout knives. Shortly after this date we can



KA-BAR did not manufacture an official folding "Scout" knife until the mid-1930s. In the meantime, KA-BAR attempted to cultivate folding knife business with shield markings. "Girl Scouts" - "Boy Scouts" - "Made for Scouts" shields; but none of these were officially sanctioned knives. The Boy Scouts of America finally clamped down and advised cutlery manufacturers to no longer use these notations.

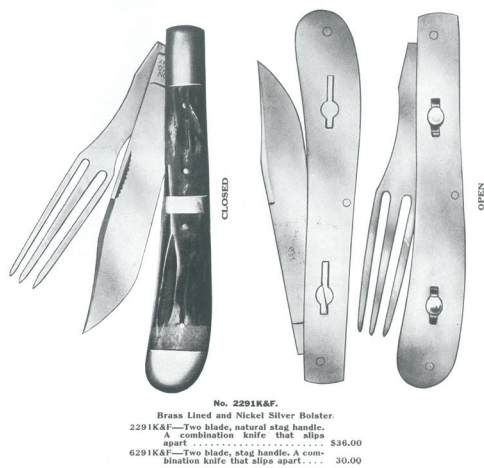


Illustration showing the connecting studs of this "combination knife," in a pre-1924 Union Cutlery Co. catalog.

find official Boy and Girl Scout knives by Remington and Ulster. It was the practice (albeit a devious practice) for companies to allude to an association with these scouting organizations. The purpose, of course, was to take advantage of the strong sales generated for these items during this time. KA-BAR and Union Cutlery marked knives were infamous for this type of selling. For example, a Union Cutlery three-bladed pocketknife proudly carries a shield marked "GIRL SCOUTS". This bone-handled knife has the standard spear blade, a one-piece can opener blade and a combination screwdriver / cap lifter blade.

Another Union Cutlery knife has a shield stamped BOY SCOUTS. Yet another KA-BAR marked knife had KA-BAR FOR SCOUTS hot stamped into its white celluloid handles. My favorite is the KA-BAR utility pocketknife that has the shield marked MADE FOR SCOUTS. It should be noted that these knives (except for the GIRL SCOUTS) had Prest-O-Lite wrenches on the screwdriver which makes it easy to date these knives.

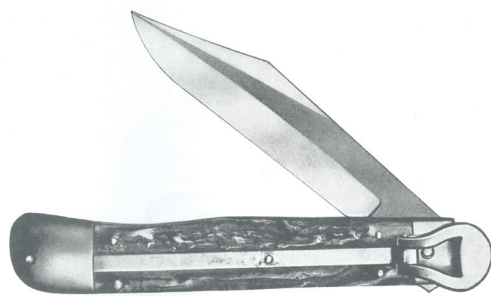
There was reportedly a big to-do about the implied use of the "official" on these knives, and the "powers that were" took action against some of the manufacturers. As we enter the 1930s, the non-sanctioned use of the SCOUT term seems to have been discontinued. Not a single utility pattern knife is offered by KA-BAR in their 1931 and 1938 "Outdoor Knives" brochures. I can only assume that there may be a connection.

Union Cutlery knives were of excellent workmanship and quality, and all the bone material used was absolutely grand. As a pocket tool it was chock full of features, and some of these knives were even equipped with "French match striker pulls." These pulls provided a semi-rough surface so that a match could be lighted by running it along the pull. It, of course, also served as a place to insert your fingernail as a lift for the main blade.

Another KA-BAR variation during the 1920s marketing period was the white celluloid-handled utility knife that has "STAINLESS STEEL" etched into the main blade. Stainless steel became available during the early 1920s. At this time this steel was not popular or accepted.



This particular pattern knife is a joy to own. It slips apart allowing the knife and fork to serve as eating utensils. Pearl, bone and stag handles adorned these knives. They are highly sought after in the collector market. Union Cutlery also made these for Magnetic Cutlery. The patent number is 870,413 (11/05/07)



No. 21105.
Brass Lined and Nickel Silver Bolster.
21105—One blade, lock, natural stag handle (spring open knife) 60.00

Lever-actuated Union Cutlery Co. switchblade, as shown in a pre-1924 company catalog. Price is per dozen.

It made sense that Union Cutlery would attempt to see if they could find a niche in sales by offering a stainless pocketknife. They were not well received, and this probably stemmed from the difficulty to sharpen. Likewise the stainless steel knives I have seen have either been hopelessly ground down (to get to the good steel) or slightly used and put away in despair. These stainless white celluloid utility knives seem to have several unique things in common. One is that they all have the Prest-O-Lite wrench; another is that the screwdriver blade is marked Union Cutlery while the main blade is marked KA-BAR; and lastly they all have the match striker pull.

The knife of all pocketknives has to be the KA-BAR seven blade pocketknife. This knife is another product of the 1920s period. From a practical standpoint; it ain't. It is large and bulky in the pocket, and the average person really has no need for this many blades. Of course, since it was a marketing failure, it stands to reason that these knives are now rare and command four digit numbers in pricing books. The handle material is yellow celluloid, and there are four blades on one end and three on the other. Aside from the obvious screwdriver with Prest-O-Lite wrench blade, there is the can opener blade, punch blade, main spear blade, spay blade, pen blade and a pointed pen-type blade. It certainly is a joy to behold as a collector item and exhibits all the quality and craftsmanship that sets these older KA-BAR knives apart.

In 1938, the official BSA catalog offered a model 1382 KA-BAR eating set. This is the slip-apart knife mentioned earlier. This knife had a yellow celluloid handle and combination knife, fork and spoon. Some call this a hobo pattern, but I don't think that the scouting organizations called it by that name. This eating set was officially sanctioned by the Boy Scouts of America and by the Campfire Girls. Both are marked with etching on the main blade. I don't think that this set was offered for more than a few years. Once WWII started, production of such items was curtailed.

The 1940s saw the introduction of another KA-BAR speciality. These were the famous KA-BAR fighting knives with leather handles. KA-BAR knives



KA-BAR made fixed blade military knives by the bazillions. Military folding knives, not so many. Besides the TL-29, this is the only folding knife made that suggests it was made for the military. There might be others that have escaped my watchful eyes.



The crown jewel of collectable KA-BAR folding knives is the seven-blade yellow celluloid knife. It is huge for a pocketknife at 4" closed. It is super as a collectable, but as far as a useful pocketknife, not so much. It has four cutting blades where one would have been sufficient. The Prest-O-Lite key suggests a pre-1925 pattern. This knife might have appealed to a whittler.



This six-blade camping knife predates the KA-BAR name. This is a well made knife and most likely competed with the popular Boker camping knife pattern.



KA-BAR utility knives with composite handles sometimes had descriptive names in the handle. The “KA-BAR Ski Knife” sports an unusual blade that was designed to spread wax on skis. The mis-spelled “Kamp Knife,” in addition to being functional, is a novelty marketing idea.



The utility pattern knife put out by Union in the 1920s era had light yellow celluloid handles. Over time they started to off-gas a nitric acid by product and, as a result, rusted any metal surface exposed. There are many reasons for this, but that is a paper unto itself. The pictured knife shows the ravages of this deterioration on the upper edge of the punch blade and on the bolster.



Slip-apart camp knives were popular in the 1930s. These yellow celluloid handle knives were sanctioned for the Boy Scouts and the Camp Fire Girls. There is a only a light etching on the main blade and with a little use, it went away.

were very popular during WWII. During WWII, the manufacturing of pocketknives for state side consumers slowed to a bare trickle as the priority was steel for the war effort.

KA-BAR did make a few utility pocketknives during this period. I have identified one specimen of a KA-BAR utility pocketknife that seems to have been a military made knife. Aside from the can opener blade, the screwdriver cap lift-

er blade and the punch blade, this knife has a sheepfoot main blade. The tang is marked "KA-BAR U.S." and the shield is marked "U.S." I have no idea of the purpose of this knife nor to whom it was issued, if indeed it was.

Another utility pocketknife that carries the KA-BAR tang stamp is a red fiber handled, bird's eye rivet, oversized utility pocketknife. On the handle, it is stamped/ marked "KAMP KNIFE." I think this

knife is an early 1950s knife, and I think it was made by Robeson but tang marked KA-BAR. This knife sports the unusual combination can opener/cap lifter blade which has become a Robeson trademark. Manufacturing styles of some of the components can sometimes give clues to the manufacturer of a certain knife. The scout utility pattern knives reveal these clues better than any other pattern.

One other knife that fits into the specialty market of KA-BAR is the black-handled knife that is hot stamped KA-BAR SKI KNIFE. I suspect that this knife is a product of the 1920s. This utility pocketknife has a clip point main blade and a rather unique blade that is not for cutting purposes. This blade resembles a spatula of sorts. Although this blade is flat on one side, it is curved outwardly on the other side. I am told that this blade was used for spreading wax on skis.

Many early Union and KA-BAR utility knives had celluloid handles. The handles were predominately a light yellow. They were tough, inexpensive and colorful. There were problems that time would tell. Celluloid, being a cellulose nitrate based product, deteriorated over time and gave off trace amounts of a chemical derivative of nitric acid. Heat and climate accelerated this chemical deterioration reaction and caused nearby steel to rust due to the off-gassing. If the particular batch of cel-

luloid was allowed to cure properly, the off-gassing was a long time in happening. If the celluloid was mixed with a binding agent of a product of a darker consistency (like a black chemical) or a less transparent media, the off-gassing was minimal over time. Minimal only, as time takes what it wants.

Celluloid contained ingredients that are used in gun powder and as a result the celluloid handles are highly flammable then and now. Celluloid, when it came to a factory, was segregated in separate buildings because of its flammability. These buildings often had metal roofs that hinged to relieve the pressure in the advent of an explosion. Sometime in the 1950s, celluloid was banned in America. With their instability, flammability, and propensity to rust everything nearby, celluloid based products of any kind are not very welcome in museums.

KA-BAR knives are highly collectable. Their high quality and beauty make them sought after items. Aside from this, they made unusual items that were rarely duplicated by other makers during their time. This would include the seven-bladed knife; the ski pocketknife; the first stainless pocketknives; gas key wrenches in the screwdriver blades; match striker pulls; hobo and slip-apart knives. Aside from these utility knife variations, KA-BAR is also noted for their KA-BAR WWII fighting knife; KA-BAR Grizzly switchblades and dog's head shield pattern knives. □

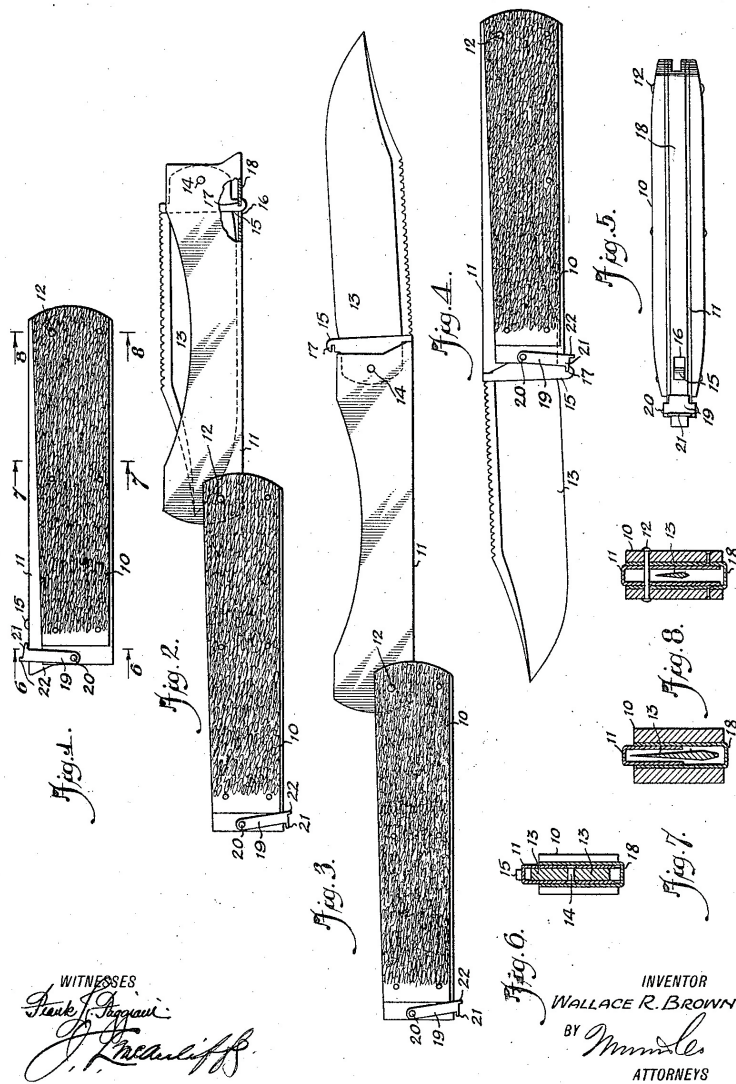
March 11, 1924.

W. R. BROWN

1,486,725

KNIFE

Filed Feb. 3, 1923



WITNESSES
Frank J. Poggiani
J. P. McLaughlin

INVENTOR
WALLACE R. BROWN
BY [Signature]
ATTORNEYS



Fishing knives seem to be a Union/KA-BAR specialty. Marble's came out with the first fishing tri-fold knife in the early 1910 era. The tri-fold was touted as a safety knife and was a fun knife to operate. A patent was granted in 1924 (#1,486,725) which incorporated a latching device for the tri-fold. They also introduced the liner lock on this knife to provide rigidity when the knife was opened. This was an early use of a liner lock on a knife.