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Hobo Knives

by Dennis Ellingsen

I had always taken exception when the term “hobo knife” was mentioned at a knife show or on eBay. It was akin to the reaction I experienced when someone referred to the Prest-O-Lite tank key on a pocketknife as a skate key wrench. I thought that camp knife, picnic knife, outing knife, automobiling knife, slip apart knife, take apart knife, slot knife, campaign dining tool, eating sets, dividing pocketknife, utility knife or knife fork and spoon pattern best described this style of knife. My thinking has since been modified due to the results of a search for the word

“hobo” in my 1912 *Funk & Wagnall Dictionary*. I am now resigned to categorize all these knives as hobo knives. Just like blowing my nose with Kleenex or using a Band-aid, the term hobo knife is now acceptable to me when generically describing these eating sets. Oh, sigh, but O.K.

The focus of this article is folding hobo knives. Albeit that there are many different eating sets for eating on the go, I found the study of folding devices to be all I could handle for now.

In my snooping around I found some interesting stuff about hobos, tramps

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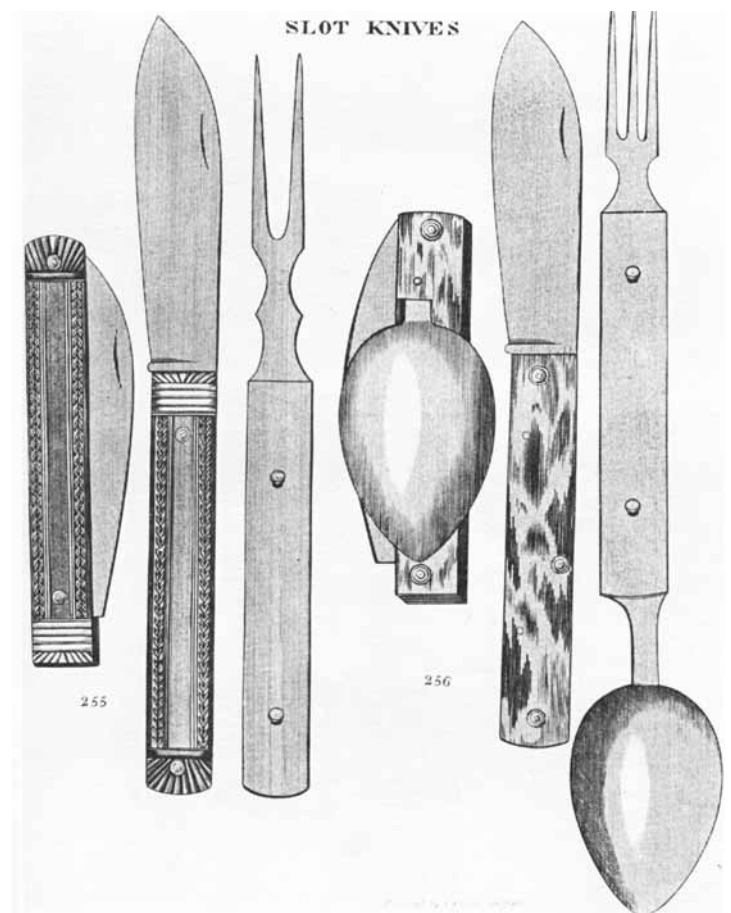
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and bums. A tramp is a person who never works and travels to avoid work. A bum is someone who never works and never travels, unless of course prodded by the local police to move on. On the other hand a hobo is

someone who works and travels. The hobo would work for meals or wages but was always on the move. A hobo was an itinerant worker. The term hobo seems to have evolved sometime around 1890, but its exact origin is unknown. It could

have come from Hoe Boy based on a farmhand or Ho Boy used as a greeting. Then again it may have been derived from a syllabic abbreviation like **Homeward Bound** or **Homeless Body**. There's
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From the top: Ka-Bar, Union Cutlery, Utery and Cattaraugus. Cracks in the handle material are common on these pattern hobo knives. The first place to look is the cutout where the spoon rests. A used tool is going to show the ravages of abuse and misuse. Note the shields on these 3- 3/4" size sets. The advertising on the Cattaraugus is unusual as few eating sets were used for give away or advertising. Too expensive.



This is a page out of Smith's Key from 1816 showing that the slot knife does indeed go back a couple hundred years.



Colonial hobo type knives were very popular in the 1950s and 1960s. When these are found at flea markets and garage sales, the seller rarely knows that they slip apart. After you purchase one, slip it apart and capture the look of surprise. Then run.



Hart Cutlery Co - New York - 1900-1920. This is a 4-1/2" two tine fork with steel liners. Note the "Razor Steel" etch.



Ulster Knife Co - This slip apart knife has three functions in the one blade. It is a two tine fork, a can opener and a crown cap opener. A little trivia is that the invention of the crown cap was 1891, and the Ulster name started in 1876.

also a suggestion that hobo is short for **hopping box-cars**, and some maintain

that hobo is short for **Hoboken**, NJ, where many rail lines converged in the



These 3-3/4" celluloid handle slip apart eating sets were popular in the 1930s and early 1940s. In addition to general sales they were endorsed and marketed by the Boy Scouts of America and the Camp Fire Girls. The Girl Scouts did not offer these sets. The scouting organizations did not offer these in other than celluloid, but bone was available for general sales.

19th century, making the city a natural gathering point for vagabonds. There was also a suggestion that it might be of Bohemian derivation based on the **Bohemian gypsy** or **Homeless Bohemian**. Hobo is one of those words where any meaning you pick could be right, just as I am suggesting one can pick the word for knife items designed for eating.

The idea of a set of utensils designed for eating while traveling goes back hundreds of years. A fork, a spoon and a knife that were compact were a wonderful traveling tool. They could

serve the military, sportsman trips, camping trips or used like dear Elayne on her weekly lunch meetings where the plastic utensils offered at high class restaurants are repugnant to her.

One of the earliest approaches to the use of compact slot knives was putting two knives together. This practice stems from using two knives for eating. You know: honey and peas on one knife and all else for the other. There is a rendition of the slot knife in Joseph Smith's 1816 book *Key to the Various Manufactories of Sheffield*. The use of traveling uten-

sils gained popularity during the Civil War (1861-1865) and then again during WWI (1914-1918), but these style tools that were popular in wartime were never issued by the military. Many were given to the soldiers by family, friends and organizations.

There were comments made that the Red Cross purchased these knives during WWI to give to the soldiers in Christmas boxes. That is why some people have referred to these knives as Red Cross knives. The Red Cross did sponsor a movement to

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Clockwise from 9 o'clock - Union Cut Co., Ka-Bar, W.R. Case and Union Cut Co. All of these style knives use the three tine forks with crown cap lifters and have nickel silver or brass liners. The three part 5-1/4" hobo knives with spoons are a little more difficult to find in good specimens.

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place needed items in packages to be sent to the soldiers in Europe during Christmas of 1917. However the Red Cross never purchased these knives nor did they purchase the socks and handkerchiefs, papers and pencils, and other needed items destined for the soldiers stationed in France. All were a product of donation drives which had been organized by the Red Cross.

This hobo style knife also became popular in the 1920s when it was sold as a camping set and/or sportsman set. The scouting organizations popularized this hobo type knife in the 1930s. Another popular item, used more in European countries, was the silver fruit knife that came as a set and typically had a knife and fork.

Our scout/utility pocketknife collection had reached the top of the bucket; but, being a rabid collector (accumulator), I looked for knife combinations that were close. The knife, fork and spoon variations had appeal; and I soon realized that my limited income would put the clamp on going hog wild. I picked carefully before going in too deeply, and I realized there

were many variations of variations. Aside from the numerous manufacturers, there were numerous varieties of handle material and size. In attempting to categorize these patterns, I was hard pressed to outline them in a standard form. So I am taking my best shot at it with a limited accumulation of these knives to work from.

The most obvious differences are size: under four inches, four to five inch and over five inch. Then the number of blades (where the spoon, fork, knife and can opener are each considered a blade for the purpose of this article) which can be two, three or four. The handle material can be aluminum, bone, celluloid, horn, pearl, ivory, silver, stag or wood. Over the years the most popular material has been wood, typically cocobolo. There's the issue of configuration which will be a knife, fork and spoon; a knife and a fork; or a knife and a spoon. Then last, does it slip apart or not?

Main blades can be found with the standard clip pattern, the spear pattern and one I will call the butter knife pattern. The butter knife pattern was popular

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Clockwise from 10 o'clock - Ka-Bar 5-1/4" "Sportsman" - A.W. Wadsworth, horn handles with corkscrew - Colonial souvenir knife from the Winchester House in California. Not a slip apart.

on camp/picnic knives that were used for spreading and cutting. Forks can either be two tine or three tine and sometimes, but rarely, four tine. Then there is the spoon which is generally plated or made of nickel silver, providing corrosion resistance. Some models have a caplifter/can opener blade, and others are equipped with a corkscrew. The older hobo knives have steel liners and later knives have brass and nickel silver liners. That pretty much covers hardware variations on a theme on the construction of these knives. The other point to make is that large majority of pre-1920s hobo knives

seem to have in common a powerful gorilla back spring that challenges the toughest nails to open the blades. The other point in common is the half stop opening position on the main blade.

The list of makers that made these knives is many, and I am sure that I have missed one or two or more.

- A. F. Bannister
- American Knife Co.
- Plymouth
- A. W. Wadsworth
- Brantford Cutlery
- Camillus
- Cattaraugus
- Colonial
- C. X. Lockwood Brothers
- Empire Knife Co.
- Enterprise Cutlery



On the left is a Camillus Cutlery with its counterpart of a Holley. Both are 4-1/2" in length (closed) with cocobolo handles and do not come apart.

- Frenzel
- Geo Kay
- Hart Cutlery
- Holley
- Hollingsworth
- J. Ward

- Ka-Bar
- Lamson & Goodnow
- Lockwood Bros.
- Maussner & Son
- Northfield
- New York Knife Co.

- Rather & Co.
 - Rice & Lathrop
 - Riverside
 - Robeson
 - Shore & Bagshaw
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New York Knife Co - Walden N.Y. - This slip apart is distinctive; the spoon has a 90 degree bend to accommodate the slot in the handle when closed. All others have a sweeping bend to accomplish the same thing.

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Terrier Cutlery
Ulery
Ulster
Union Cutlery
Union Knife Co.,
Naugatuck
Western
Western States
W. Morton & Sons
W. R. Case & Sons

The Mechanics of the Slip Apart

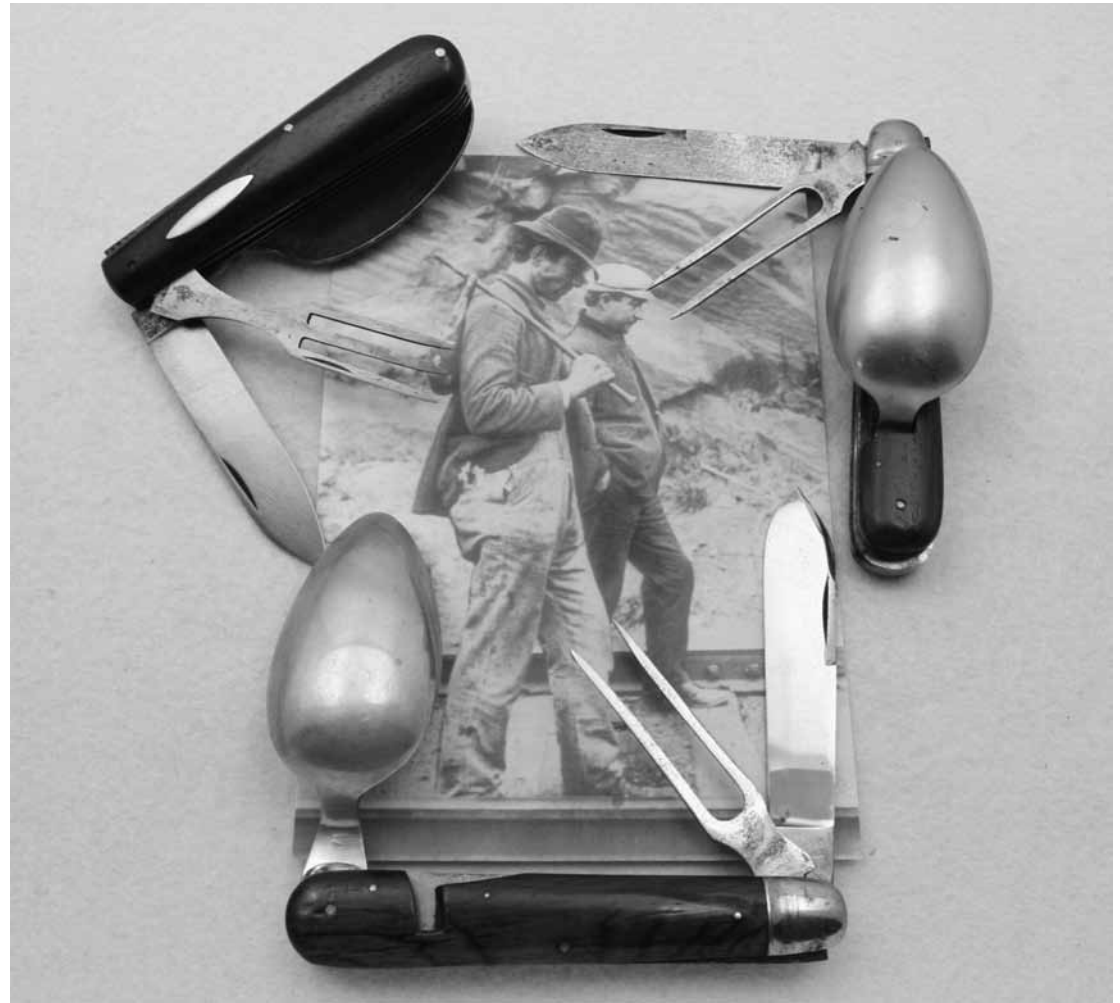
The earlier pre-1920 three blade knives are, for the most part, all slip apart. They come apart when each handle is pushed in opposing directions, releasing the tabs or pins that hold the knife together by friction. This separation allows one to use each of the tools separately as a knife, fork and spoon. The knives that are about 4-1/2" in closed length are almost always in cocobolo wood. Cocobolo wood is very dense and withstands abuse, heavy use and washing with water. Almost all the makers made this style knife. Robeson has the most unusual variety in that one cannot slip the tools apart until the main blade is opened. This action allows the slip apart tabs to move freely so the knife will come apart. This could be a locking device or a safety device.

A locking device was first seen in a patent by James H. Cables of the American Knife Company in Plymouth Hollow, Connecticut. The patent for a folding slot knife was March 18, 1862, patent #34,712. A brass catch kept

the two parts of the knife together and would prevent it from coming apart accidentally. This was the only time this device has been seen on a knife, fork and spoon.

I recently picked up an English made hobo knife by W. Morton which has the most unique and interesting locking engineering that I have encountered. The seller claimed it did not come apart, but it looked as if it should. When the blades were closed or open, I failed to make it come apart. However with the blades open and a quantum amount of force on the edge of a table, the knife came apart. The idea that it was rusted together was quickly disproved. This device was engineered so the tang prevented the blades from slipping apart when the blades were folded closed. When the blades were open, the backspring prevented the slip apart. When the blades were at the half open position, the tang was clear, the spring was pushed back, and they would easily slip apart. Very clever.

Just for clarification, the tabs that are in the center area of the liner have a male tab/pin that fits into a keyhole female opening in the corresponding liner. The slip movement puts the male tab in the narrow portion of the keyhole thus securing each tool to make it as one. The earlier hobo knives had a steel pin in the steel liner with a flared head. Early specimens can also be found with a copper or brass pin. In 1907 a



Clockwise from 10 o'clock - Brantford Cutlery Co. has a three tine fork, a shield, no bolster and does not slip apart; Robeson Shuredge and Terrier Cutlery have a safety feature which only allows the blades to slip apart when the main blade is open.

patented tab affair made the use of brass and nickel silver liners more practical. The November 5, 1907,

patent #870,413, for this design would expire in 17 years. It might be noted that in most, but not all

cases, the main blade points the direction that the blade slips free. If a slip

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apart is sticky, then try extra efforts in this direction first.

Hobo Slip Apart Knives Under 4"

This group of knives can be categorized as the scouting group as they were quite popular from the late 1920s through the 1950s. It wasn't all about scouting though as camping, picnicking and the sportsman's world had use for the eating knife set too. For the most part the favored blade style was the clip point or spear point main blade. Camillus, Cattaraugus, Ka-Bar, Ulery and Union Cutlery made these knives. The handle material was predominately bone but celluloid, horn and metal were also used. The Ka-Bar and Union Cutlery bone handled knives are often found with hairline cracks in the bone as well as major cracks and chips. A good magnifying glass is needed to detect these flaws. It also helps to run your fingernail around the edges to detect those hairline cracks that are difficult to spot with the eye.

The other group of these knives is the one that has the butter knife point. This would be a great picnic knife for spreading butter or peanut butter. The outside edge is sharp, but it has no sharp point. The extra width of the blade from stem to stern makes a great tool for picnic use.

In the 1930s Ka-Bar offered Boy Scout and Campfire Girl eating sets. The handles were yellow celluloid; and because of the base content of this celluloid material, they have not been prone to deterioration like so many other celluloid handle knives we have seen. The collector looks for an in-the-box mint knife with the etch intact and pristine. I have specimens of the Campfire Girls etch, but I have never found one with a Girl Scout etch. These hobo style knives were offered in bone handles but never by the scouting organizations.

The Colonial Knife Company put out a series of hobo knives that were popular in the 1960s and 1970s. The shield on them read *Pic-Nic-Pal* and the plastic or synthetic handles were either black, white or yellow. By the early 1950s celluloid was long gone from knife handles. Most of these

Colonial knives seem to pop up in flea markets or garage sales, and it always surprises the seller when you slip them apart in front of them. The smart buyer always does this after the purchase.

Today there are a plethora of hobo knives being offered on eBay as novelty items. The bidding usually starts at ninety nine cents and, even at that price, I suspect they are not much of a bargain. These are probably similar to the Japanese "jumbo knife" imports of the 1960s which had every tool imaginable, but you now pass over at a garage sale even when offered for ninety nine cents. These were not slip apart but basically fall apart; they had twelve implements to break on demand.

Hobo Slip Apart Knives Over 4"

The two section slip apart hobo knife usually has a cutting blade and a fork. The specimens I have come across are Empire, Lamson & Goodnow, Northfield and Rice & Lathrop; and these have cocobolo handles, steel liners, powerful springs and two or three tine forks. The next and most popular variation of this category of hobo knives are the three blade knife, fork and spoon. In this group I have seen American Knife, Hart, J. Ward, Lamson & Goodnow, New York Knife Co., Robeson, Terrier, Ulster and Union Knife Co. The most popular handle material found is cocobolo and the forks will have two, three or four tines.

Hobo Slip Apart Knives Over 5"

The second variant of the two blade slip apart is the 5-1/4" two bolster knives that are the prize of the collectibles. To me they are beautiful knives; and, being less stout than the steel liner cocobolo knives, I hardly think that a real hobo would carry one of these knives as they had to be expensive in the day. But we can still call them hobo knives just to categorize them. The third variant in these 5-1/4" knives is the knife, fork and spoon combination as was popularized by Ka-Bar.

The names on these elegant 5" knives are Ka-Bar, Union Cutlery, Western and W.R. Case. The handles can

be bone, celluloid, pearl or stag; and the liners are brass or nickel silver. The most familiar is the Ka-Bar dogs head pattern. The forks are three tine and have a crown caplifter at the base of the fork. The favorite knife for me is the Union Cutlery pearl knife. It is beautiful beyond words. It also exemplifies the fact that pearl or bone is a one drop on the floor disaster. So precious and so fragile.

Hobos that do not Slip Apart

The no slip apart knife and spoon sets were made by Camillus, Holley, Ulster and W.R. Case. They are all about 4-1/2" in closed length, and all have cocobolo wood handles. The comment came up that at one time many ate their food with two knives for lack of a fork or spoon. Cutting one's meal and then using the spoon to serve oneself seems logical. All have spear blades and half stops and very powerful springs. There is always an exception to the rule, and I do have one knife that has three eating tools and is not a slip apart. It was made by Brantford Cutlery and has no bolsters, unlike almost all others which do have a bolster on one end.

The Civil War

The term hobo knives doesn't accurately apply to the period of time from 1861-1865, as the term hobo was derived around the turn of the century. Another fact was that the knives of this period were not issued by the military so each soldier that had one during the war either purchased it individually or it was given to them. And then the question was raised as to which of the cutlery companies could have possibly manufactured these during this conflict. The following list is comprised of companies that started business prior to the Civil War and that made knife, fork and spoon eating utensils. I have specimens of several of these companies or I have been shown photographs to substantiate that these products were made by these companies. Whether they were made and sold during the Civil War is a tough thing to prove, but they could have been. In the research I was doing on the Civil War I came across a

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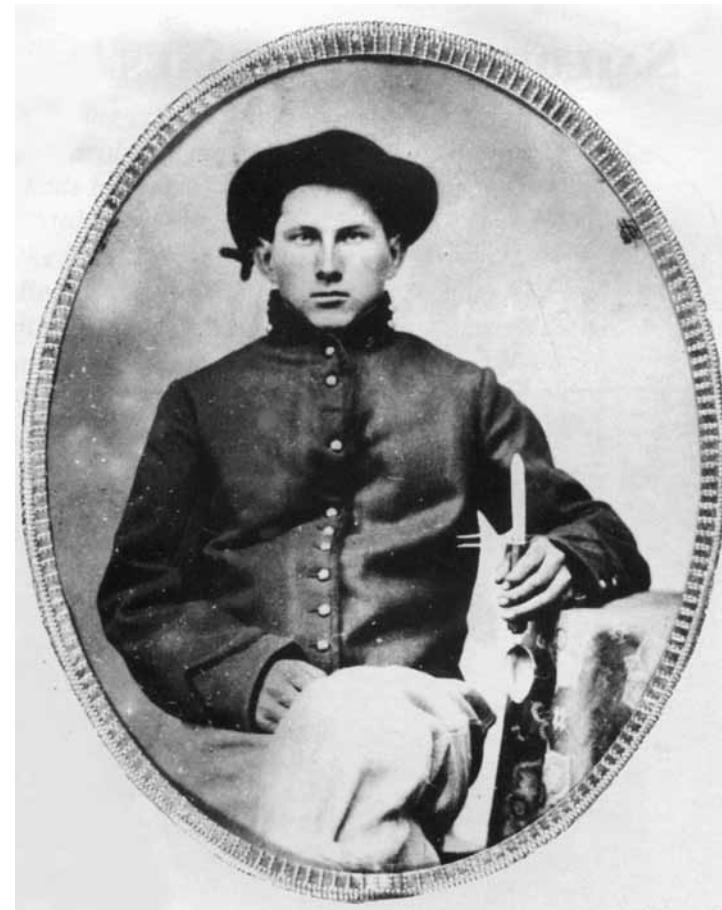
In 1955 this ad appeared and, from the number I have seen of this eating set, I would say that a hundred bazillion were sold. They were indeed a novelty knife but not too much on practical functionality methinks. On a collector's market I do not think they have appreciated much past the 1955 price.

portrait photograph of a Civil War soldier proudly holding a folding hobo knife. Civil War portraits are usually taken with knives and guns, but a knife, fork and spoon?

American Knife Co. -
Plymouth Hollow CT - 1849
Empire Knife Co. -

Winsted CT - 1856
Geo Kay -
Esopus NY - 1860
Holley Mfg. Co. -
Lakeville CT - 1854
J. Ward -
Bronxville NY 1860
Lamson & Goodnow -
MA - 1853

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*The tools of the American Civil War.
Knife, fork & spoon.*



Emmett Kelly



Emmett Kelly captures the flavor of the various stages of the hobo knives. All the sizes and all the blade shapes in addition to the various handle materials.

New York Knife Co. - NY - 1856

Northfield - CT - 1858

Rice & Lathrop - Winsted
CT - 1861

Union Knife Co. -
Naugatuck CT - 1851

This and That About Hobo Knives

I started out with the hope of debunking the term hobo; but now I embrace the term as it categorizes, in a positive way, an association of an eating kit for the migrant worker or mobile individual, be it military, sportsman, picnic, scout or those who want metal rather than plastic eating utensils. The two tine fork was probably discontinued pre-1920 in favor of the three tine fork. On some knives I have seen corkscrews but they are more common on European knives. Sometimes can openers were implemented in the designs as were crown caplifters.

In a Maher and Grosh 1932 catalog they listed this knife for soldier and sailor, hunter and camper, picnic and woods, a necessity and a luxury. Cattaraugus, in one of their catalogs, called this a *Kum-A-Part Camp*

Knife. This is not particularly the expression I would want to shout out loud at a crowded knife show. Cattaraugus is one of the few pre-1950 companies that made a hobo knife that was an advertising item. (The one I have is etched *Journal Gazette*.) Novelty style hobo knives were used as advertising when it became possible to manufacture inexpensive knives.

In the search for hobo knives it is very common to find only one part of a set. The pieces that go to make up the whole are often lost, misplaced or broken. Dear Elayne uses a mismatch of pieces to make up her Ka-Bar hobo set which is a celluloid handle on one half and bone on the other. It works, but it took years to locate the parts to become one whole.

I recently encountered a hobo knife offered on the internet for \$16 shipped. It was listed for use for reenactments of the American Civil War. I was curious so I ordered one and was pleasantly surprised. It is pretty nice. It has wood handles (not cocobolo) and is over 4" in length. It also features the safety lock feature

which requires the main blade to be open before it will separate.

Of course a story of hobo knives would be incomplete without mentioning the greatest hobo of all time. Emmett Kelly based his clown character on the hobos of the 1930s Depression Era. Prior to that we have Charlie Chaplin who was the little tramp. I think he aspired to be a hobo as hard as he worked and traveled.

As with many cutlery items, the history and evolution of tools can be easily traced in hobo knives. And that is the reason I accumulate cutlery. I am just a hobo at heart.

This article started out with a meager collection of hobo knives and an intense study of these knives. There was a great deal of input and help from Art Green, Bernard Levine, Phillip Pankiewicz and Mark Zalesky; I thank them for their help.

Patents of Interest

March 18, 1862 - 34,712
August 17, 1897 - 588,174
August 14, 1900 - 656,092
November 5, 1907 - 870,413

□