

October 2022
\$7.95

Knife MAGAZINE

Visit Us Online At KnifeMagazine.com



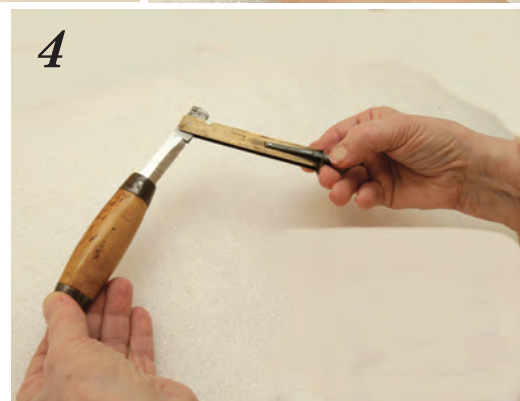
Swedish
**BARREL
KNIVES**

Swedish BARREL KNIVES

By Dennis Ellingsen



Curly birch is the most common wood used on Swedish barrel knives. The curly birch tree grows in a twisted fashion and appears to have no growth rings. This also makes the colors and patterns quite random and beautiful.



(1) The opening of this knife is easy and safe. While the latch is depressed, the thumb is used to push the inner knife assembly out of the barrel. (2) When the inner frame clears the barrel, the barrel itself fulcrums the knife into the open position. (3) Pushing the knife blade forward until the latch engages makes the knife ready for use. (4) Similarly to #2, the barrel can be used to close the blade without touching it when the task is completed. (5) Typical Swedish barrel knife with the inner brass frame fully removed from the barrel handle.

I am late to the gate with the collecting and the unraveling of the historical mysteries about Swedish barrel knives. The most comprehensive historical studies have been done by a Norwegian. Go figure? It is this study, and some of my own conjectures, which has made this article happen.

As far back as I can remember, I have seen Swedish barrel knives offered for sale. I never had enough interest to purchase one, let alone research them. That was the case up until one appeared on eBay in nice condition and affordable. I was intrigued by the simplicity of this knife and also the questions that developed. Of course, one beget two knives and three beget four knives and beget beget beget ...on and on. Now I have many. The chase was on, but the most elusive part was the history of this knife. Numerous searches proved only slightly informative. Then by luck I stumbled onto a website from Norway that had a thorough study of these knives (kniver.blogspot.com). It was in the Norwegian language; but computer translations are available these days. It was a snap to translate to English. The writing and research were by Per Thoresen, and what you're reading is a compilation of his study and my observations. I am not able to go into the depth that Thoresen has gone, but this article might be enough to educate the casual collector of these knives.

Swedish barrel knives, because of their pattern, are often called folding sloyd knives. Sloyd is derived from a Swedish word meaning handiwork or crafts. The fixed blade sloyd knife is a durable, well-made tool, ideal for spoon carving, whittling, marking and general woodworking and crafts. Its versatility allows use for a

wide range of wood carving projects from detail work to roughing.

The popular name given to these knives is Swedish barrel knives. This name was derived from the fact that the majority of the knives come from Eskilstuna, Sweden, which is known historically for their metal works. Eskilstuna is about 70 miles west of Stockholm. In Sweden the knives are called *konstkniv* or *konsttäljkniv*, which may be translated as art knife, artistic knife or artistic whittling knife, and sometimes *emigrantkniv* (emigrant knife). In Norway they

say *tønnekniv* (barrel knife) or *kneppekniv* (clicking knife – when the knife is opened or closed, there is an audible clicking sound made by the latch.) In German the term is *fassmesser* (barrel knife).

Many of these knives have the brass interior frame stamped 1874. This implies the patent for this knife was for a Swedish invention. However, the original patent was granted in 1874 to a H.C. Nilson of Grand Rapids, Wisconsin, USA. It appears that the original patent of 1874 was made available to a knife manufacturer in Eskilstuna, Swe-



There are five distinctive locking or latching systems found on these knives. The pinlock (left) and the steplock (right) are by far the most common. The Norwegians call this knife kneppekniv (clicking knife) which is attributed to the sound made when the latch engages.

den. It is unclear to which Swedish company the patent was granted. My guess is the J.W. Engström company.

I originally thought that I would like a collection of all the company names marked on these knives. Aside from cost, it would be a daunting undertaking, for there are upwards of 20 different markings that can be found. The largest percentage of the companies were in Sweden. There were a huge number made in Sweden but carrying the names of global distributors. I have attempted to gather all the names that were involved with the barrel knives. That infor-

mation can be found towards the end of this article but might not be complete.

In my brief exposure to these knives, the names of Engström, Holmberg, Jernbolaget, Segerström and Zinn are the most common names to be found. They cover the period from 1874 until 1925. I think that knives were made in meager quantities after 1925, and the bulk were pre-1925. There seems to be a cutoff point of the massive making of these knives around 1925. You may be looking at one of your knives and based on a few facts may be able to narrow down a date of manufacture. The McKinley Tariff Act of

Miniature barrel knives bring a premium thanks to their novelty. Based on their dating they also fall into collectable curiosities.

1890 (USA) imposed country-of-origin labeling requirements on all articles of foreign manufacture. That is for items imported into the USA. So a knife having the Country of Origin Label (COOL) would be made after 1890. Eskilstuna is a city in Sweden. If a knife were sold in Sweden, it would not need to have that label.

The knives are categorized based on the length of the barrel. The common sizes are 3 inch, 4 inch and 5 inch (plus or minus), along with miniature and custom made barrels and blades. There are smaller and larger variations, but these are not common. So all in all, the collector could acquire upwards of 75 to 100 variations which, seen in a row, would not be distinguishable as to what makes each unique.

Curly birch is the wood most found on barrel knives. Curly birch is found naturally in European countries like Finland and of course Sweden. The wood of the curly birch is dense and ideally suited for knife handles. Curly birch trees grow in a twisted fashion which explains the absence of age rings in these trees. This also is why there are so many random, variegated colors and patterns in the wood. Other woods appear on barrel knives, but for the most part it is



Artistic endeavors always catch the eye, especially in the collectable realm. Ivory, exotic woods, and artistic engraving add a touch of elegance to the knife.

H. C. NILSON.
Pocket-Knives.

No. 149,146.

Patented March 31, 1874.

Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.

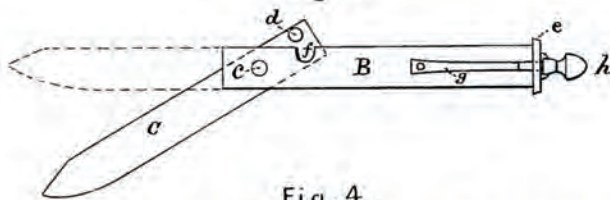


Fig. 4.

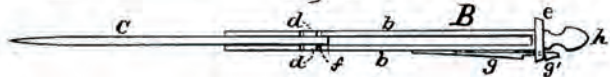


Fig. 5.



Witnesses:

Adl. Papp
Wm. H. Howard

Inventor:

Hans C. Nilson
Louis Bagge & Co.
his attorneys.

The first and original patent for the Swedish barrel knife went to H.C. Nilson from Grand Rapids, Wisconsin, USA. It is not clear how this patent came to be used in Sweden. Johan Engström (1874-1915) made knives that are stamped "JE" and 1874. It might be said that Engström was the recipient of this patent and licensed other companies to make these knives.

curly birch.

The construction of the typical barrel knife consists of a wood handle, iron bolsters, steel blade and a brass inner frame. All these knives date pre-stainless steel.

The U.S. patent #149,146 of H.C. Nilson goes into detail on the functions and operation of the knife. Briefly, the inner brass frame is removed from the barrel. Holding the end piece and depressing the latch releases the interior knife system for removal. Twisting the knife blade which lies between the brass liners and pulling it out reveals the blade, which stops when the knife is fully extended. The knife is then inserted back into the barrel and pushed in until the latch engages. This holds the knife blade firmly in place, ready for work.

The latches that hold the frame and liners in place use up to five different identifiable styles. The two most common are the pinlock and the steplock. The pinlock appears later in the evolution of this product. A pinlock is described as a pin inside the barrel that fits into a hole in the latch spring. A steplock is described as a step in the spring which stops against a metal stopper inside the barrel. This is the oldest, and it was used for many years. Further mention of other latches can be found with internet searches.

A Little Dis and Dat

My own limited observation suggests that the Swedish knives might come out of only a few factories and were stamped with other names. They are so similar in construction that sometimes it is hard to believe that each mark was made in different factories. In the case of exported knives, there could



Swedish barrel knife inner frames showing different makers' marks. Note the bottom knife with the 1874 date of the U.S. patent. While the blade is marked for Edward Zinn, the manufacturer "JE" is thought to be Joh. Engström.

be a single manufacturer with many different names.

Edward Zinn was a distributor who imported an enormous quantity of knives. It is difficult to ascertain whether he was doing this as a base in Sweden, England, Germany or the USA. Zinn did not manufacture the knives. The knife I have has the JE 1874 mark indicating it was likely made by Joh. Engström. In 1914 Zinn registered the im-

age of an elephant on cutlery.

This article only touches the tip of a huge iceberg. There are numerous twists and turns of exporters, makers and manufacturers of this popular style knife. It also appears that the large percentage of barrel knives were made prior to 1925. The sheer antiquity seems to be a factor that drives the price of these knives up and beyond to three figure pricing. Condition also raises

values, as it does with almost anything.

The Most Collectable:

- 5 inches and larger
- The smallest, under 1 inch
- Two blades
- With a corkscrew
- With a saw in the back of the blade
- Carved ornamental barrel
- Ivory barrel
- Flat handle of man-made materials
- Companies with small production
- As new condition older made knives
- Impressive or outstanding curly birch

Makers and Marks

I have not authenticated all these names but just appropriated them from the internet. Marks can be those of manufacturers, traders, sellers, distributors, special requests, other makers of similar products, custom makers, and hardware suppliers (and more.)

- F. Aldis Pimlico - England
- Anderson - England
- Lars Birkeland (1857-1920)
- Bleckmanns Cutlery - Germany
- Paul Berghaus (1892 -)
- M. Blomqvist (1876-1886)
- Heinrich Böker - Solingen, Germany
- Henry Boker - Solingen, Germany
- Edgren - Eskilstuna, Sweden
- Edwards Sons & Co - Germany
- J.W. Engström (1864-1880)
- Johan Engström - Eskilstuna, Sweden (1874-1915)
- Fiskars - Finland (1649-current)
- A.G. Gustafsson (1869-about 1890)
- A. Halling (ca 1870-1921)
- H. Hallström (1882-1917)
- Hedengran & Son (1833-1916)
- J.A. Hellberg - Eskilstuna, Sweden (1891-?)
- P. Holmberg - Eskilstuna, Sweden (1876-1960)



Segerström made a Swedish barrel knife that has a corkscrew integral in the barrel. These are a bit on the rare side.

Jernbolaget - Eskilstuna, Sweden (1868-?)
 Bröderna Jönsson (1936-2020)
 Hellstedt & Co - Eskilstuna, Sweden
 Friedrich Herder - Solingen, Germany
 Hugo Jonsson (1917-1960)
 Haagen Olsen Lae (1837-1905)
 C.G. Larson (c. 1890-1894)
 C.J. Lindström (before 1900 'til after 1909)
 Jean Mette (late 1880s)
 Mora - Sweden (1891-present)
 G.A. Nejtström - Eskilstuna, Sweden
 NK - Sweden (1902)
 Oscar Peterson - Eskilstuna, Sweden
 E.T. Segerström - Eskilstuna, Sweden (1864-1925)
 C.A. Ström (1900-1937)
 J.R. Torrey - Worcester, Mass. (1858 - 1963)
 A.J. Westersson (1889-1905)
 Edward Zinn (1914-1925)

Tips & Tricks

The unfurling of the barrel knife is fairly straightforward. Push the latch release and at the same time pull with the ring. But sometimes there is no ring. Often the inner frame and knife is a bit sticky, so a strong finger is needed to pull the unit out. Then I discovered that while holding the barrel in the hand such that the other thumb can apply pressure to the end opposite the latch, the interior knife slides out easily while the latch is being depressed.

Manipulating any knife by the blade always leaves you at risk for a cut. With the barrel knife, when the interior knife and frame just clear the bolster, the end of the knife can be twisted to unfold the knife and then, using the full barrel, extract the blade clear of the barrel. Inserting the knife in the barrel makes the knife ready for use. Folding the knife is accomplished with the same steps in reverse.

If the ring is missing from your barrel knife, you can find 12 mm split rings which at your favorite arts and crafts store.

In the world of Swedish barrel knives, the length of the barrel without the insert determines its descriptive size.

And Today

I asked Brian Huegel of Country Knives (www.countryknives.com) what he could share on current made Swedish barrel knife patterns. Jean-Michel Remaud, a cutler located in France, offers numerous variations of the barrel knives. Aside from this there have been little to none offered after the 1950s.

My studies on this knife have shown a simplicity of design, a useful knife tool, a spectacle of show-n-tell, an historical treasure drove, a global curiosity and a just-for-fun knife. □