

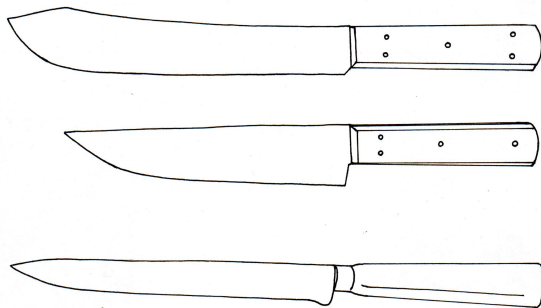
Some Thoughts on Butchers & Other Knives

By Gene Hickman

Most butcher knives did not look much different in the 1800s than they do today. According to Charles E. Hanson, Jr. in *The Museum of the Fur Trade Quarterly* (Vol. 23, No. 3, Fall 1987) *The term "butcher knife" began to appear in trade goods lists toward the end of the 18th century. In different periods of history a "butcher knife" might mean widely differing styles of knives by 1816 in Sheffield it meant a knife very much like today's average butcher knife.*

A few years ago I contacted a company in Sheffield England that has been in the knife business since 1700. I was trying to obtain knives that would have been available in 1803 and perhaps used by the Lewis & Clark expedition. The company I contacted told me that the majority of their utility cutlery was going to North America and Africa all through the 1700 & 1800s. Their records show a common butcher knife just like those used today. They sent me drawings and dimensions of what they were making as butcher knives from the 1700s on. The only difference in the earlier to the later 1800s knives was that the nose got broader; otherwise they were the same width as the handle. Of course the older knives had tapered tangs and pins rather than brass cutler's rivets, which date from the 1890s. Most early butchers had blades as wide as the handle with the characteristic fat nose with up-swept point.

Butcher knives came into their own as the most popular knife in the Indian trade and for general use on the frontier from the Revolutionary War on through the 1800s. Although the term "butcher" knife can a somewhat generic term that could also include those knives with an arcing or curving single-edged blade. Others use the term "scalper" for this style knife, although scalper is also another generic term for knives of several different styles. The same company I contacted in Sheffield shows their scalper of the 1700 & 1800s as what we would recognize today as a French kitchen knife, which historically was also known as a Frenchmen's knife.



Knives can usually be organized into three general categories: butchers, scalpers and cartouche knives. If you want more information on the scalping knife it may be found in *The Museum of the Fur Trade Quarterly*, Vol. 23, No. 1, Spring 1987 and for the Cartouche knife it is in Vol. 23, No. 2, Summer 1987. All three types of knives may be found in the fur trade papers.

According to Carl P. Russell Jr. scalpers may not be what you think, as the term "Scalping Knife" was used by fur traders of the period to designate a certain style of knife for trade to Indians, and Russell described them as "*any cheap butcher knife.*" On the other hand, Charles E. Hanson, Jr. has confirmed the existence of a specific pattern for the trade good known as "the scalping knife." In the Quarterly Journal of the Museum of the Fur Trade, Vol. 23, No. 1 (Spring 1987), Hanson illustrates and describes the knife from notes and letters of Alexander Mackenzie & Co., a partner of the North West Company.

"These scalpers are of the simplest pattern possible-a generally straight or very slightly curved blade 6 or 7 inches long, fairly straight and unsharpened on the top, ending in a point from which the sharpened bottom edge begins and runs along the bottom back to the grip, making a curved edge suitable for skinning and slicing. The grip is a single piece of wood split with a saw for two-thirds of its length. The short tang of the knife blade was shoved into this split and fastened by two or three rivets inserted into holes drilled from side to side. With a minimum of machine polishing, the knife was completed and ready for sale."

Hanson goes on to say that "*hundreds of blades of this general style have been found at fur trade sites of the 1780-1840 period.*"

In the 1826 articles of agreement between William H. Ashley and Jedediah S. Smith, David E. Jackson, and William L. Sublette, Ashley agrees to furnish certain goods at prices listed in the agreement. Only one type of knife is listed: ... *Butcher Knives at seventy five cents each...*

(William L. Sublette Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St Louis, MO).

Capt. Meriwether Lewis buys his butcher knives from John Wister & Charles Jones Wister (143 High Street) in Philadelphia, they advertised in the local papers of the time as carrying only the finest English knives. He pays \$2 for his 4 dozen butcher knives. Both the Director of the Frontier Army Museum and the former Army Historian, agreed that the "scalper" that Capt Lewis got from Wister, thru the Purveyor General, most probably looked like the French kitchen knife. The knife guys in Sheffield confirmed that this was very possible as it is what their company made a lot of at the time, and they were variously known as Frenchmen's knives or scalpers, depending on the customer.

The Sheffield guys told me that some of the handles were also of the extreme octagon shape and that other handles were originally nothing more than the rectangular slab handles with the corners angled. They also told me that tangs were made both half and full. Full tangs were easier to haft and were stronger,

but cost slightly more to produce. Pin numbers varied as to the size of the blade it supported and whether it was full or half tang. You'll see 4, 5, or 6 pins commonly, usually depending on the size of the knife. Either way it was always more than 3 pins. The 3 pins become standard with the invention of the "big fat" brass cutler's rivets of the 1890s. Iron and less often brass pins are correct for the time period and not the large brass cutler's rivets. Brass pins are also acceptable. Some of the 19th century examples even have 3/32" to 1/8" iron pins. The norm, based on years of handling and looking at originals in collections and other research, is wood handled with iron pins.

I have 4 old (pre-1890) I. Wilson butcher knives. Three have 6 pins and one has 5 pins. Two are 10", one 8" and one 6". One 10" and the 8" are half tanged the other two are full tanged. All have rectangular slab handles with the corners "shaved." I had two other I. Wilson butchers which I gifted to an anthropologist friend for his collection. They were 6" & 8" knives; half tanged and had 5 pins each. I have a bunch of other old butchers where the maker's marks are indistinguishable. Most have had the blades sharpened so much they've lost their original shape. All have multi-pins, tapered tangs, and rectangular slab handles. These knives are all pre-1890, but may have been made after the Civil War. However, it seems that the basics of the butcher knife have not really changed much in 200 years.

The knives I eventually got from Sheffield, for our Lewis & Clark bicentennial interpretation, had the old company name and logo stamped on them. The only thing they added was Sheffield, which is required by law. Otherwise the original stamp had: John Nowill & Sons Ltd. Est A.D. 1700 flanked by crossed keys on the right and a D with an asterisk above it on the left. The 8" butchers I got from them had 5 pins, and the 5"-6" butchers and the Scalpers (6 1/2" blade) had 4 pins. All had full tangs. My Wilson knives have an X with O's in each of the four spaces and a diamond to the right of it.

Don't know whether Lewis & Clark had Wilson knives, but mountain men had some, and here are a couple of references:

An 1835 invoice for items shipped on the steam boat Diana bound for the Upper Missouri River and for the upper Missouri Outfit included ...50 dz. *Wilson Butcher Knives #2634* and 50 dz. *Wilson Butcher Knives 7 in...* (Papers of the St. Louis Fur Trade, Reel 7 Vol. Y, p. 86, from American Fur Company Ledger Books, Chouteau Family Collection, Missouri Historical Society, St Louis, MO.).

In 1837 merchandise furnished to Rocky Mountain Outfit under Fontenelle, Fitzpatrick & Co. lists, in February 1837 ...84 doz W. [Wilson] *Scalping Knives...* 17 doz *Wilson's Butcher Knives...* 10 doz W. *Cartouche knives...* 6 doz W. *Cartouche knives...* 6 doz *Green Bone hand'I knives...*

Then in April 1837 ... *12 doz Scalping Knives...3 doz Wilson Butcher [knives]... 6 doz Cartouche [knives]...* (American Fur Co. Papers. Vol. Y, Z. Missouri Historical Society).

In Robert Campbell's accounts, from 1832, are listed more knives, but we aren't sure of the manufacturer ... *6 doz Butcher knives No 4778...6 doz Butcher knives [No] 4779... 12 doz Scalping knives [No] 2355...* (Papers of the St. Louis Fur Trade, Part 3: Robert Campbell Family Collection, from the St. Louis Mercantile Library Association. Transcribed by Bill Nevius). The account goes on to list various other knives, but does not designate style only the quantities and the cost.

We know a lot about knives in the 18th & 19th century, but then again we don't know a lot of detail. I think that the modern buckskinner and his fascination with knives of all kinds has really turned our heads as to the kinds of knives that most trappers, traders, hunters, Indians, etc. carried. I believe that the butcher has got to be the most prevalent knife of the time. It certainly is the dominant knife in fur trade records. I also think that in the early half of the 18th century the cartouche knife was also common although after the Rev War the butcher seems to eclipse it and become more dominant. In the southwest the Spanish belduque was essentially their version of the cartouche knife.

John McKnight leaves on a trading expedition with the Comanche in 1822 (Three Years Among the Mexicans and Indians by John McKnight. In his trade list are: ... *2 doz. Cartouche Knives ...2 doz. Buck Knives ...3 doz. Brass inlaid knives ...1 doz. Clasp knives* and ... *1 doz. Pocket knives* ... The list of McKnight's goods are in the Chouteau/Moffit collection in the Missouri Historical Society. From *Tomahawk and Long Rifle*, Vol. 12, No. 1 (March 1987).

In Ashley's diary there is an inventory of Goods for the 1825 Rendezvous on Henry's Fork of the Green River. There are lots of knives listed here, but they are not defined. Here are the lists of knives cached ... *7 doz knives (1st Cache)... 14 doz. Knives (2nd Cache)*. Then in Ashley's notebook are the accounts from the rendezvous and listed are some of the entries: ... *12 knives [\$]30.00 ...3 knives 7.50 ...knives .75 ...3 doz. knives ...4 knives ...2 knives 4.50 ...3 knives 4.50 ...3 knives 7.50 ..4 knives...4 knives ...8 knives ..12 knives*, etc. Still other entries just have knives listed with other items like cloth or powder, but no price or quantity.

(Following are translations from Spanish to English of Samuel Parkman's list of trade goods as submitted to customs officials and the letter from Santiago Abreu to Agustín Durán regarding goods being cached by Parkman on the Ocate River)

The Manifest of Jedediah Smith's Trade Goods in 1831:

Chest No. 1:

2 dozen pen knives
1 dozen pocket razors
3 dozen pen knives
3 dozen pocket knives
1 dozen shaving razors
3 dozen shaving razors
2 dozen butcher knives
4 dozen table knives
7 dozen table knives
3 dozen butcher knives
4 dozen butcher knives
3 dozen butcher knives

Chest No. 2:

1 dozen table knives
14 dozen butcher knives
12 dozen pocket razors
6 dozen knives and forks
4 dozen pen knives

I have looked at a lot of museum knives, reviewed lots of early newspaper ads, and read many of the fur trade records. Unfortunately none of these written sources have pictures or detailed descriptions of what the knives really looked like. We do have a number of original knives in museum collections. Butcher knives are also mentioned by "name" in a number of period journals. Much of my information also came from the knife guys in Sheffield and the Fur Trade Cutlery Sketchbook by James A. Hanson.

The knives commonly known as the "ripper" and the "skinner" are considered in the butcher knife category and were developed in a later historic period for the buffalo hide hunters. The skinner, as a specific pattern developed from the butcher, even though it has a more radical curve to the blade. I would refer you to the Fur Trade Cutlery Sketchbook for more information.

Many folks try to tell us that the Green River was the knife of the fur trade and even for Lewis & Clark. However the Green River really dates to the Civil War. The company was not started until 1834 and it did not manufacture knives until 1841. I often see "Skinners," Green Rivers, Bowie knives, and other large chopping knives, many with all kinds fancy handles, antler handles, animal jaw handles, and many other outrageous innovations at modern rendezvous, and all are purported by their owners to be what the "Mountain Man" carried. The closest thing we have to the big "choppers" is the Hudson's Bay Company camp knife, which is a long heavy bladed knife very popular in the Canadian Indian trade.

There are a lot of guys that know more about knives than I. I got into it trying to find the knives of Lewis & Clark. The Museum of the Fur Trade has a number of knives which I have studied and they also have written knife articles in their Fur Trade Quarterly. I think that Carl P. Russell's book "*Firearms, Traps, & Tools of the Mountain Men*" is also a reference worth looking into. Another source would be to look up the knife makers in Sheffield, England. Many have been in existence for 100s of years. Those that responded to me, I found most helpful in what knives they were making in the 19th century, and seemed to know everything about what they were making and where they were going. One thing I learned from them is that until about the 1950s most knives were made by one company and the handles were made and assembled by a totally different company. All of these were family businesses. John Nowill & Sons, where I got my knives, was a knife maker, which company is now owned by the family that was formerly their handle maker. Just recently Crazy Crow Trading Post started carrying a "Snake Brand" Sheffield butcher knife, which I consider to be an excellent example of the kind of knife carried during the fur trade period.

That's my 2 pence worth on knife ramblings.