

KNIFE WORLD

Knife World Publications, PO Box 3395, Knoxville, TN 37927

Vol. 35 No. 11 November 2009

www.knifeworld.com

Boker Celebrates 140 Years

by Mark D. Zalesky

When iconic cutlery manufacturer Boker – precisely, Heinr. Böker Baumwerk GmbH – designated 2009 as the year of the firm's 140th anniversary, they may have sold themselves short. It's customary for companies to consider their business histories in a favorable light – perhaps extending their founding date back through a major change in operations or a less well-connected ancestor – but the 1869 date that Boker heralds as their founding is modest indeed. True, 1869 was the year that Boker erected their own full-scale cutlery factory in

Solingen, Germany, but it certainly wouldn't be a stretch to push that date back to 1860, when the Boker brothers split the family business into separate halves – or even 1829 when that business was first founded, or the 1780s when the business before that was established. For that matter, the Boker family's involvement with tools and edged weapons likely dates back as far as the late 16th century, so the company could easily lay claim to over 400 years of cutlery tradition!

While there's plenty of it, Boker's history is poorly documented and poorly

Continued on page 5



This pristine mint 1920s American made Boker cattle knife, built on a canoe pattern handle frame, was part of a small cache recently found in an online auction. It bears the 'script' stamping on all blades. Don Richardson collection.



This whittler bears the extremely rare H&R BOKER REMSCHEID marking, among the first known to have been used on Boker pocketknives. Note the stamp on the face of the master blade, SENATOR'S KNIFE. Leroy Roark collection.

Continued from page 1
understood. One reason for this is the complete destruction of the German Boker factory and everything in it during WWII, while another is the many changes in ownership of the American branch from the mid-1960s until its ultimate closure in 1983.

Finally, Boker's history involves so many different businesses and individuals split between different countries – often employing the same names and/or markings – that anyone trying to understand it all soon finds themselves trapped somewhere between “confused” and

“bewildered.”

Thus are the joys and hazards of collecting Boker knives. The Boker brand offers variety like perhaps no other, superb quality, and more value for your collecting dollar than many better understood brands. Plus, this misunderstood marque offers

plenty of opportunity for collectors who have done their homework.

Before we take a step further, a word about the Boker name, which the Germans properly spell *Böker*. The “two dots” over the “o” are called an umlaut, and can alternatively be represented by replacing ö with oe, thus *Boeker*. While the umlaut was originally not used on the company's wares, during the 1930s it was added to German-made knives and it continues to appear on Boker products to this day.

WHERE IT ALL BEGAN

Jürgen Buchenau, in his book on the Mexican Bökers entitled *Tools of Progress*, states that the

Böker family first began manufacturing and trading hardware in the late 16th century. In the mid-1700s, Gottfried Böker manufactured blades used in the Seven Years' War. Gottfried's son Johann Gottlieb Böker would become a partner in an early export firm called Böker & Hilger, representing two families who headed important American cutlery import firms a century later. By 1832, Böker & Hilger had dissolved, as the family's direction had taken a more direct turn towards manufacturing cutlery.

In 1829, brothers Heinrich and Robert Böker began the production of

Continued on page 6



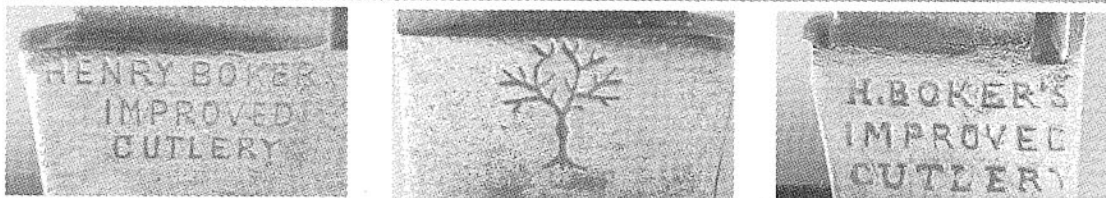
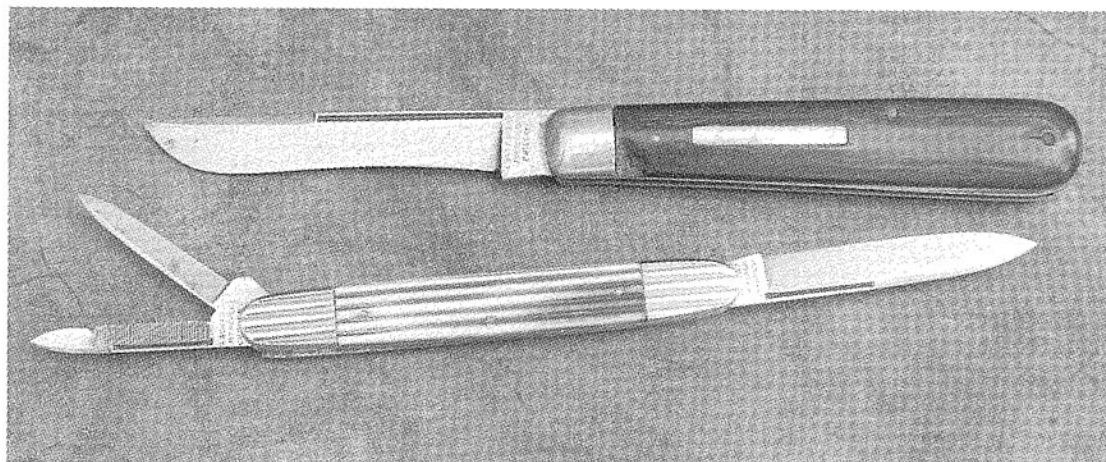
This little “Jenny Lind” or “tuxedo” pattern knife is the only example the author has encountered with the R&H BOKER'S IMPROVED CUTLERY marking. This likely represents the first use of “Improved Cutlery.” Private collection.

Continued from page 5
sabers in that city, and as early as September 1830 there is evidence that the Bokers employed 64 smiths, 47 grinders and an unspecified number of unskilled laborers – a rather large operation. Seeing the potential of this new enterprise, the brothers Böker branched out into other product lines, and in 1837 another brother named Hermann left Remscheid for New York

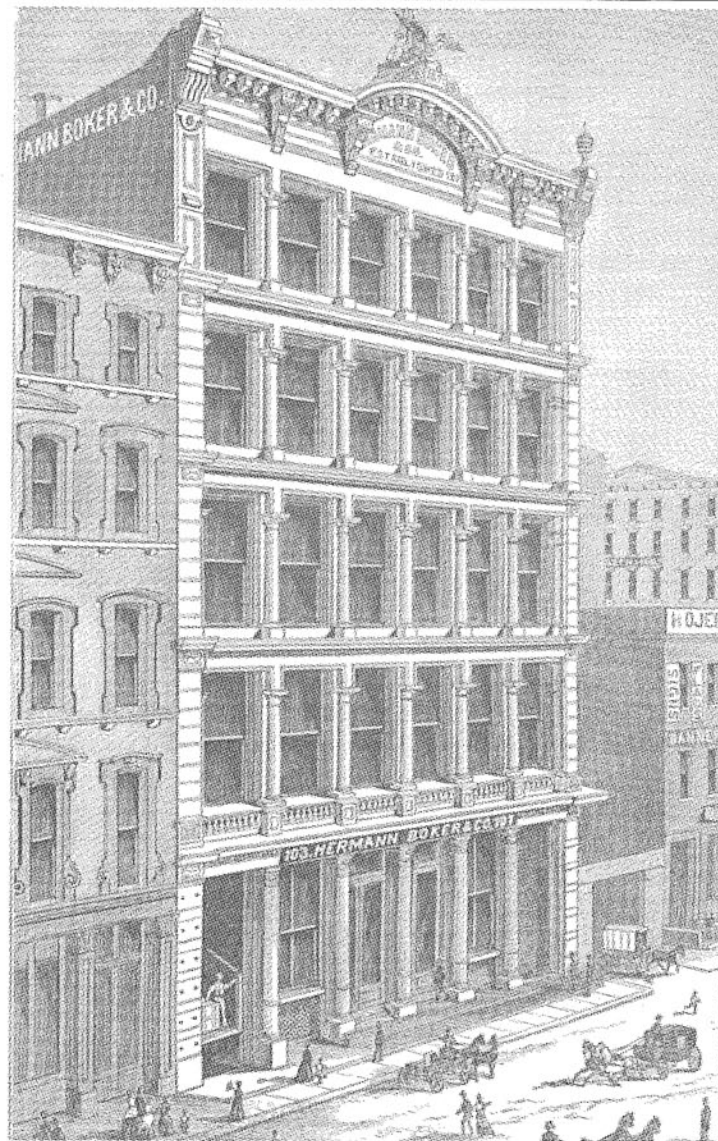
City, to establish an importing business for handling the German products. We'll pick up the rest of Hermann's story later.

As evidenced by existing examples, H. & R. Böker produced bayonets, tools, and pocketknives at their factory in Remscheid. While a great deal of the work would have been performed by outworkers much like it was done in Sheffield, the company's

factory was large enough to incorporate new steam powered grinders in 1854 – which were initially rejected by the workers (as was the case in Sheffield). Later, a rolling mill was added which would have been very useful in manufacturing table and kitchen knife blades. In 1860, the brothers divided the family business; Robert taking over export to the Russian and German states while



German-made "H. Böker's" or "Henry Böker's" without "& Co" after the company knives date from the 1860s until circa the early 1880s, and are quite scarce. Note the large, detailed tree marking. Roger Russell collection.



An 1872 illustration of H. Böker & Co's brand new offices at 101 and 103 Duane St., New York City. The buildings extended through to 10 & 12 Thomas St.

Heinrich retained the factory and trade with the U.S. and Canada. Robert's son, also named Robert, would travel to New York in about 1863 and learned the business there, working with the U.S. and Canadian branches before heading to Mexico in 1865

and founding the famous Casa Böker hardware establishment – but that's a story for another time.

After the split of H. & R. Böker in 1860, it is believed that the company initially operated under its owner's name, Heinrich

Continued on page 7

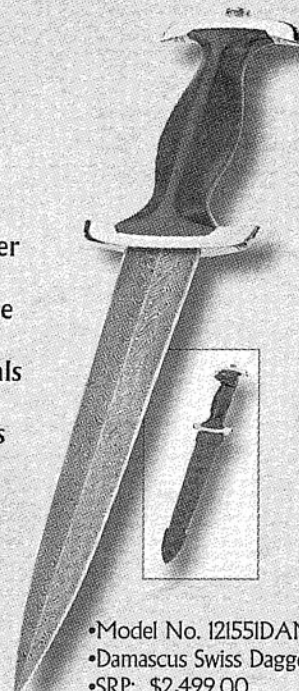
Böker Treebrand Celebrates 140 Years!



A 140-year tradition of continuous knifemaking since 1869 is something we are very proud of, and we feel that it is time to say "thank you" to all who have supported us throughout these years.

We continue to provide the "good old Solingen carbon steel," in a number of traditional patterns and bone handles. At the same time, we lead the pack in high tech materials and designs. Check out your local knife shop this year to find our special run 140th Anniversary knives!

- Model No. 111869
- Anniversary Camp Knife
- SRP: \$149.00



- Model No. 12155IDAM
- Damascus Swiss Dagger
- SRP: \$2,499.00

BOKER USA, INC.

1550 Balsam Street • Lakewood, CO 80214-5917

Phone: (800) 835-6433 • Email: sales@bokerusa.com • Website: www.bokerusa.com

Continued from page 6
Boker ("H. Boker" for short). But in 1869, after amassing large profits from sword contracts during the American Civil War, Heinrich Boker partnered with expert manufacturer Hermann Heuser, establishing a new factory in nearby Solingen and renaming the company Heinrich Boker & Co.

Solingen and Remscheid are located across the Wupper River from one another in North Rhine-Westphalia, Germany; on the northern edge of the Bergisches Land and south of the Ruhr area. Given that Solingen has for centuries been known as the "City of Blades," it seems inevitable that the Boker family would eventually find its way there, which it finally did with the new firm.

It was at about this time that Heinrich Boker asked for and was granted permission to adopt the tree logo as his trademark. The tree that inspired this choice was a majestic chestnut, located outside the original Boker factory in Remscheid, which stood for many years before finally being struck down in a 1924 lightning storm.

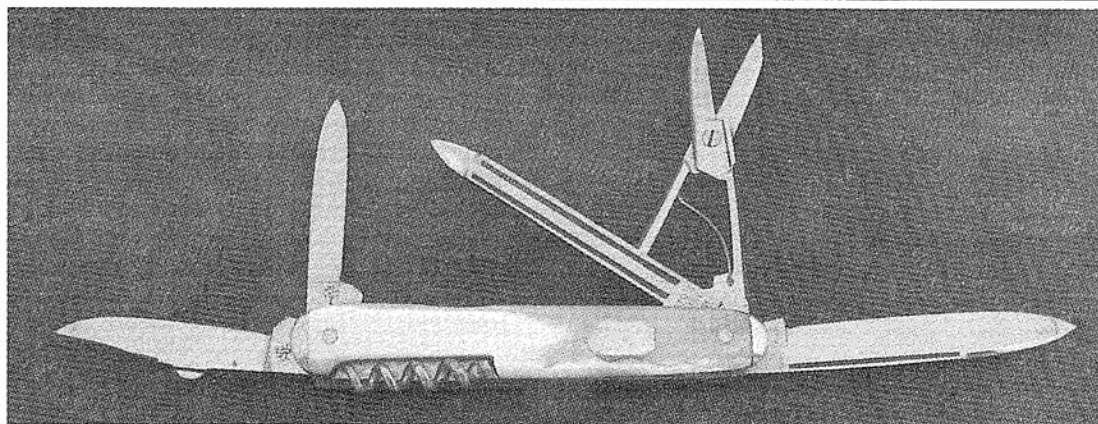
The tree, usually depicted as roundish and without leaves, has appeared on nearly every knife, razor, and other article that has left the Solingen factory since that time. The mark was shared with and used by the American Bokers as well, and it has inspired a variety of other trademarks and phrases including "Tree Brand", "Arbol" (Spanish for "tree"), "Arbolito" (Spanish for "little tree"), and "Baumwerk" (German for "tree works").

After the establishment of the Solingen factory, much of Boker's production was in the form of pocket knives as well as scissors and, later, straight razors. While sales were also made to other countries, including Canada and Mexico, the majority of H. Boker & Co.'s (Solingen) output was destined for the United States by way of New York's H. Boker & Co.

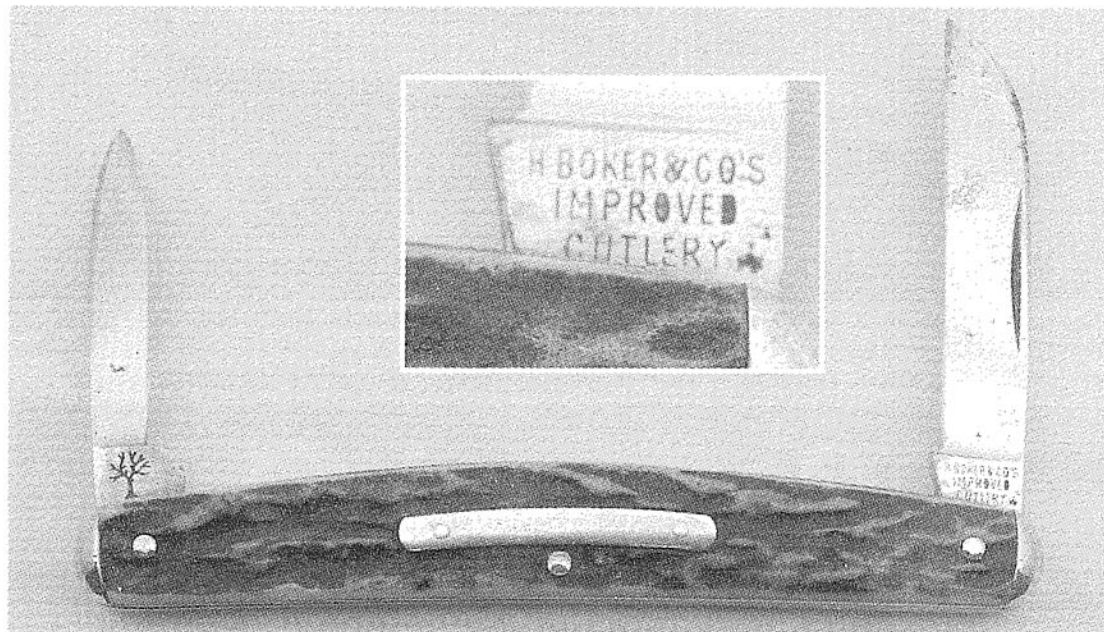
MEANWHILE, ACROSS THE ATLANTIC...

In 1837, Hermann Böker, brother of Heinrich, emigrated to the United States with plans to import and sell goods produced for the Bökers in

Continued on page 8



Top quality multi-blades like this pearl handled beauty seem to have been a specialty of the German Bokers, as this pristine mint example attests. The reverse of the master blade bears salesman's sample numbers. Private collection.



A first-rate small congress pattern with genuine stag handles. These markings were used on both German and American-made Bokers, forcing collectors to determine a knife's origin with other clues. (This knife looks German to me.)

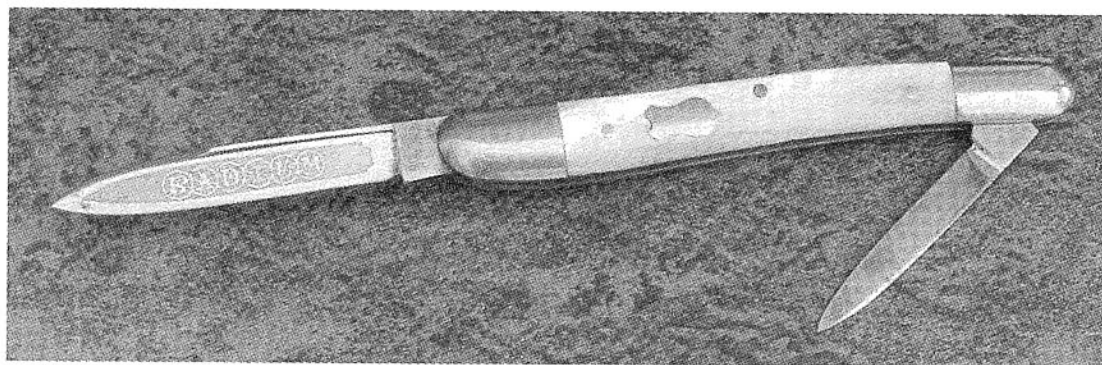
Continued from page 7
Remscheid, Germany. Dropping the German umlaut from his name, Hermann Boker first set up shop at 63 Liberty Street in New York City, soon moving to 80 John Street, where he remained until 1848. In that year he moved to 50 Cliff Street, where the firm would reside for over twenty years. Hermann Boker himself left the United States in 1852, returning

to the city of Bonn in his mother country and entrusting operation of the business to his children.

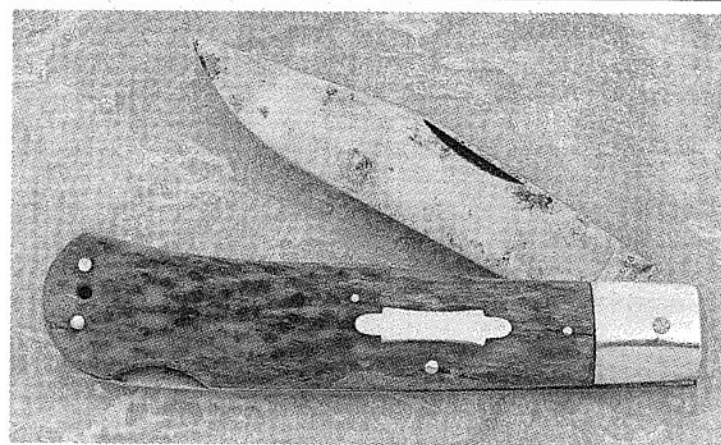
In 1857, the firm was reorganized and renamed H. Boker & Co., and the American Civil War brought with it profitable contracts for over 45,000 cavalry sabers, over 1500 light artillery sabers and over 550 non-commissioned officer swords, as well as a few other types of swords and, reportedly,

about 10,000 muskets, all of which were supplied by the German Bokers.

In 1872, H. Boker & Co. moved into a new iron-front building at 101 and 103 Duane Street, just west of Broadway in the heart of New York's hardware and cutlery business district. In time, the import firm expanded to become the exclusive distributor of a few English brands like Manhattan Cutlery Co. and John



The attractive etch on this tiny pearl handled serpentine pen reads RADIUM (a 1904 Boker trademark). German made Bokers often featured distinctive reverse etches like this one – and they still do today. Roger Russell collection.



Does this knife look familiar? If you look close, you might see Remington's R1303/1306 "Bullet" pattern in it. Did Boker's version come first? Bill Wright collection.



Newton & Co., and even American manufacturers like Massachusetts' Lamson & Goodnow, as well as handling the German-made Boker goods.

THE SUCCESS OF BOKER

Both of the H. Boker & Co. firms – Solingen and New York – experienced continued success, and in 1876 a display was presented at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia – the world's fair. The judges in attendance commented, "H. Boker and Co., Solingen, exhibited a very fine display of pocket knives, Solingen scissors, & c. The examples were doubtless made up for exhibition. The pocket

knives and scissors were from the finest steel, and were remarkable for the high class of the workmanship. There was also supplied, at request, a selection of the ordinary manufacture, of good quality and at moderate prices. Altogether this exhibit was considered to be of a very superior kind, and showed the amount of careful attention that had been bestowed upon it."

In time, though, the ever-increasing tariffs on imported cutlery cut deeply into the profits of both Boker firms, particularly with regard to their mainstay – high quality German pocket knives. Seeking another avenue,

Continued on page 9



Ernst Felix-Dalichow of Heinr. Böker Baumwerk GmbH poses, c.1992, with a spectacular antique Boker exhibition knife.

Continued from page 8
 in about 1899 Carl F. Boker of New York's Hermann Boker & Co. decided to try avoiding the tariff by purchasing controlling interest in a nearby Newark, New Jersey firm called the Valley Forge Cutlery Co. In addition to producing high quality pocket knives under the Valley Forge name, the operation also produced knives with the "H. Boker & Co's Improved Cutlery" marking identical to that used by the German Bokers. These American-made Bokers were first produced only in the simpler and less expensive one- and two-blade jack patterns, but in time more complex patterns like congresses and utility knives were offered. Nevertheless, the fanciest and most difficult to make knife patterns were almost always produced by the German factory; while the tariff made them very expensive, these fine knives continued to find a ready market.

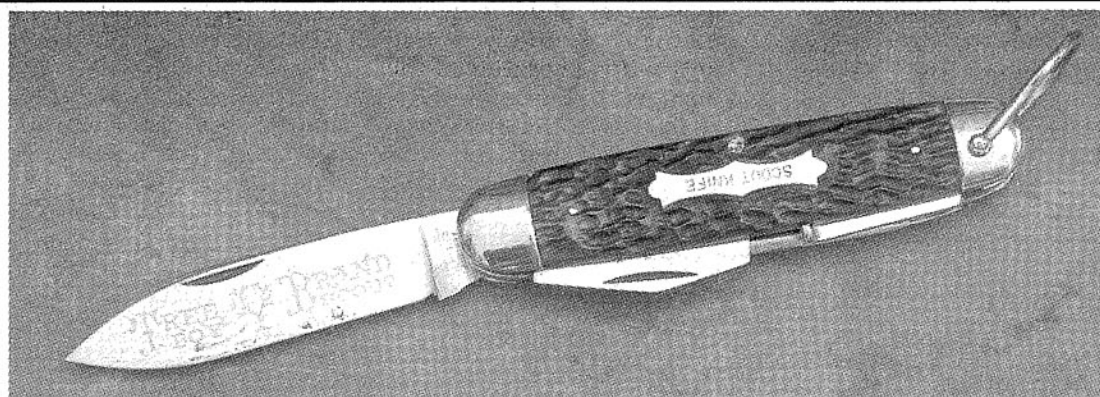
With the arrival of World War I, the two H. Boker companies found themselves on opposite sides of the fight. German imports soon came to a standstill, and the sudden loss of this business plunged both New York's H. Boker & Co. and Boker-owned Valley Forge into bankruptcy before the end of 1914. The former was quickly reorganized as H. Boker & Co., Inc. and also as the Boker Cutlery & Hardware Company, Inc.,

and Valley Forge was kept in the family as well. Incidentally, in 1916 Carl F. Boker put together a group of investors and purchased the Cyclops Steel Co. of Titusville, Pennsylvania – in whose factory today's Great Eastern Cutlery Co. produces some very fine traditional style knives!

Boker underwent several changes from World War I into the early 1920s, but unraveling the events of this period ninety years hence has proven somewhat difficult. To be sure, the German Boker firm was again exporting pocket cutlery shortly after the War, while the American firm rebounded from bankruptcy and kept the Valley Forge plant in operation as late as 1924, but it must have been difficult. To make matters worse, in 1919 Remington Arms hired away production manager C.W. Tillmanns and a team of Solingen-trained cutlers from their jobs at Valley Forge. Remington built their new cutlery division around Tillmanns, and several Boker and Valley Forge designs and features subsequently found their way into the Remington pattern books. Of note are the famous "acorn" shield, the "blood groove" whittler, and a few of the patterns that would gain fame in Remington's line of "bullet" knives.

In the early 1920s, H. Boker & Co. moved their American manufacturing

Continued on page 26



This American made "Tree Brand Boy Scout" knife – so reads the etching – has to be one of the finest non-official "scout" knives I've seen. Roger Russell collection.



Two mint, etched Boker jack knives; surely made in the Boker-owned Valley Forge Cutlery Co. factory located in Newark, New Jersey. Roger Russell collection.

Continued from page 9
operations from the old Valley Forge plant in Newark to a new factory in Maplewood, New Jersey. Both Boker and Valley Forge knives were apparently produced in the new factory, and at some point during the 1920s the last American-made H. Boker Improved stamps were dropped in favor of a marking that simply read "Boker" in script. In time, the Valley Forge stamp disappeared as well.

Back in Germany, H. Boker & Co. of Solingen was once again exporting large quantities of high grade German cutlery to its sister company in the U.S., including patterns such as the six-blade utility or "camp knife." But by the early 1930s the politi-

cal climate dramatically changed with the Nazi Party's rise to power. Boker was soon called upon to make SS and SA daggers as well as HJ knives for their government, and the examples they produced are regarded by collectors as among the finest of their type. When WWII came, the German company undoubtedly supplied knives to German troops just as the American Boker company produced M3 trench knives for the U.S. Army and Mark 1 deck knives for the U.S. Navy. Before V-E Day ended the War in Europe, the Heinrich Boker & Co. factory lay in smoking ruins, completely destroyed by Allied bombers.

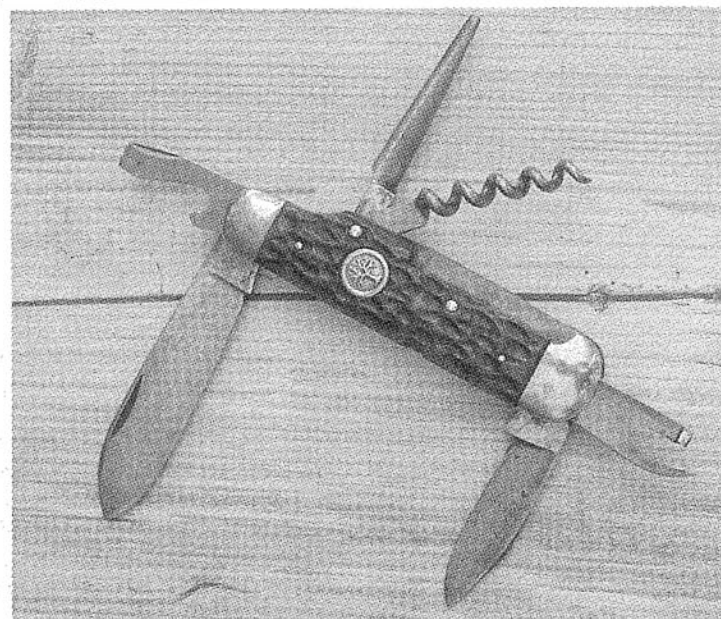
Shortly after the War,

the U.S. Government seized the famous "Tree Brand" trademark that had long been registered to the German Bokers, and transferred ownership to the American Boker firm. Right or wrong, ownership of the famous brand would remain that way for more than 40 years.

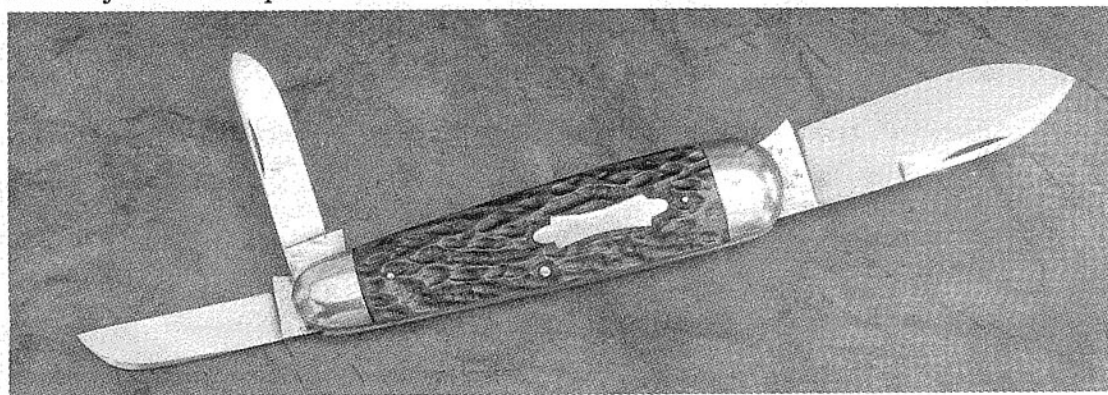
THE POSTWAR ERA: AMERICA

Cutlery historians often consider World War II a turning point in American cutlery manufacturing, after which the demand for a good knife at an attractive price found a more ready market than an excellent knife at a higher price. Like many other American pocket knife manufacturers, the American Boker, now

Continued on page 27



Boker's flagship "Camp Knife", commonly known as a six-blade utility knife. Upper knife pre-dates WWII, below is the company's limited edition 140th Anniversary model.



As if being a bone handled jumbo sleeveboard wasn't enough, this German made beauty bears the rare G16 stamp on its secondary blades. Courtesy Roger Russell.



Continued from page 26
marking its knives BOKER / U.S.A., reduced the quality of their product in response to market demands. While still making a good quality knife complete with bone, celluloid or even pearl handles, the new knives were just not as fine as the pre-war models, and in time modern synthetic materials replaced the natural ones. Boker purchased the George Schrade Knife Co. of Bridgeport, Connecticut in 1956, but with G. Schrade's key line of "Presto" knives soon rendered irrelevant by the Federal Switchblade Act, Boker saw little reason to keep the plant open and closed it in 1958.

In 1965, the American H. Boker & Co. merged with the New Britain Machine Co., and Boker's New York offices on Duane Street were finally closed after a 93-year run. In 1968, New Britain Machine merged into Litton Industries, and in 1969 or 1970 H. Boker and Co. was bought by J. Wiss & Sons of Newark, N.J., the famed maker of scissors and shears. Under Wiss' ownership, Boker was perhaps the first to introduce commemorative knives for collectors (1971), but despite their best efforts the Boker-Wiss pairing did not work out well. In 1976, Wiss (and thus Boker) was acquired by the Cooper Tool Group of Apex, North Carolina.

Cooper finally shut

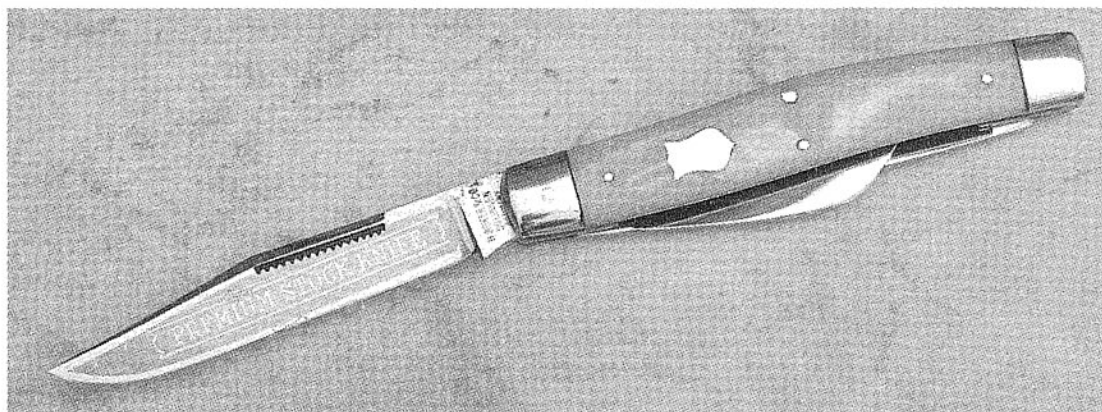
down the Maplewood, N.J. factory and moved production of the American Boker knives to an existing factory in Statesboro, Georgia. While successful in reducing production costs, the company found it difficult to compete in the working-knife market, and stopped manufacturing American made pocketknives in 1983 or 1984; signifying the end of Boker knife production in the U.S.A. Incidentally, Cooper's Statesboro plant would continue to produce utilitarian cutting tools until its closure in 1999.

THE POSTWAR ERA: GERMANY

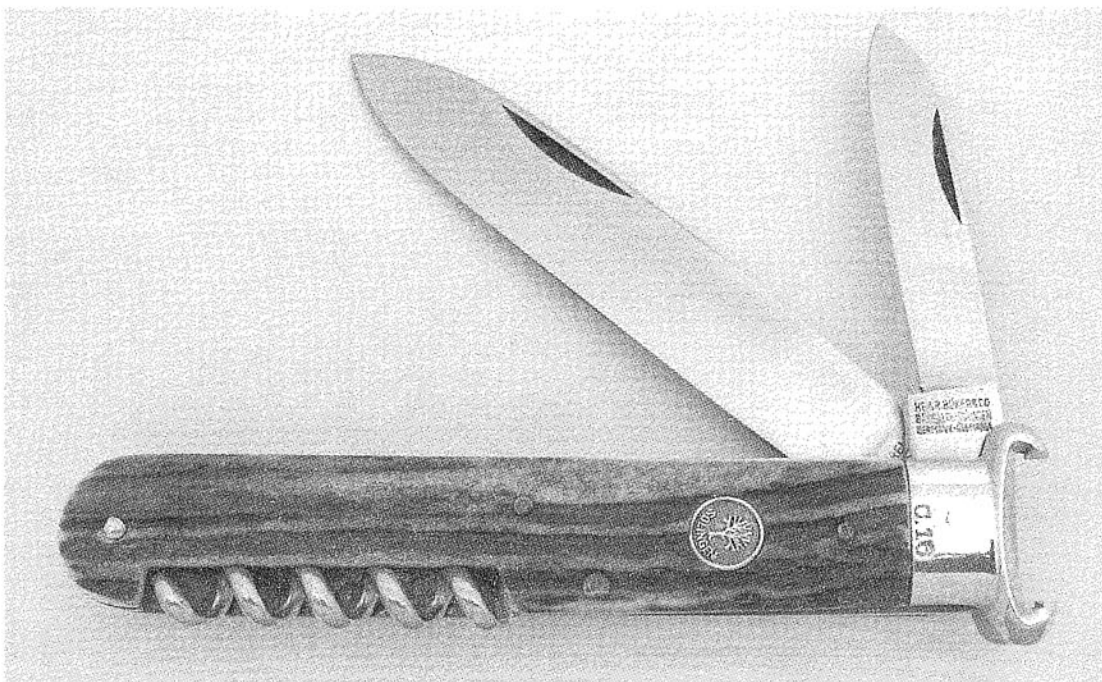
With the total destruction of the Boker plant in Solingen, one might have expected Heinrich Boker & Co. to have quietly faded away after the War, leaving little but a trail of old cutlery to remind one of their existence – but nothing could be further from the truth. Instead, Boker's own employees returned to rebuild the factory in which they once worked, and by 1947 production had begun to resume. By 1950, H. Boker & Co. was again turning out fine quality knives in quantity, for an eager worldwide market – including the United States.

While demand for the American made "Boker U.S.A.'s" seems, in retrospect, to have slowly faded from the War's end until the 1980s, the quality of the German Bokers was

Continued on page 28



In 1906, Boker claimed that their premium stock knives were "the original and the most popular of all stock knives." Could Boker have originated the pattern?



After the German company rebuilt in the wake of WWII, top quality sportmans knives like this one again became a major part of the company's product line.

Continued from page 27

revered in the U.S. – particularly in the South. While the German company sometimes suffered through the ownership changes of the American Boker firm that imported their knives, demand for the knives themselves remained strong. Cooper Tool Group's purchase of the American Boker in 1976 proved to be very beneficial for the German Bokers, and they enjoyed a very positive relationship during their short period of association. In 1986, Cooper Tools sold the Boker name and trademark rights back to the German Boker firm, which soon established a new American import company in Golden, Colorado – Boker USA Inc.

The evolution of Boker from the 1980s to present is a story for another time, but it involves the first factory-made damascus steel knives, ceramic blade technology, a new factory in Argentina in 1983, a new

Solingen factory in 1999, a partnership with United Cutlery, and a bevy of interesting knives, designs, and designers including some of the top knifemakers in Germany and the U.S.

A FEW THOUGHTS ABOUT BOKER MARKINGS (AND SUCH)

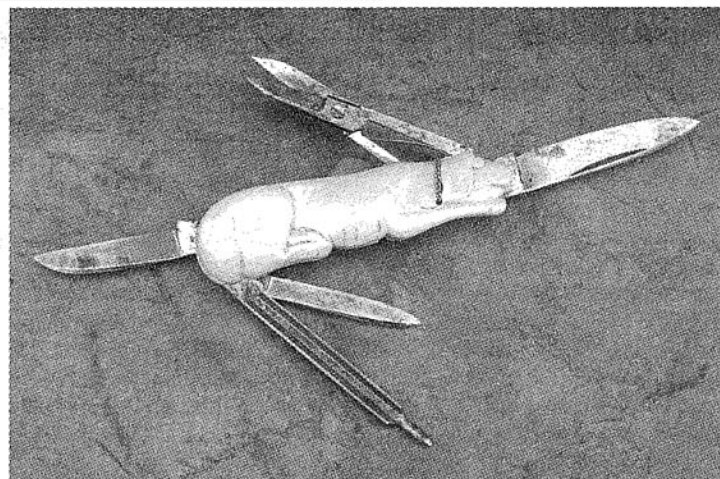
When this article was first proposed, one of the goals was to create a more complete list of Boker tang stamps and dates of use than had heretofore been published. This task proved more challenging than anticipated – honestly, I've never before studied a company with a history *half* as bewildering as Boker's. Actually, the BOKER name represents a loose family of companies, one that worked together – or did not – while using markings that often muddled the waters as to which company was responsible for the product in hand.

In researching this article, 40-odd different pock-

etknife tang stamps were uncovered, which have been condensed into the 27 most significant ones that you'll find in the table on page 29. The usage dates associated with them range from “pretty solid” to “educated guesses,” and while I believe that they represent progress, there is certainly much room for further improvement. It is hoped that their publication sparks further research on the subject.

German markings [G]: these stamps represent the Solingen firm, Heinrich Boker & Co., and its immediate predecessors across the Wupper River in Remscheid. There are several minor stamp variations, which are not detailed here. When attempting to date a German made Boker pocketknife, a few useful tips to keep in mind are included in a separate box in the table.

U.S. & German marking [US&G1]: This variation of the “Improved”



One of the most distinctive Boker patterns is this German-made lobster with pearl handles carved in the shape of a sleeping dog. Roger Russell collection.

stamp is the only marking currently thought to have been used both on American and German-made Bokers. If the knife in question does not carry a more conclusive marking on another blade, the only way to determine the country of origin is to examine the knife's construction and compare it to other known Bokers.

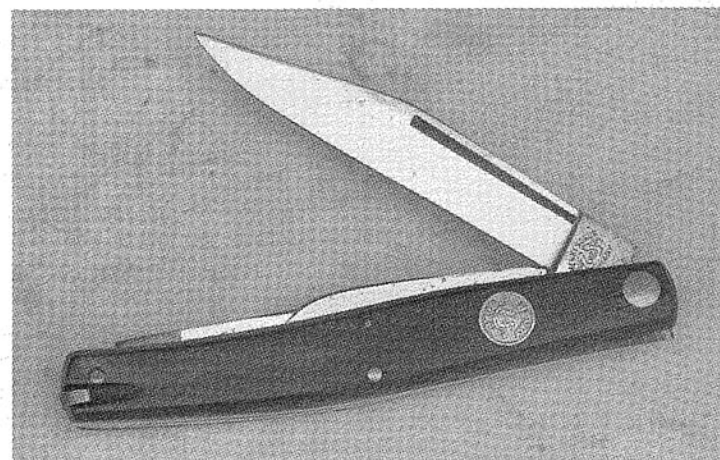
U.S. markings [US]: These markings represent the New York firm, Hermann Boker & Co., and its successors; they are only known to have been used on American made Bokers.

Remscheid markings [R]: These two markings have been used on knives produced for the firm now known as Heinrich Böker GMBH & Co. KG of Remscheid, Germany, which sells hand tools and

other goods and is descended from the same origins as the Solingen Boker company. Some of these knives, but not all, were produced for the Remscheid firm by the Solingen firm. It's my opinion that pocketknives with these markings probably date from the 1970s, but the “arrows” trademark is at least as old as the 1870s and could well appear on older knives.

CREDITS

My sincere thanks to Ernst Felix-Dalichow of Heinr. Böker Baumwerk GmbH, to Bill Harvey, Don Richardson, Roger & “Topsy” Russell, and other anonymous parties for advice and access to their collections, and to Pete Cohan, Dennis Ellingsen, Jim Woods, and Charlotte and the late John Goins for other research aid. □



Many of these unusually-marked Bokers were imported here during the 1970s; they were made for a related Boker company based in Remscheid, Germany.



A Basic Introduction to Boker Tang Stamps – ©2009 Mark D. Zalesky and Knife World

H&R BOKER REMSCHIED CAST STEEL G1: c.1837-1860 No tree on reverse Very rare	R & H BOKERS IMPROVED CUTLERY G2: c.1860-1865 No tree on reverse Very rare	 G3: c.1867-1880s Also similar with "BB" On small knives only	HENRY BOKER'S IMPROVED CUTLERY G4: c.1860-1880s No "Co."	H.BOKER'S IMPROVED CUTLERY G5: c.1860-1880s No "Co."
H.BOKER & CO'S IMPROVED CUTLERY G6: c.1869-1910 Four-line "Improved" Compare to US&G1	HENRY BOKER & CO. SOLINGEN G7: c.1869-1944 On small knives only	HENRY BOKER & CO. G8: c.1869-1944 On small knives only	H.BOKER & CO SOLINGEN G9: c.1869-1944 Usually on large knives	H. BOKER & CO SOLINGEN GERMANY G10: c.1891-1944 Some with pattern #'s on reverse tang
H. BOKER & CO'S CUTLERY GERMANY G11: c.1891-1944	BOKER'S CUTLERY GERMANY G12: c.1891-1944	HEINR.BÖKER & CO SOLINGEN-ALEMANIA MADE IN GERMANY G13: c.1932-1944 Deep ETCH on blade, not a stamp	HEINR.BÖKER & CO BAUMWERK-SOLINGEN GERMANY-ALEMANIA G14: c.1932-present Primarily used up to c.1950, but also on reproduction knives	HEINR. BÖKER & CO. SOLINGEN GERMANY G15: c. 1947-1950s Perhaps used later on secondary blades
 H. BOKER & CO'S IMPROVED CUTLERY G16: c.1920s-1930s Last "Improved" stamp	 H. BOKER & CO SOLINGEN G17: c.1920s-1930s	 BÖKER SOLINGEN GERMANY-ALEMANIA G18: c.1950s-present Primarily used up to c.1960s, but also on reproduction knives	 BOKER SOLINGEN GERMANY INOX G19: c.1960s No umlaut over O	 BÖKER SOLINGEN GERMANY G20: c.1960s-present Also with STAINLESS
H.BOKER & CO'S IMPROVED CUTLERY US&G1: Used in Germany c.1869-1910, U.S. c.1899-1920s. Only stamp used by both Germany & U.S.	General Boker Dating Information: • "G" stamps = German, "US" stamps = American, "US&G" stamp was used by both. "R" stamped knives were made for a different but related Boker company in Remscheid, Germany. • All German stamps from G4-G15 have a tree on the reverse. Variations in tree style are useful for dating knives only in a general sense. Bokers with the tree on the back of the blade are usually but not always earlier than those with a front side tree. • "Germany" stamped <i>anywhere</i> on a knife makes it post-1891. No "Germany" stamping does <i>not</i> mean a knife is pre-1891. • an umlaut over the "O" in Böker means the knife is 1932 or later. • German Bokers with a large round tree shield (no "Solingen") are pre-WWII, those with a round "Solingen" tree shield are post-WWII.		 R1: c.1970s Made for Remscheid Bokers, for Australian & African markets	 R2: p'knives c.1970s?? Made for the Remscheid Bokers, SOLINGEN on reverse
BOKER'S IMPROVED CUTLERY US1: c.1899-1920s Usually a secondary blade stamp	<i>Boker</i> US2: c.1928-1930s "Script stamp" also with STAINLESS	BOKER BUSAR US3: c.1930s-1950s Usually on folding hunters	BOKER US4: c.1930s-1970s "Block letter" stamp	BOKER U.S.A. US5: c.1945-1983 Last & most common U.S. Boker stamp