

April 06, 2002

Ellenville knife factory cuts 75 jobs

By Paul Brooks
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Ellenville – Fallout from Sept. 11 has forced knife manufacturer Imperial Schrade to lay off 75 workers here, but the company itself is in no jeopardy, an executive said yesterday.

"People giving gifts no longer use knives," James Economos, executive vice president of the privately owned company, said yesterday. For example, companies would give employees the knives as a gift in a sales-incentive program. That type of business was a significant part of Schrade's market prior to the terrorist attacks, amounting to a few million dollars annually, he said. "After Sept. 11, that has just evaporated."

The layoffs will bring the company in line with the size of the market today, Economos said, noting that the overall retail market is weak. Imperial Schrade will still employ just over 500 people in Ellenville, he said. The company also laid off 10-20 employees at its factory in Ireland.

Despite rumors, the layoffs have no connection to the company's relationship with retail giant Wal-Mart. Schrade is the strongest manufacturer in its category for Wal-mart, Economos said.

In Ellenville, the job cuts began this week and will continue through the early part of next week. They include some voluntary layoffs and retirements and are across the board, including management. Economos would not say whether those laid off were given severance packages or the like.

"We do this with a heavy heart," Economos said. "It has been a decade since we had to do something like this."

Brian McIntosh sat in the 209 Diner in Ellenville yesterday contemplating what his source of income would be after next Friday, when he receives his last paycheck from Schrade. McIntosh said he had worked for the company for five years before he was laid off Monday.

McIntosh, who earned \$241 a week molding knife handles at Schrade, has put in applications at ShopRite and Burger King. If he doesn't find anything soon, he'll turn to his father to help him pay the \$400 rent on his Ellenville apartment.

"Somehow I'm trying to scrape up some money to stay alive," McIntosh said.

The local company is committed to growing and re-hiring workers down the road, Economos said. To do that, Schrade has to find new products and new markets to increase sales. "That includes possibly bidding on government and military-type tools and knives worldwide," Economos said. "Those plans are in the works right now. ... But they take time to develop."

Wawarsing Supervisor Richard Craft said he knows some of the new product plans at Schrade. "There are several things that are very promising," Craft said. "They will re-trench and will be coming back. They are still a very viable force in Ellenville and Wawarsing."

McIntosh said he hopes to go back some day. "I wanted 20 years there and then get out."

Staff writer Nicoletta Koveos contributed to this report.

July 13, 2003

Knife maker faces future on the edge

By Douglas Cunningham

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Eleven years old, if memory serves, was the age of responsibility in my house.

I could have a pocketknife.

Would I take care of it or throw it in the dirt? Would I slice off a finger? Would I

Mom and Dad apparently answered the questions to their satisfaction, though Mom was still a bit hesitant.

The knife in question, naturally, was to be the Boy Scout camping model – a blade and a couple of tools like a can opener. It was a pretty good knife.

And the time was, most every kid, or at least most boys, carried a pocketknife.

This wasn't that long ago. Not back in the log cabin days. Not back during the Great War, or World War II.

A mere three decades.

I still carry a good knife now and then. One's mighty handy for outside chores, or when fishing, or knocking down cardboard.

A lot's happened since those halcyon days. Few know that better than the people at knife maker Imperial Schrade in Ellenville.

Carrying a pocketknife today is akin to a high crime in a lot of places. Regarded as a weapon. Dangerous.

And we've become, how to put it, soft. Working inside, cutting words or numbers apart on a PC, instead of outside – cutting twine on a bale.

And knife making has moved abroad. Offshore companies first copied the domestic designs, but later, as quality increased, they became innovators.

Today, even China is increasing its quality. And the cost of manufacturing there is vastly less.

Making Schrade's dilemma all the more acute. It has 400 highly trained workers. It has a well-known name, a solid reputation, and customers who want it to succeed.

It also has been, shall we say, slow to innovate. Companies like Spyderco moved in with easy-to-open blades, new designs, new materials.

Schrade is left to play catch-up, in an unforgiving, high-speed retail market.

The plant's leaders seem to realize their dilemma. Schrade has new designs, new products, new plans.

Success, though, is far from assured. When my own children are old enough, will Schrade knives, made in Ellenville, still be around for me to give them?

Some 400 jobs and a good chunk of Ellenville's economy rest on the edge.

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December 20, 2003



Knife firm cuts to the bone

Imperial Schrade lays off as many as 200 workers

By Jeremiah Horrigan

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Ellenville – The rumors ran through this hard-working town like a trickle of cold sweat. Imperial Schrade, the community's cornerstone manufacturing plant, was laying off people again. This time, lots of people.

Layoffs at the embattled knife manufacturer didn't strike people around town as something new. But doing it a week before Christmas, and pink-slipping people after they arrived for work yesterday – that, people said, plain stunk.

At least 100 people – some workers estimated as many as 200 workers – were believed to have been laid off.

"They just came around to us and tapped us on the shoulder one at a time. Just tapped me while I was working and marched me up to the office, like I was a criminal," said a man who had been a grinder at the plant for four years. "Then they marched me out."

Like many other workers who got the bad news, the man asked that his name not be used.

"We were in shock, all of us. It was like 150 to 200 of us."

Workers had been told a handful of part-timers hired a few weeks ago would be the only workers let go.

"But it was everyone. Guys who've been working there their whole lives – supervisors, too," a worker said.

The employee, who lives in Ulster County, said benefits, such as health and dental insurance, are only extended through the end of the month.

"That's what hit me hard," he said. "No benefits come Jan. 1. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year."

The workers were told to blame the economy, not the company.

The workers' shock was shared by people who had heard about the layoffs.

"There should be some kind of law about laying people off at the holiday season," said Emma Blauvelt, a Salvation Army volunteer collecting for the annual Christmas kettle drive outside the M&T Bank on Main Street. "Why couldn't they have done this back in November, if they had to do it?"

Company officials had no explanations for people who felt as Blauvelt did. They did not return repeated phone calls or requests for comments from the newspaper or from village officials yesterday.

In lieu of any official word about the layoffs, rumors swirled like so much street litter in the cold afternoon air in the downtown business district.

Village Clerk Ann Bowler was told by a friend he'd just been laid off.

"When? I asked – 'Just now!'"

Bowler shook her head in dismay.

"Can you imagine? This is devastating. They were just told to leave the building, and that was it!"

Kelly Hull, a laid-off mother of three and a 10-year veteran of Schrade, took the news philosophically.

"They've been struggling to stay alive. I can't blame them," she said "If things get better, maybe they'll rehire.

"They've been good to me. I won't down them. The bottom line is, maybe this will work out for me – maybe God sees something for me that I can't."

Village Manager Elliot Auerbach, like everyone who grew up in Ellenville, remembers the company as a major piece of the community's social and cultural fabric. As General Motors once was to Detroit, so was Schrade to Ellenville. But, like Detroit, the global economy's impact has finally taken its toll on Schrade and on the community.

"They're a dinosaur in the way they do things and what they do – it's a change that's hard to take," Auerbach said.

Over the years, the plant has provided work for a cross-section of workers from all ethnic backgrounds.

Roberto Landaverde was one of the lucky ones yesterday. He still has his job in the grinding department. He's worked at Schrade for 10 years, makes \$8.47 an hour, and he's thankful.

"I was crying today – lots of those people have children," he said.

Landaverde said executives met with the company's remaining employees and said that sales have been bad and the company could not handle its payroll.

"You know," Landaverde said, "if you don't have the business, you don't have the money for the paychecks on Friday."

He shrugged his shoulders, frustration crossing his face.

"You have to trust in the future," he said. "That's all you can do, you know?"

Imperial Schrade history

Layoffs are nothing new at Imperial Schrade during the past few years. With yesterday's yuletide slashing, the longtime knife and outdoor tool maker has shed nearly 400 jobs since the end of 2001. And, as the company's Web site discloses, many of those workers are third- and even fourth-generation employees.

Imperial, a non-union, privately held company, grew out of three companies, two of which began in the Hudson Valley.

The Ulster Knife Co. was founded in Ellenville in the 1870s. In the early 1900s, two other knife companies started competing for a slice of the market share: The Schrade Cutlery Co., founded in Walden in 1904, and Imperial Knife Co., founded in Providence, R.I., in 1916.

In 1941, as the industry grew and manufacturing methods advanced, Imperial purchased Ulster, becoming Imperial Knife Associated Companies. The merger helped it capture the knife market for World War II soldiers.

Then, in 1946, Schrade was purchased by the company. It was renamed Schrade Walden Cutlery Co. and was a separate division for the growing knife corporation.

Years later, all the operations were moved to Ellenville, where its headquarters are today. It was in 1985 that the corporation became Imperial Schrade Corp.

Imperial also owns a knife and tool manufacturing plant in Listowel, Ireland, which employs about 70 people, according to the company's Web site.

Imperial manufactures outdoor knives, ideal for hunting and fishing. It also makes outdoor tools, used for camping, hiking and climbing.

There are approximately 250 workers still employed at the Ellenville plant.

Staff writer Mike Dawson contributed to this report.

December 23, 2003

A most painful cut

There is no good way to tell people they are losing their jobs. But some ways are worse than others.

It's hard to imagine a more uncompassionate way than the one chosen by Imperial Schrade in Ellenville. Last Friday, 100 to 200 employees at the knife factory showed up for work only to be summoned to an office and told they had been laid off. Immediately.

A week before Christmas. No notice. No severance. Benefits end Jan. 1. Happy holidays.

The company, which has suffered through previous layoffs, points to increased competition in a global economy for its financial problems. That may be so, but that doesn't explain or excuse the callous manner in which company executives responded to the problems.

If the payroll was too big last Friday, it was too big weeks before then. Workers, including many who had apparently been employed by Imperial Schrade for years, deserved to be told the bad news in a more respectful way. This was an especially cold-hearted cut from a company that has been a cornerstone of the village economy for years.

January 15, 2004

Starting out, all over again

By Paul Brooks

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Ellenville – It's tough to boil your life down to numbers and a few lines on a job application.

Donna Van Wagner of Ellenville is 59 and she is starting over. She made \$13.35 an hour after 32 years at Imperial Schrade. That ended in a mass layoff Dec. 19.

"At first, I was devastated," she said as she stood with a handful of other ex-Schrade employees at yesterday's Department of Labor Job Fair.

The job fair was a family reunion of sorts. The ex-knife factory workers stood in the hallways of the Ellenville Library and Ulster County's Trudy Farber Resnick center next door. They clutched job applications from Kohl's and Orange Regional Medical Center and Hydro in their hands as they spoke. They talked of the job hunt, of family and how they can't stand to sit home and watch TV shows like "Jerry Springer."

People in Ellenville know how to work. The job fair didn't start until 10 a.m. At 9:30 a.m. they were lined up outside the door, according to Ron Stonitsch, an employer services representative with the Labor Department's Kingston office. He attracted 18 employers for the fair.

By 11 a.m., the tally of job seekers had swollen to more than 300, he said. They stood shoulder to shoulder around the employer tables and filled the library's community room.

More people pumped questions at representatives from Ulster County Community College, Ulster BOCES, labor officials and other service agencies in the building next door.

Their eagerness is a plus, said Emile Gerle from Orange Regional Medical Center. "'I'll take anything.' I heard that a lot," she said.

Arden Dean was looking for three warehouse workers for the business he owns, Superior Building Products in Neversink. The time Schrade veterans have put in tells him a lot.

"They understand all the things about work," he said. "They know they have to be on time. They know they have to be presentable and that they can't wear sneakers in a warehouse."

For their effort, new employees will be paid \$10 to \$13 an hour, Dean said. One other thing: "I've never laid anybody off."

Kohl's is offering \$10.25 to start for part-time work, said Teresa Cooke of Accord. That is more than the \$7.45 a hour she was making after seven years at Schrade before she got hit in the latest round of layoffs.

But Kohl's is only hiring part-time workers for now. That doesn't pay the bills in the long run, Cooke said.

Commuting long distances has drawbacks, too: It takes her away from her kids and her mom, who baby-sits her kids, Cooke said. She needs more schooling. "I don't have my GED. That is the only thing holding me back."

Van Wagner has a plan. "There is a place after Schrade," she said. "I am going to get my high school diploma and then go on from there. The good Lord will take care of me."

Jennifer Santiago contributed to this report.

January 31, 2004

Ellenville

Struggling Schrade is looking for financial assistance

Imperial Schrade officials went hunting for low-cost financing among local economic development and political officials yesterday. Officials representing the county Empire Zone, the Ulster County Development Corporation and U.S. Rep. Maurice, among others, met with Schrade top brass yesterday. After nearly two hours, the economic development officials shook hands with Schrade President Walter Gardiner and Vice President Jim Economos, then emerged into a stiff, biting wind.

Gardiner disappeared back into the cavernous factory that employed about 400 workers until Dec. 19, the day the company laid off between 100-150, citing poor economic conditions in the company. Economos said he could not comment.

Dan Ahouse, representing Hinchey, said the meeting was productive and frank. The company needs the financing to remain competitive. "They are not looking for a handout."

Chester Straub, executive director of the UCDC, said one option is for Schrade to work through the County Industrial Development Agency to remove another 4 percent of the sales tax. The cut could apply to equipment or information technology improvements. The company may also look further at available training resources, he said. Schrade is already in the county's Empire Zone. Kingston's development director Steve Finkle said the company is already using all of the benefits available through that avenue.

July 24, 2004

Imperial Schrade may be adding shifts, workers

By Paul Brooks

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Ellenville – Seven months after laying off 100 to 200 workers, Imperial Schrade is on the hunt for help.

"Employment Available" says the sign beside Route 209 in front of the plant.

Three workers on break outside the plant said they had been told to get their vacations out of the way by the end of August. Then, they said they were told, the company could be adding second and possibly even a third shift. "Overtime too," said one of the workers, who declined to give their names.

That would be good news for the region. The Schrade layoffs came on the heels of the bankruptcy in November of another local institution, Ellenville Regional Hospital. That organization appears to be righting itself as well.

The layoffs left Imperial Schrade with an estimated 200-250 workers.

Officials at the privately owned knife and tool manufacturer did not respond to questions yesterday. No comments have come from company officials since the layoffs six days before Christmas. At the time, employees were told to blame the poor economy, not the company.

Cindy Baran of the Ulster County Office of Employment & Training said a lot of the workers who sought help in finding new careers have finished their training. A couple of the workers had received notices that they could come back to work at the plant, she said.

Donna Van Wagner of Ellenville said she had heard 14 or 15 people got recalled.

She was told she could come back to work but that she had to start at minimum wage, \$5.15 per hour, instead of the \$13.35 an hour she was making when she was laid off in December. She worked for Schrade for 33 years.

"I am not going back for minimum wage," Van Wagner said.

She, for one, doesn't think the new hires will happen. Anticipating holiday orders, the company projected increases in the work force last year as well. It didn't happen, she said.

"I enjoyed what I did at Schrade," Van Wagner said. But, at 60, she is getting her high school equivalency degree and moving on. "I had enough of Schrade," she said.

July 31, 2004

It's a knife to the heart

260 workers at Schrade say goodbyes

By Jeremiah Horrigan

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Ellenville – It was silent as a church inside the Imperial Schrade knife works yesterday morning. A pall had fallen across the hallway that used to ring with the thrum of production and the chatter of busy workers. The plant was officially closed; the only job that remained was for 260-some workers to collect their next-to-last paycheck.

It was the morning after the worst day in many of their lives. The smiles you saw were tinged with regret. The words were meant to comfort and encourage.

"Stay in touch."

"Hang in there."

"It can only get better."

They exchanged words, handshakes, hugs. The ex-workers were left to comfort themselves, a task they'd had some experience at and one that no one in public life chose to assume.

On a covered trash barrel just outside the front entrance, someone had placed a box full of tip sheets on how to apply for unemployment insurance.

Ernie Fabiano stared momentarily at the box. A look of distaste crossed his face. He'd been working at Schrade for 10 years.

"They didn't do anything right by us, not a thing," he said.

On the trash barrel next to the one containing the tip sheets, Danny McMillan had placed his and his wife Darlene's employee ID badges.

"We don't need 'em anymore, do we?" he said, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Last Monday marked McMillan's 18th anniversary at Schrade.

McMillan and a friend, Loren Greer, discussed other job possibilities.

Kohl's, Greer had heard, was hiring.

"Yeah," said McMillan, "third shift. Eleven an hour. And it's seasonal."

McMillan sighed.

The Kohl's job didn't look appealing. But it appeared to be the only place hiring.

McMillan shook his head, his lips hardened into a tight line of frustration.

"It's hard, man. It's hard."

September 21, 2004

Final farewell at Schrade sale

By Jeremiah Horrigan

Times Herald-Record

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Ellenville – Having already rid themselves of workers, the owners of Imperial Schrade are preparing to sell off the physical remains of their gigantic plant.

A three-day industrial auction in late October is expected to draw bidders from around the world – personally and virtually – for the company's final everything-must-go sale.

For the last time, local hotels and restaurants will host businesspeople eager to do business with a company that was once the biggest and best of its kind.

For the last time, there'll be cars in the weedy parking lot and people strolling down the giant plant's aisles.

Those aisles will echo not with the thrum of knife-making machinery but with the shouts of auctioneers and the bang of gavels. Everything must go – buffers, back-hoes and balers. Markers, millers and molders. A 2001 Chevy Impala. Plain-vanilla office furniture. The company telephone system. Fork lifts. Laser marking machines. Robots. A pair of Singer sewing machines.

Those towering metal bins – they're called dust collectors – bolted to the building's front flank and visible from Route 209 – make a bid, they're yours. Thousands of tons of stuff you might not think was even moveable, will be moved.

Maybe saddest of all, more than 2,000 reminders of the way it used to be – the firm's entire collection of knives spanning 100 years will go on the block on the auction's last day. Also up for grabs is unidentified "intellectual property," presumably trademarks or patents, that made Schrade the leader of the knife-making pack, before cheap Chinese knock-offs and fixed international exchange rates ganged up and killed the company.

People with knowledge of the private company's sorry financial condition wonder if the sell-off was made necessary by the need to pay off its principal bank debt, thought to be at least \$15 million. Company officials have refused to comment about any aspect of the company's condition or plans. Requests for comment from Wachovia, the company's principal bank, went unreturned yesterday.

Meanwhile, former workers and village officials greeted news of the auction with a shrug of inevitability born of long experience. Village Manager Elliott Auerbach scanned the auction Web site and joked that he might bid on a golf cart listed there. Former Schrade employee Efrain Lopez said he wasn't surprised by the news, but when told the firm's entire knife collection was for sale, you could hear the dismay in his voice.

"Oh man," was all he could say.

November 22, 2004

Ex-Schrade exec taking another stab at making knives

By Paul Brooks

Times Herald-Record

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Ellenville – Ellenville has its edge back.

Barely three months after longtime knife-maker Imperial Schrade shut down, a new knife company has forged its beginning in the village.

One of the two principals behind the rebirth is former Schrade President Wally Gardiner. He spoke last week by cell phone from the factory where the new Walden Knife Co. will locate. Ironically, the building on Canal Street was the home of Imperial Schrade for years before it moved to larger quarters on Route 208.

"Why Ellenville? Because we have some very talented craftsmen here, that's why," Gardiner said, "and because I want to continue the tradition of fine pocketknives here."

Village Manager Elliott Auerbach said he is excited about the endeavor. "We feel Ellenville has always been the home of a first-class knife manufacturer. We see this as the business coming back to its roots. We see it as the beginning for not only the knife industry, but also for the community at large."

Gardiner is not looking to replicate Imperial Schrade's mass marketing approach. Rather, he said, the Walden Knife Co. will focus on high-end, "boutique" folding and rigid-back pocketknives.

Craftsmen will fashion the knives by hand from natural materials like mother of pearl, ram's horn, ox horn and the like. "They will be very beautiful," Gardiner said. Prices will range from \$40 to \$300. The United States, Canada and Australia are the primary markets, but Gardiner said the company will market its products worldwide, particularly in Germany.

Right now, the company has three employees, including Gardiner and Joe Hufnagel, the other principal in the company. The numbers will grow to seven to 10 as sample production gears up next month. Regular production will start in January, Gardiner said.

Eventually, the company may employ as many as 50 people. Imperial Schrade, in contrast, employed as many as 450.

"We will be very nimble," Gardiner said. He hopes to be able to produce as few as 25 units of a knife design if that is what the customer wants.

James Economos, another former Schrade executive, now works as a consultant. His prediction of success: "They have a great chance."

February 28, 2005

Former employees in tough battle against Schrade

By Paul Brooks

Times Herald-Record

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Ellenville – Nearly 200 former employees of Imperial Schrade have sued the defunct knife maker for 60 days worth of lost wages and benefits.

But the workers face a tough time collecting from Schrade. The company has sold off all its assets and is in bankruptcy.

Former Schrade worker Kelly Hull of Ellenville said she saw the papers for the lawsuit. "I didn't bother with it. They aren't going to get anything anyhow. I am done. I want to get my life back in order and move on."

The 180 workers in the lawsuit hope otherwise. In the Jan. 17 lawsuit filed in Albany's federal Bankruptcy Court, they maintain Schrade fired them all without giving them 60 days' notice. The notice is mandated by the federal WARN Law. Schrade shut down July 29 without any prior notice to the 260 or so workers left at the time.

Here is what is at stake for the employees: 60 days worth of pay and bonuses; 60 days worth of holiday and vacation pay; 60 days worth of pension, 401(k) and medical benefits, health insurance and other fringe benefits, according to the lawsuit. The federal law gives the workers a boost in going after the first \$4,925 in wages, so their claims fall basically in the middle of the pack along with claims from the IRS, for instance.

But the top priority claims are settled first. What's left over after that, if anything, is then parceled out to the rest of the creditors. In Schrade's case, it doesn't look like much will be left for the lower ranks of creditors to split up.

The Imperial Schrade Corp. filed for bankruptcy protection Sept. 10. According to court papers, the company had assets of \$20.3 million, including the property near Ellenville. But the company also listed liabilities of just more than \$18 million, including mortgages of \$12.3 million.

In October, the company auctioned off everything. The factory, the equipment, the furniture, the inventory, even the trademarks and patents, all of it went on the auction block. The take from the auction, according to documents: \$8.6 million.

"The banks got theirs. That's about it," said Wally Gardiner, a former executive with Schrade. He has filed a claim for money he says is owed him.

While the bankruptcy is classified as a reorganization at present, there is nothing left to reorganize. Eventually, the action will be converted to a straight bankruptcy, Gardiner said.

August 07, 2005

Knives made the old way

By Ramsey Al-Rikabi

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 whir 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."



Times Herald-Record/TARA ENGBERG

Harold Buley works on a process called sheilding, at the Canal Street Cutlery Co. in Ellenville



Times Herald-Record/TARA ENGBERG
Jason Berger grabs sanding equipment so he can finish the knife surface , at the Canal Street Cutlery Co. in Ellenville



Times Herald-Record/TARA ENGBERG
R to L Wally Gardiner helps Harold Buley pick out a tool so he can sheild knives, at the Canal Street Cutlery Co. in Ellenville



Times Herald-Record/TARA ENGBERG
Randall VanWaganen glues Shields in to the Caveties of pocket knives at the Canal Street Cutlery Co. in Ellenville



Times Herald-Record/TARA ENGBERG
Knives wait to be inspected at the Canal Street Cutlery Co. in Ellenville



Times Herald-Record/TARA ENGBERG
Knives wait to be assembled at the Canal Street Cutlery Co. in Ellenville .



Times Herald-Record/TARA ENGBERG
A finished Knife at the Canal Street Cutlery Co. in Ellenville .



Times Herald-Record/TARA ENGBERG

The workroom at the Canal Street Cutlery Co. in Ellenville. From R to L Wally Gardiner, Harold Buley, Randall VanWaganen, Alex Hupalo, and Russell Gray.



Times Herald-Record/TARA ENGBERG

The workroom at the Canal Street Cutlery Co. in Ellenville. From R to L Wally Gardiner, Harold Buley, Russell Gray Randall VanWaganen, and Alex Hupalo



Times Herald-Record/TARA ENGBERG
Russell Gray drills Counter sinking rivet holes in to knives at the Canal Street Cutlery Co. Ellenville.



Times Herald-Record/TARA ENGBERG
At Canal Street Cutlery Co. in Ellenville, Harold Buley picks out a tool so he can get a sheild in to a knife. The process is also called sheilding.



Times Herald-Record/TARA ENGBERG
Alex Hupalo puts pins in to pocket knives at the Canal Street Cutlery Co. in Ellenville .



Times Herald-Record/TARA ENGBERG
Working on a pocket knife at Canal Street Cutlery Co. in Ellenville.



Times Herald-Record/TARA ENGBERG
Chuck VanAken assembles a pocket Knife at Canal Steet Cutlery Co. in Ellenville.



Times Herald-Record/TARA ENGBERG

Pocket knives wait to be assembled at the Canal Street Cutlery Co. in Ellenville .



Times Herald-Record/TARA ENGBERG
Knives wait to be assembled at the Canal Street Cutlery Co. in Ellenville .



Times Herald-Record/TARA ENGBERG
A finished custom knife waits to be sent out the Canal Street Cutlery Co. in Ellenville .



Times Herald-Record/TARA ENGBERG
Empty Knife boxes at the Canal Street Cutlery Co. in Ellenville .

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Knife making revived in Ellenville

By Ramsey Al-Rikabi

Times Herald-Record

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Ellenville – Knife making in Ellenville was supposed to be over when Imperial Schrade closed. But the handful of craftsman of Canal Street Cutlery Co. are keeping it alive, by hand, one at a time.

The owners, Walter Gardiner and Joe Hufnagel, were both executives at Schrade until it folded. They formed Canal Street last October, rented and renovated the workspace and started getting knives out the door in March.

More than 100 years of knife making in Ellenville died last summer. Schrade, the last and biggest of the knife makers, lost out to overseas competition. The end came suddenly, though, in truth, it was likely coming for several years, as foreign knife makers steadily boosted quality, even as they undercut on price.

At one point, Schrade was cranking out 15,000 knives a week, and in the 1990s it had about 600 employees. More than 260 people were jobless one morning in July when Schrade closed for good.

"It was abrupt, but the signs were all there," said Chuck Van Aken, a Canal Street knife maker who worked at Schrade for 28 years.

With 11 employees on a busy day, Canal Street makes about 400 knives a week.

It's less than a year old, but the hands and eyes of the Canal Street Cutlery Co., if you add them all up, have been doing this for more than 300 years.