

## **Knives made the old way**

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Times Herald-Record

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Ellenville – Go around the right side of the gray building by the loading dock, through the door held open by a chain and up the stairs. It smells like burnt hair or maybe a dentist's office on a heavy day of drilling teeth. Follow the hum and buzz and whirl into a big room where a new company carries on an old craft.

"Let's start at the end," says Walter Gardiner, co-owner of Canal Street Cutlery Co. He leans into a brown cabinet and pulls out wooden boxes with pocket knives lying in rows.

"This is genuine stag deer horn," he says, showing off one knife's handle. "Believe it or not, my man," holding up another, "this is giraffe bone."

Canal Street makes knives by hand, one by one. Gardiner, who in blue Dockers and a white polo shirt looks like a football coach, summed up the setup: "This is a level of craftsmanship you couldn't do at Schrade."

Gardiner and his business partner, Joe Hufnagel, were executives at Imperial Schrade, the knife company that laid off the last of its 260 employees last summer and shut down.

"That last part really was sudden," Village Manager Elliot Auerbach says. "It was tough to see them go."

Auerbach recalled that in his youth, about half of this Ulster County village worked for Schrade and the other half for Channel Master, maker of TV antennas.

You could say this is a knife building; Imperial Schrade made knives in this building from the early 1950s until the mid-1980s. Canal Street – the new tenant and Schrade's smaller successor – only takes up 6,000 square feet of wood floors and big windows. Workbenches and tables, many from Schrade's old operation, line the walls. Red sprinkler pipes crisscross the white ceiling.

"It's more than just the (hand) assembly, it's the finishing," Hufnagel says. "There is definitely a heart string out there in the country for something made in America and at a high quality – a level of quality that is visible."

Here, that means natural materials like bone, mother of pearl and wood, hard D2 steel, hand finishing by experienced craftsmen and finishing touches like hand-filed edgings.

Canal Street's traditional designs are what Joe Kertzman, managing editor of Blade magazine, describes as, "high-quality, grandpa pocket knives," although many knife enthusiasts are looking for "light-weight, fast-opening, high-tech stuff."

Old school or not, Kertzman has faith in this small-scale hand-made approach. "I expect them to be around for a while."

A.G. Russell, owner of the highly regarded knife mail-order company of the same name, called Canal Street "competitive as hell" and says this: "They know how to make knives. That's the point."

Any of the knife makers here, known in the knife business as cutlers, can make a knife from beginning to end. For the sake of efficiency, however, they don't.

One day last week, Jason Burger and Bob Thayer were doing what is called "hefting" and polishing.

Thayer, 49, picks up half a knife and does his part to make it beautiful. At this point there are no blades and it's just a bone handle riveted to the metal innards – a thin piece of brass with nickel or stainless steel ends called bolsters.

Thayer's an accidental knife maker. He got a job at Schrade after the Ford plant in Mahwah, N.J., closed. "I just applied for a job," he says. "I didn't think I would stay at Schrade."

Twenty-seven years later, Thayer's still making knives. He describes the time between Schrade and here like this: "I was just unemployed for a while."

Wearing padded guards on his fingers to save his knuckles, he presses the knife against a sanding belt, rocking it a little to shape and curve the end. The white blur on the brown belt gets a little wider and the piece gets hot in his hands.

Burger has biceps that could make him a champion arm wrestler. He's 30 and uses those arms to press blades against polishing wheels and make the blades shine.

On this day, Chuck Van Aken and Alex Hupalo are assembling four-blade pocket knives. Put in the blades. Clamp. Place the pins. With gentle hammer taps, they make adjustments, make sure the knife makes the right "click" when it opens and closes and align the blades so they pass each other smoothly.

There's no air-conditioning here. So, to avoid the summer heat of the workshop and save a little sanity, they work 10-hour days, four days a week. At lunchtime, the hum of knife making stops, and the only sounds are fans and small talk. Blackened hands are washed, ready for sandwiches.

Burger jokes that his last paycheck just went into his gas tank, and the conversation drifts to when, exactly, you must fill out a DEC tag when you bag a deer. The smell of drilled teeth is temporarily beaten out by Bob Thayer's chicken and rice. Chuck Van Aken eats oatmeal with raisins and talks about how good it is to get back to his "roots."

Van Aken started at Schrade when he was 23 and finished 28 years later overseeing 20 employees. His dad worked in this same building. So did Harold Buley, another cutler here. Buley, 60, worked downstairs, and Alex Hupalo worked here, too, before Schrade moved to a bigger place on Route 209. Now, at Canal Street, he's happy to be working with his hands again.

"At a place like Schrade you do a lot of different things, and you don't even know what it all will look like. But here, we all do everything," Van Aken says. "Everybody in this room is proud of what they do. It's not like an assembly line – bang, bang, bang – and nobody cares."

He looks down the lunch table at the other guys.

"Here, everybody cares."

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