# George Schrade and his accomplishments to the Knife Industry

By George M. Schrade
Text from the book by the same name.

I can still remember, how, as a young boy, I would sit and listen in awe as my father would tell me the stories about his grandfather, George Schrade. Of his many inventions, his greatest was probably the switchblade knife.

George Schrade was born in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, on February 13, 1860. He was the son of Jacob L. and Henrietta Hiem Schrade. As a young boy he learned the toolmaker and machinist trades. He loved working on mechanical projects and solving problems that stumped other people.

During the mid 1880s, in New York City, he conducted an experimental shop. For about ten years of that time, he was connected with making models that the United States patent office required with all patent applications. In this small shop he set his ideas to work. He was an able inventor of his time and had many inventions to his credit. They were the drill gauge, the player piano, the dime bank, saws on centers, weaver scissors, the shielding machine, cutlery machines, and the switchblade knife.

The switchblade knife was the invention that he pursued. His first knife had a button set into the bolster, and when it was pushed, the blade would automatically spring open. G. Schrade started the Press Button Knife Company in 1893. He operated from a small shop in New York City, which employed about one dozen men. His production was not up to par and he was having difficulty finding good cutlers.

He met a man named Edward Whitehead, President of Walden Knife Company. Mr. Whitehead liked Schrade's knife, and so he talked G. Schrade into moving to Walden to set up his operation. As part of the agreement, the Walden Knife Company bought an interest in the Press Button Knife Company and set up the production factory for switchblade knives, with George Schrade as superintendent.

Under the supervision of George Schrade, the company made many patterns ranging from a large folding hunter pattern to a small pocket knife. He sold his patent to Walden Knife Company in 1903, and moved to East Main Street in Walden to start his own knife company.

In 1904, the Schrade Cutlery Company was started by George Schrade, along with his brothers J. Louis and William Schrade. For two years, he produced a quality line of pocket knives. Then in 1906, he developed an improved switchblade knife, incorporating an automatic spring and a lock on the blade. It had a safety slide which enabled the knife to stay locked in an opened or closed position. Before the invention of the lock for the blade this knife had been criticized for being dangerous. In the following year, he improved the means of releasing the blade and locking it when open or shut. Also, this knife had a multiblade push button which could operate with four automatic blades.

Once he was established in the knife business, Schrade spent his time inventing cutlery machinery to improve production. Some of these were the neck drawing machine, the heating machine, the knife and shear sharpener, the saws on center, the bone jigger, the bolster, and automatic shielding machine.

The shielding machine brought Schrade to Europe. In 1910, while in Sheffield, England, in an effort to introduce his shielding machine to the cutlery industry, he had an interesting experience. He was called upon by Sir Thomas Turner of Thomas Turner and Company Sheffield Cutlers. Sir Thomas had taken a large order for knives from the British Navy on specification. It seems that Sir Thomas' employees had informed him that the composition of the handle, rubber, made it impossible for the knives to be bored for the specified shields. The

cutlers were protesting because it was much harder to gouge the shields on the rubber than on the bone or wood.

George Schrade installed the shielding machine. It bored out a cavity on the outside covering of a knife to allow the installation of a shield or metal plate. Because of this machine, the Navy got its order of knives on time. However, the machine was objected to by the factory workers because it reduced hand operation. When the contract with the Navy was completed, the cutlers threw off their aprons and went on strike until the shielding machine was removed from the plant.

George Schrade and his son George M. Schrade left England and went to Solingen, Germany, where they set up a push-button knife factory. While in Germany, George Schrade designed and patented another type of automatic knife. It is known as the springer knife, which is manufactured in Germany today. I have been told that he sold his patent to a German company.

The steel for the blades from Solingen was the best for keeping a cutting edge. This is why he set up a factory there. He also made scales for pocket knives. They were in Germany for four years. The German government confiscated all their equipment and raw material for use in the war effort. They were forced to leave the country and leave everything they had behind them. In 1916, he returned to New York with his son, George.

Bouncing back from his misfortunes in Europe, Schrade invented another kind of switchblade that same year. He called it the flylock. Schrade moved to Bridgeport, Connecticut, in 1919, and went to work for the Challenge Cutlery Company. In 1921, his son George joined him there. In the following year, Schrade invented a snap on rubber heel. They manufactured these heels and the flylock knife at 461 Seymour Street. Schrade sold his rights to the flylock to the Challenge Company and manufactured it for them. From 1925 to 1929, they made the flylock under the Challenge name. In 1929, the Challenge Company ran into financial trouble and went bankrupt.

In return for monies owed for the rights to the flylock, my grandfather was given some cutlery machinery. This enabled him to start his own business in 1929, which was called the George Schrade Knife Company of Bridgeport, Connecticut, using the Presto logo.

He attracted attention by appearing before the United States District Court at New Haven, Connecticut, acting as his own counsel. The Schrade Cutlery Company of Walden, New York, brought suit, claiming infringement of a patent on one of the articles that Schrade had claimed to have invented himself, and which the company that bore his name claimed as its own.

The case was dismissed and the plaintiff ordered to pay the costs. The patent on which the suit was brought was declared invalid. Schrade's main defense was that the patent had run out, and his familiarity with the basic invention made it possible for him to defeat one of the best known law firms who appeared for the plaintiffs.

The George Schrade Knife Company was built from a few pieces of cutlery machinery and a few good cutlers who came from Walden, New York, to work for George Schrade. The company struggled throughout the depression. When the economy picked up, so did the George Schrade Knife Company. The new push button pull balls and wire jacks gave them an edge on the competition. Because of his constant new designs, Schrade was able to file many patents.

The first patent for the wire jack was granted on September 21, 1926. Most knives have many parts and hours of assembling time, but this knife was practical, economical, and of simple construction. The knife was made of two pieces of welded wire, a blade, liner and rivet. The 1926 wire jack did not have a sheet metal guard in the butt portion of the knife. It was introduced later to protect the fingers from being cut and protecting the blade. Since the knives were so inexpensive, they were used primarily for advertising and scouting.

The advertising knives were etched on the blades and the knives were usually painted with an enamel paint on the metal guard in various colors. The knife was also used in scouting. Boy Scout kits were red and Girl Scout kits were green, and each consisted of a knife, fork and spoon. These kits came in leather and vinyl pouches.

The wire jack knives range from a small two and one-half inch spear and pruner with a bottle opener to a large fishing knife with a fish scaler.

The 1926 patent was granted to my great-grandfather George Schrade. The 1942 and 1952 patent was granted to his son, George M. Schrade. These original patents will explain the differences.

George M. Schrade son of George Schrade was a chip-off-the-old block. He had five patents credited to his name. A 1923 patent on a removable blade which was granted in both names and a 1930 push button, 1944 pull ball and 1942 and 1952 wire jack.

In 1937, George Schrade introduced a new design of fly-open knives on one or more blades. This design was introduced so it could be operated easily with one hand and to prevent its accidental release while carried in the pocket.

One of these, called the flying jack, had a sliding latch mounted on the side, which could be produced with one or more blades.

Another type, called the pull ball operated from the butt end of the handle. The pull ball came in a variety of latch ends, for example, dice, rings, eight balls, or different colors. They were manufactured for Remington, and known as quick point and Case No. 4217.

In 1940, George Schrade was granted another patent on his push button. This design was complex compared to his other patents.

In 1944, George M. Schrade, the son of George Schrade senior, redesigned the pull ball. The object of the invention was to provide certain safety features, whereby the knife blade would not be casually released because of looseness of the parts or because of carelessness in closing the blade.

At Schrade's death on September 9, 1940, he employed thirty-five men. The business was then taken over by his son George M. Schrade, and his grandson Theodore Schrade. The business began to tool up for the war, and at one time, employed one hundred people. The company made a knife for the paratroopers. It was a large push button knife with a four and one-half inch blade, and was called "the Commando."

Throughout the years, George Schrade Knife Company sold royalties to other knife companies or took them out on contract themselves. Some of the companies were Remington and Case. Soon after the war, the cutlery business began to slow down. Cutlers were scarce and there was no new blood replacing them. At the time there was an influx of inexpensive Japanese imports. Due to the controversy over the danger of the switchblade, laws were being passed prohibiting their use and sale. Because of all these factors, my grandfather and father decided to sell the business.

In 1956, H. Boker Knife Company bought the George Schrade Knife Company. The company continued for the next two years under the Boker name, and run by Theodore Schrade. In 1958, the business ended. All the machinery was auctioned off. The building still stands today. I have some of the knives made by the George Schrade Knife Company and the memories of my father, grandfather, and great-grandfather which I am sharing with you.

I would like to end this story by saying that the switchblade was not invented for criminal use or for self-defense. It was invented for convenience so that men would not break their fingernails. A true knife lover knows that the switchblade was a great invention which should never have been outlawed. I hope some day this law is repealed and the switchblade will be put on the market again.

I have truly enjoyed putting this book together and hope that my readers will enjoy reading it, too. It is especially important to me to know that knife

lovers and collectors understand and appreciate the role my great-grandfather played in the cutlery industry.