

# The Perfect Hunting Knife

By Jeff Waring, Publisher 9/2003

American cutlery icon Imperial Schrade has honed its knife-making trade for a full century.

My introduction to knives was rather shameful. As a child I got into my uncle's collection of old pocketknives and unleashed my whittling skills on the arm of my grandmother's couch. To this day I wish I'd carved my brother's name instead of my own. What was I thinking? Years later, despite that and a number of other minor pocketknife incidents, my dad gifted me with one of Schrade's Uncle Henry hunting knives. That Bear Paw has been with me ever since, and it's as sharp as ever and infused with even sharper hunting memories.

It could be argued that the most important piece of bowhunting equipment, besides a bow and arrow, is a sharp, sure-fitting hunting knife. A hunting knife, like a trusted bow, is a tool filled with energy and a certain spirit that deepens over years of hard use, "notched" with experiences earned in the field. A good knife is close to a hunter's heart. It's kept clean, sharp, and ready for use come hunting season. It's always in a special place, waiting patiently for opening day.

Every hunter has a favorite knife or, if he's anything like me, a couple of them. On most occasions I carry at least three knives - pocketknife, lightweight folder, and heavier lockback or sheath knife for field-dressing chores - plus a multi-tool. But as much as in-the-field experiences have added to the mystique of my own perfect hunting knife, a recent tour of the Schrade knife factory in Ellenville, New York, taught me that every knife to leave that plant has a very special beginning indeed. Seems my Uncle Henry knife had a rich history before I ever touched it?

READERS OF THIS magazine probably know that the good folks at Imperial Schrade Corporation helped mark Bowhunter Magazine's recent 30<sup>th</sup> publishing anniversary (2001) with a one-of-a-kind custom knife. When I heard that Schrade would be celebrating 100 years in business, I just had to take a look at this big-hearted company from the inside. Imperial Schrade Corporation, a quiet giant whose actions speak far louder than words, has a hunter's heart. The world's largest maker of quality pocketknives and multi-tools has made a habit of recognizing and supporting all sorts of hunting and conservation efforts like those of the NRA Youth Hunter Education Challenge, Ducks Unlimited and the Federal Duck Stamp Program, the Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, the National Bowhunter Education Foundation's national seminars, and The Dianas group of well-known and influential lady bowhunters. Schrade cares about the hunters who carry their knives and tools. (Although they don't talk about it much, Schrade has a patriot's heart, too, having recently answered the call to duty on a number of fronts in the war on terror.)

This American company got its start in Walden, New York, in 1904. I really had no sense of what that meant in terms of production until spending a few energy-filled minutes with Imperial Schrade President and COO Walter A. Gardiner and Director of Marketing Tim Faust. In recent years Wally Gardiner has made a mission of documenting the company's history in wall display units filled with knives and tools of all kinds - thousands of them. In rapid-fire Wally ran through the displays like a proud parent describing branches on the family tree, from the early days with Schrade knife visionaries Albert M. and Henry Baer (two Cutlery Hall of Fame members), right up to the latest Old Timer, Uncle Henry (named after Henry Baer), Tough Tool, Survival, Cliphanger, Switch-It, Lightweight Lockbacks, Outback, and new creations that are just unbelievable works of art. One hundred years is a long time in business! And it means Imperial Schrade has built and sold tens of millions of knives.

"Where was all this stuff?" I asked.

"Oh, all over the place," Wally answered, rolling his eyes. "There's so much more. I've ordered additional cases.

"When you get or give a Schrade knife, unfortunately for us that knife will last forever," Wally said, half-jokingly.

Based on what I saw during my tour of the Schrade plant, this company's unique blend of modern technology and cutler-craftsmanship probably makes Wally's statement truer than ever. In recent years Imperial Schrade has invested millions of dollars in high-tech machinery - like CNC Milling, Wire EDM, and Fine Blanking Machines, just to name a few - but this community oriented company also continues to invest in skilled employees who bring an uncompromising hands-on approach to the knife-making business. The Schrade team in Ellenville includes about 450 employees, some of them third and even fourth generation "family members." Schrade's century party will begin at this year's Shooting Hunting and Outdoor Trade (SHOT) Show in Las Vegas, but the official 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Cake will be sliced and served at the plant. In addition, Schrade plans a number of other community events and fundraisers in

conjunction with the celebration. (The company also runs a 75-employee plant in Ireland where Imperial Tradesman and Apex Wilderness knives are made.)

## Author's Notes

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Just about every aspect of the company's manufacturing business takes place under one roof at the 548,000-square-foot plant in New York:

Design and engineering; tooling; milling of various pieces from the finest steel; crafting handle materials; heat-treating and cryogenically treating blades and tools; assembling the pieces; buffing and polishing and washing and cleaning; checking the knives and tools to make sure they "walk and talk" as a good Schrade knife always does (that means they open and close perfectly with a click); printing and vacuum-forming and packaging products for retail display; and, finally, packing and shipping product around the world.

All of this takes place under the watchful eyes of proud quality control experts who oversee every step of the knife-building process (multiple times), determined to build nothing short of the very toughest knives and tools possible - one at a time. The Schrade folks have an expression for their production philosophy: "tradition tempered with technology." Spending a little time in the busy Schrade factory, you definitely get a sense of that company's tradition. Amid the high-tech machinery in this clean, modern factory you'll find dedicated men and women working over old wooden boxes filled with knife and tool parts, and it's as though you've gone back to the turn of the century. In one section of the plant you'll find workers using computer-run machinery to optimize production. And in another section you'll find the Cutlers, who have taken as long as 5 years to learn how to make sure every Schrade knife "walks and talks." Sitting in front of literal piles of knives, these highly skilled artisans dexterously sling blades open and closed, turning the knives and tapping them here and there with a resounding metallic ring, never wasting a single stroke. They are masters of their fine-tuning art. And it probably shouldn't be a surprise that not far from their work area you'll find Schrade's Wall of Honor, where the company pays homage to its founders and visionaries.

"We're really proud of what we've done at Imperial Schrade over the last 100 years," President Wally Gardiner said. "We think we've got a great story to tell, and we're bullish on the future, too. A lot of businesses were hurt by the events of September 11, 2001, and the knife business was, too. When you can no longer take a pocketknife onto a plane, that's naturally going to hurt our business. But we're a strong company, and we're seeing a turnaround now."

"We have great tradition here, a very solid manufacturing foundation," Tim Faust added. "But we're also staying light on our feet, ready for the future."

It doesn't hurt that along with Schrade's enduring lines of traditional knives they are adding innovative modern designs - Badger fixed blades and Badger, Viper, Black Ice, Silhouette, Nitro, and Spitfire folders - which incorporate incredibly durable, high-end materials and manufacturing techniques that result in knives that will last another 100 years. And it also doesn't hurt that they continue classic collaborative efforts with custom knife makers like D'Alton Holder (be sure to see Schrade's Centennial Series knives) and Richard Rogers. Or that this company, which already offers knives and tools of every size and configuration, also has the vision to grasp the future and offer no-less-than-revolutionary mobile electronic gear like the i-QUIP (which among all sorts of tools contains a computer module with altimeter, barometer, digital compass, and clock) and multi-tools like the Navitool (which features a liquid-filled compass along with other orienteering tools).

And in the coming year Schrade also will be introducing a number of 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Commemoratives, some available only over their new website. With all the new developments at Imperial Schrade, it certainly seems like these folks have their eyes set on another 100 years in the knife business. For bowhunters like you and me, always looking for the next perfect hunting knife, that's a very, very good thing.