

The Story a Shield Told

By Dennis Ellingsen



This Winchester utility knife pattern 4950 went from Chicago, Illinois to a flea market in Eugene, Oregon. How it made that journey is a mystery.



A closeup picture of the “Curtis” engraving shows the individual lines made to make up the name. It is the style used that made the identification of the knife’s engraver possible.

Did you ever say, “If only this knife could talk, what stories it could tell.” Well, I have a knife – and because of it, I’ve got a story to tell. In May, 1980 I purchased a Winchester scout/utility knife in Eugene, Oregon. Winchester scout patterns are elusive at best, so even though it had a chunk of bone missing on the back handle, this pattern 4950 was still rare and desirable. At the time of the purchase, I noted that the shield had the name “Curtis” engraved on it. I had speculated at the time that the knife might have been

my father’s, since that is his name and spelling.

I hadn’t seen Dad in several years, but the Christmas holidays of 1981 brought us together after a very long absence. We talked and talked; and finally the opportunity arose to bring up the questions about the knife. I eagerly awaited his recognition of the knife with a tale that it was the one he lost in the summer of 1935; where did I find it, etc. etc. No go. Wrong, wrong, wroooong! Well, I had hoped.

I think that it would be important at

this time to tell you a little about Dad. Dad was 64 at the time of this meeting. His profession for the major portion of his life (other than fishing) was as an engraver. He started his profession during high school days in Chicago, Illinois and during his life had engraved names and designs on everything from chalices, jewelry, Oscars, Stanley Cups, trophies, urns, and oh yes, knives. His unique art has now been replaced by the electrical mechanical buzz machines that he spoke about with a high degree of malice and contempt. Hand en-



Caught in the middle of a game of "Mumble-the-Peg" at "Boys' Camp," circa 1915-1920. During his younger years, my Dad won (and lost) a lot of knives in games of mumblety-peg like this one.

graving in this country is now only done by a very few; and, as it is with any art form, each engraver has his own style, his own design and his own way of doing things. Dad said each engraver could forge another engraver's style; but without willfully doing this, each engraver's style was like a fingerprint.

Back to my story... so says I, "But Dad your name is engraved on the shield, and doesn't that jog your memory a bit?" Again, bitter disappointment, followed by, "You know, Dennis, I've owned a hundred knives in my lifetime; and I couldn't possibly remember them all." He went on to explain that during his younger days, mumblety-peg was a favorite sport, along with marbles; and, when you played for knives

as the stakes, you won and lost a bunch. It was Dad's habit to engrave his name on every knife he won, as long as it made its way home first; and he could sit down and work on it. During the early years of 1935 and 1940, this was also additional practice to develop his skills. Armed with the information, I asked if he could identify the name "Curtis" as his engraving. "Absolutely," he replied, "providing you can give me a magnifier to exam the work closer." Thus provided, the engraving was quickly identified; and you guessed it, it was done by Dad.

Later during the visit, I was curious to determine if he was saying what I wanted him to say, or was it fact. It was fact. That shield has been under many eyes since, revealing things that the naked eye couldn't discern. First the engraving was done by a 6-4 tool, as Dad calls it. The four denotes the lines made on each stroke, and the six refers to the length of the tool. This was his favorite tool for this size work, whereas other engravers might have used a different tool. He pointed out the 45 degree lines that were used in the "C-U-S" and referred to the feet or cross lines on the "I-T-R." All these were distinctive. He also verified the work by stating that he always had trouble with the left upper portion of the letter "T," and that was also evident. There was no doubt in my mind now. But, says I, "Why did you use your 6-4 tool to make a dot over the "I," since it was a capital "I?" Seems like we both made a mistake, and I made the second by asking. But it was important,



A private game of mumblety-peg between a pair of young men. Check out those striped trousers!

since it dated this as early work. Mistakes were costly later in his profession.

Winchester stopped making cutlery about 1941, while Dad started his engraving in about 1935. Youthful games like marbles and mumblety-peg would, no doubt, have ceased for Dad by 1941; so one can assume that this work was done circa 1935-1940. The bone broken in the back could have been due to the stresses placed on the knife while playing mumblety-peg. The most perplexing part is how the knife traveled from Chicago to a flea market in Eugene, Oregon, in a span of 40 years.

With the story told, I decided to quiz Dad on other knife-related memories that would relate to the pre-1950 era. His random thoughts touched on the giving of pocketknives as gifts, which was rather widespread in the mid and late 1930s, due to a sagging economy. At that time, knives could be purchased for \$1.25 or \$1.50; and as a special personal touch, the name of the receiver was engraved on the shield. Engraving was also done on celluloid

handled knives, however, the lines were done with a round tool, then filled in with a special crayon stick. Often a telephone number was put on the back side. In the 1940s, knives lost their place as the big gift item and bicycles soon took over, indicating an uplift in the economy. Dad also recalled the boots available to kids during the '30s that had a special pouch on the side to carry a pocketknife. He couldn't recall the maker of the boots, but I think that they were the Buster Brown boots. I wish that I could find a pair of those boots to add to my collection.

It soon became apparent that I was getting excellent historical information of knives. I started to consider how many people I could have talked to and hadn't with regard to their memories of knives. I was delighted with the turn of events, and I now wonder how many more knives are still intact and out there that were engraved with the name "Curtis." Got one? Reach out through *KNIFE Magazine*, and let me know. □