

Celluloid & Kitsch @ 2.25"

by Dennis Ellingsen

I recently picked up a small collection of miniature "scout" knives that measured 2-1/4 inches each. These were not the official sanctioned knives, but all had three blades and a shield that stated "scout." Each knife had a main spear blade, a can opener blade and a

screwdriver/cap lifter blade, all of which would have presented challenges to fulfill the functions for which they were designed. All had celluloid handles, and the colors and patterns were extremely varied. Colorful they are. Over the years I had picked up a few of these knives to add to our utility/scout knife collec-

tion, but I always passed on those where the owner wanted too much gold in trade. These knives were period knives that were not well made and sold for very little at the time. After all they are barely functional with the tools that are displayed and usually became garage sale items if they weren't thrown into the

garbage.

I would hazard a guess that there were a *hundert bazillion* of them made. There is very little known about them as to the original purpose, marketing value, composition and timeline. I could just tell you in a brief sentence, but that wouldn't give you the opportunity to learn more about related subjects with these knives.

The first subject is about celluloid. The next subject is about kitsch. The third subject is about the knives themselves, and their purpose.

Celluloid

I wrote an article for *Knife World* in 2000 that explained about celluloid and its use on knife handles. Celluloid is a great material that was easy to use, durable and colorful. No two color patterns were the same. The downside: it is extremely flammable and deteriorates over time, releasing nitric acid fumes that attack metal and cause a severe deterioration of the celluloid. The rate of deterioration is based on the bonding agents used, and the actual curing of the original product. Even with the right formula and the proper storage conditions, celluloid will eventually self destruct; but it can take a long time in some cases. Under the proper conditions celluloid can have a long

serviceable life. Under poor conditions its life can be short. But the trick is knowing the history of the celluloid, how it was made and the storage conditions. Celluloid can last hundreds of years, hundreds of days or hundreds of minutes depending on the conditions. Exposed to light, heat and chemicals the number goes to days. Celluloid was banned in this country in the mid-1950s and was replaced by plastics that did not give negative reactions. Not as colorful for sure, but way more durable and not subject to deterioration and of course the flammability factor.

Over the years I have developed a sensitivity to celluloid. If I touch a celluloid handled knife, I experience a burning sensation on my fingers. I have often been used to verify whether a knife handle is celluloid. In preparing for this article I have used cotton gloves to handle the knives, since without them the burn continues for few days. All celluloid knives I touch give me the sensation, which is proof the celluloid is deteriorating, but how fast remains the question. If you have celluloid handled knives, examine them often and the other knives around them. The first clue is the rusting of the metals. The second is the condition of the handle. Handles can



Sixteen all different circa 1930s celluloid miniature "scout" knives pose with their big brothers of this same period.

look great, but the attack of the metal is what is damaging. If this happens isolate the perpetrator and clean all the knives around it. To date I have not discovered any way to solve this unique celluloid problem.

Kitsch

In 1986 I wrote a comprehensive article for *Knife World* on kitsch and knives. I still think it to be one of my best research and writing projects; but the lack of response suggested others did not agree, as I never heard a single comment on the article. In 1986 I did not have the luxury of the internet and definitions and examples that abound today. Let me start with several definitions for *kitsch*: "Art or literature of little or no value, especially when produced to satisfy popular taste." "A mass produced item that makes the purchaser believe that it endows the owner with an air of culture." "Kitsch presents something of not like art or respectability, and relates this to something we know little about. An endorsement by transference."

The owner of the colorful celluloid designed pocket knives was bestowed an image of class, culture and prestige. They were considered fashionable and were linked closely to the Depression of the 1930s. There was little money to purchase a quality knife, so a person had to purchase on a budget. Eye appeal became the standard of culture and status. These knives had razzle dazzle which was great for the Depression years.

During the 1930s, salesman Dennis wanted a knife that would give him distinction and suggest individuality and culture but would fit his budget. Salesman Dennis was trying to impress his customers that he was in tune to the fashion of the times. Thus the celluloid handled glitz knife served that purpose. After all, Art Deco and artistic forms of architecture and paintings in this period were started in the 1920s and continued into the 1930s. The colorful celluloid knives certainly fit into this popular art period. I can imagine that a youngster of the day would covet a miniature knife that looked like the adult version and was coupled with "scout" on the shield. And there you have "kitsch" and market-

ing wrapped up in a single item.

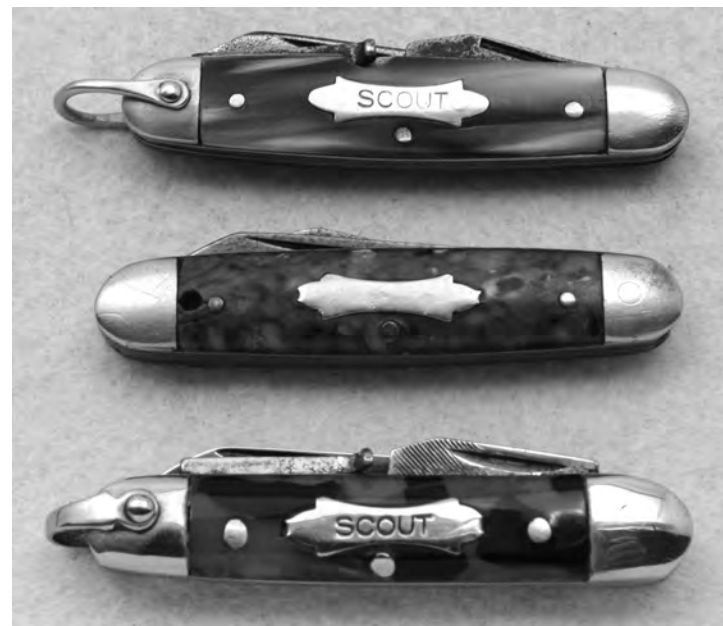
The Knives

And thus entered the marketing of the 2-1/4" celluloid three blade "scout" miniature knives. This knife would hardly be a knife for sale at your local cutlery store as it was totally without use or function. But it did have a niche in the "winning" circle or the souvenir world. I believe the largest places of distribution for these knives were carnivals, fairs, expositions, at the circus and special events of the day. These knives had appeal as they were representative of the larger knives that were popular at the time. These were prizes for the carnival games, and the cheap price served the giver and receiver well. After all one could not purchase these knives at cutlery stores, so how else but to win them or purchase as a memento of an event. I think that these knives were also popular

prizes in punch boards too.

The design of these knives always made me to believe they were products of the 1930s based on the design of the can opener blade and also the bails. Flat bails were popular on larger knives in the early 1920s. The shield with the "scout" name was very popular in the 1920s and 1930s. One of the knives recently purchased really put the cap on my speculation as it was stamped on the back "San Diego 1935." Bingo. I think I would be safe at guessing this to be a souvenir of the San Diego Balboa Park 1935 California Pacific International Exposition.

The majority of these knives had no marks on the tangs with the name of a manufacturer. Just another way to reduce costs methinks. Those that do have tangs are marked COLONIAL. One I have is marked BOYE(?) and there may be others with esoteric



The bails and the shields seem to be the only variations other than the handles. There are the standard bails and the flat bails and then the bail-less flavors of these colorful knives.

names, but my study has not discovered them.

These miniature scout kitsch 2-1/4" knives seem to have held up well over the years and deterioration is

minimal. This is probably due to the bonding or binding agents added that seem to stabilize these knives from damage. For now, that is. □



No two handle patterns are the same for these miniature knives. The main blade might have some real functions as might the mini screwdriver while the other tools are purely cosmetic.



This is the knife that proves the time line. SAN DIEGO 1935 is stamped in the back handle. The flat bail mimics bail designs popular in the early 1920s.