

Looking sharp

For 100 years, Imperial Schrade has been churning out great American pocketknives

By [FRED LEBRUN](#), Staff writer First published: Saturday, June 21, 2003

There are those of us even in the post-9/11 world who don't feel fully dressed without a pocketknife.

Like our fathers, grandfathers and generations before them, a dozen times a day that smooth, cool-to-the-touch folding pen or jackknife that always sits in the same corner of the same pocket is brought out to slice, dice, mince, open a letter or core an apple.

A quick wipe with a cloth handkerchief and in one motion it's back where it belongs. A familiar extension of the hand, a comfort, a holder of memories and countless associations like the family rocking chair. A most useful instrument.

Frankly, I don't know how anyone can live without such perfectly functional beauty.

Wide variety

When America was more rural and self-reliant than it is now, nearly every man carried a pocketknife, and many women, too. I know first hand that most boys aspired to one, dreamed of that first Scout knife. A banker had his sleek, single-bladed gentleman's folder. The doctor his long, thin-bladed knife with a flat butt for crushing pills. Tradesmen had their thick utility Barlows that cut or pried just about anything, or two- or three-bladed stockmen's knives. There were customized blades for use by electrician or plumber, smith or orchardist.

For a few affordable dollars, the average Joe had a choice of hundreds of named blade configurations, shapes, sizes, lengths, manufacturers and levels of quality and craftsmanship from a dozen countries. Not to mention varied types of steel in the blades, and handle material like bone or stag, plastic or exotic materials like semiprecious stone or metals.

A pocketknife always was and thankfully still is as varied in its possibilities as those who carry them, and consequently each one provides individual personality, a signature of the bearer.

To which the Imperial Schrade Co. of Ellenville, an hour and a half from Albany down in the Catskills, can only shout, hallelujah! Those myriad blades, steels, handles and designs driven by both consumer whims and actual function over the years have kept the company scrambling and adapting to keep up competitively. Many other knife companies have not been able to.

Consequently, Imperial Schrade, which makes 3 million pocketknives a year from scratch right here in our back yard, will celebrate its 100th anniversary in January. In New York,

it'll join knife-maker Camillus, just west of Syracuse, in not just surviving the century mark, but staying in front of the field.

Heavy hitters

Not coincidentally, these two are among the heaviest hitters in pocketknife manufacturing worldwide, under their own brands and as contractors to others, reflecting this state's central role in the history of American pocketknives. Historically that is due to ample water power in places like Ellenville and nearby Walden, as well as proximity to New York City distribution. But it's thanks most of all to that ever-popular lady with the beacon in New York Harbor, who lured experienced cutlers from Sheffield, Solingen, Frosolone and Thiers to set up shop here.

Making a pocketknife -- artfully assembling blades that pivot without wobble on pins held in place by a tempered backspring or two -- hasn't changed materially in 200 years.

Even seemingly contemporary concepts like the Buck lockback folding hunting knife that caught fire a couple of decades ago and rejuvenated the industry, or today's "standard" pocketknife for the younger generation, the Victorinox or Wenger Swiss Army Knife, have actually been around in identical form since the 19th century.

Wall of the past

Just outside of Imperial Schrade president Wally Gardiner's office on the second floor of a 548,000-square-foot manufacturing facility is 30 feet of wall exhibiting thousands of half-open pocketknives. A staggering number representing examples from Schrade's past, the various incarnations go back to founder George Schrade in 1904.

There are examples from the Ulster Knife Co. -- Ulster as in Ulster County -- with a local manufacturing history dating from the 1870s, and the Imperial company of Providence, R.I., both acquired by Schrade over the years. Some of those knives, especially those from the 1920s, with stainless steel blades and snappy scissors, look so modern it's scary.

"In the world of pocketknives, there's nothing much new under the sun," says Gardiner, a bundle of barely suppressed competitive energy who just loves talking about knives, comparing them. He laments what 9/11 has done to those of us who carry cherished knives into airports. Big losers.

Pocketknife design, concepts and the basic makings haven't changed much in centuries, but manufacturing methods certainly have. So has consistency of quality, thanks to the latest technology and metallurgy.

"Pocketknives have never been better made than they are today," asserts Jim Economos, Imperial Schrade's operations manager.

Golden age

The golden age of pocketknives is conceded to be between the world wars, and was largely American. We had the cutlers from the Old World here, and we had huge markets. Manufacturers like Remington and Winchester and dozens of others who have since given it up cranked out millions of high-quality knives using the then-latest technology and materials, with oversight by those who used to labor over one knife at a time.

After World War II, our culture changed. Pocketknives arguably became less important to daily life. Those huge pre-war markets dried up, and many manufacturers withered away. But the steady rise of a few, and then hundreds of custom knifemakers across the country rekindled consumer interest and restoked the industry a decade or so later.

The vastly expanding outdoor-sports community took to knives anew, and knife collecting became popular. Today, traditional makers like Imperial Schrade are in collaboration with many of these custom makers.

To say the Ellenville Schrade plant is massive is an understatement. Imperial Schrade has 425 employees, says **Economos**, making it the largest employer in the county and region. Yet in the hangar-sized work spaces, these hundreds look like a scattered handful.

Making the knife

Every aspect of making a knife happens under this roof, including making all the forms and the machinery necessary to create all the parts and processes. There are still countless human inspections and refinements required along the way, including the cutlery of a blade on an anvil to bend it just so, so it will snap in place inside the pocketknife. That's done by hand and eye. So is adjusting the "walk and talk," the opening and closing tension and position.

Long rolls of brass for the liners inside the handles are stamped out by a design created upstairs on computer models by product engineers. As are the hundreds of new styles of blades. Thousand-pound coils, primarily of soft, high-carbon steel, move quickly through noisy preprogrammed stamping machines. These blades are later tempered in furnaces and cooled in refrigerators, by computer.

Meanwhile, various handles called scales are created from bone or stag or plastic, dyed and "jigged," given the familiar grooves and indentations. Nickel silver bolsters are pinned at the ends. Big grinding machines, 108 of them, with belts of abrasives, are used to create the final, smooth product and sharpened blades. Knowledgeable hands put it all together so quickly it's a blur.

At the other end of the day comes a perfectly buffed and gleaming Old Timer or Uncle Henry three-blade medium stockman, the latter the most popular knife Imperial Schrade sells. **Economos** says to keep prices down and stay competitive, notably against the Chinese, who produce crude but reasonably useful knives for a fraction of American costs, Imperial Schrade uses a concept called lean manufacturing.

Quick turn-around

The company doesn't create expensive inventory waiting for customers, nor does it store costly parts or materials. It's all gotten in from suppliers and made on a quick-turnaround basis. To have that work, orders need to be executed -- from computer model and prototype to out the door in crates -- in 24 hours to five days. That means workers need to be flexible and concentrate on different operations on different days.

To do just that, says the production manager, "We spend \$1 million a year on educating our workers."

A million bucks to not miss a beat, nor a special order from a major client, nor even one from those of us who don't feel complete without a little, perfectly functioning jackknife in our pocket.