

THE VULCAN SAFETY RAZOR CORP

If there was an official hierarchy to the categories of sharp things that make knife collectors a little tumescent surely the safety razor blade sits at the absolute bottom of that list. A truth that smacked me hard in the face when I actually tried to pitch this story as a magazine article a few years ago...somewhere an editor is still laughing at my chutzpah. But this, folks, isn't a tale about some random, unaffiliated razor blade manufacturer – it's a story about The Vulcan Safety Razor Corp. The history of Vulcan involves some of our favorite characters from Schrade, Imperial, and Sears - but first, there was a phone call from the airport.

Albert Baer's relationship with Sears goes back to his days at Camillus. Sears' head of purchasing, Tom Dunlap, quickly took a shine to Baer and had complete faith in his ability to service the account. Baer and Dunlap would go on to become lifelong friends and when Baer left Camillus it was Dunlap who made sure he was able to take some lucrative contracts with him to Ulster. Dunlap often asked Baer to supply more products. At Camillus Baer even started making kitchen cutlery for Sears to feed Dunlap's growing desire to use Baer as a one-stop shop for all things sharp. When Tom called from the airport one day and invited him to tag along on a trip to find a new supplier for safety razor blades, Albert packed a bag. After touring several potentials Tom turn to him and said "Why the hell don't you make blades for us"?

In 1945 The Vulcan Safety Razor Corp was born. Organizationally, Vulcan was a

subsidiary of Kingston Cutlery Co so it was a common interest of the Baers, Mirandos, and Fazzanos, and the factory was located at 238 Burnett Ave in Maplewood, NJ. They didn't have to build the business from scratch; the factory was already home to another razor blade company. It appears they bought it out and kept a key man in place to run Vulcan.

Arthur Tuerff was born in Germany in 1902 and by 1910 had immigrated with his family to America – and landed in Camillus. Camillus Cutlery actively imported German cutlers at that time so it seems pretty likely Tuerff's old man was in the business. As a young man Tuerff would move down to New Jersey and work in the razor blade business. He also had industry patents in his name so when Baer came along Tuerff not only stayed on to run the day to day, he also became a part owner of Vulcan. There's a strong possibility that Baer worked with Tuerff's dad and this wasn't a random pairing.

Since it was Dunlap's idea for Baer to get into the razor blade business, Baer was able to bring Sears in as a 25% investor. Dunlap was clear about his motive from the beginning. He wanted a reliable vendor for the blades but never saw it as a key business. "We're not trying to make money on razor blades" Dunlap confided. He only wanted to offer them to draw in new customers who would buy other products. To further that end they came up with a clever way to raise advertising money. Sears would buy blades for a penny and a half but would be billed two and a half cents. The extra penny went

into a “kitty” which quickly accumulated a substantial budget from Sears ordering millions of blades.

Sears came up with a creative way to launch Vulcan. They packaged individual Craftsman branded razor blades and mailed one out to every single Sears stockholder along with their dividend check. The packaging promised it was “a gift that will make a man happy and cheerful...even on his grouchiest morning”. The Craftsman blade would give a cleaner, faster shave with its Swedish chrome steel that was “scientifically” ground, honed and even leather-stropped. The new blades promised a clean shave without “nicking your face and your temper”. Really, what could go wrong?

It was 2AM when the phone call woke him up. Baer was in a hotel room on a trip to Atlantic City. When he picked up Dunlap was already screaming. “What in for Christ’s sake hell has Tuerff done to louse up our blades? General (Robert) Wood (CEO of Sears) called me from Arizona to say that the bathrooms of America are red with the blood of the people who cut themselves with Craftsman blades.” It turned out to be a vendor issue. The factory coated the blades with a preservative oil supplied by Sun Oil Company and the batch had a contaminant in it that had corroded the edges of the blades that went out to the stockholders.

Baer went to Chicago to talk to Dunlap in person about the incident and, awkwardly, also pick up a check for the advertising kitty. He walked into Dunlap’s office and announced “we’ve accomplished our

purpose in razor blades”. “What the hell do you mean?” Dunlap shot back. Baer replied “when we started in the business, you said you didn’t want to make money with razor blades”. Dunlap roared with laughter and sent Baer on his way with a \$153K check for the kitty. After the bumpy start, Vulcan smoothed out and became profitable. Not long after, Sears 25% interest was bought out at a substantial profit.

The end of Vulcan’s run is a bit of a mystery. Literature put out by Imperial in 1966 lists Vulcan among its many current brands. A lawsuit filed in 2011 between insurance companies over who is responsible for the toxic chemical cleanup at 238 Burnett Ave gives the history of the property starting in 1989 when the owner, American Razor Blade Corp, was selling it after operating the factory for some amount of time. Another date is 1981 – that is when Tuerff retired from Vulcan according to his obituary. When did Vulcan close? Was Imperial connected all the way to the end? Both good questions. I have no idea. Have I mentioned yet that there are absolutely zero records known to exist about any of this? This story has been entirely patched together using some notes Baer left behind, a few newspaper clippings (mostly obits) and a lot of scrounging through the internet. Honestly, it’s kind of amazing that even this much has surfaced. Beyond this, the rest of the story is told by the few trinkets that pop up on eBay from time to time. So far I’ve found four brands the razors were sold under, a utility knife, some blade dispensers, and even a couple of dealer displays that all came out of this lowly

razor blade manufacturer. Here's what these items added to the story:



Vulcan was the flagship brand but probably not their biggest seller.



This little boy scout exacto knife is the only non safety

razor product I've found related to the brand.





It was packaged with a variety of straight and curved blades.



The slide-pak also has a patent number on it that belongs to Tuerff. This one item connects all the dots – I think of it as my very own Vulcan Rosetta Stone.



You can find Craftsman blades fairly easy in a variety of packaging. The Craftsman blade dispenser was a fortunate discovery. The package ties Sears to the Maplewood, NJ factory but also sports that second address at 1776 Broadway, a known IKAC office that Baer used on many other printed media items.



The real heavy hitter might just be the Hammer Brand razor blades. I've come

across numerous bulk packages of them with NSN numbers on the boxes. They were selling these in bulk to the government to supply the military. Vulcan branded razor blades can be found in bulk with the same NSN.



The final brand was Slek. Maybe a contract product? Maybe just a second in-house brand for Vulcan? No idea, I stumbled upon it by dumb luck.



This is where the tale of Vulcan ends. I still search for known, or new, items once in a while and when I find them I can hear echoes of that editor laughing in the wind and I'm reminded again that I might be the only person on the planet to find joy in this least-popular category of sharp things. Maybe I should have sent him one of those free stockholder samples?

