

## The Mighty Wire Jack

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Twenty years or so ago I found my first wire jack knife. At that time I wasn't really sure what it was, but I liked it so I bought it for my knife collection. At that time I had mostly bone handled pre WWII American made knives in my collection; but as I continued to buy these wire jacks, my collection grew. One time at the Springfield knife show I had a table next to a gentleman who told me he designed a perfect knife that had the fewest possible parts. He showed me his design of only five different parts and then I showed him one of my wire jacks with only three parts. He was truly amazed!

Over time I sold most of my other knives, but I continued to specialize in collecting wire jacks. It was always easy to trade someone a bone handled knife for a couple of old wire jacks, so my collection grew and grew. To this day, most collectors don't seem much interested in wire jacks and some don't even put them on display at shows - as they save their space for more valuable stuff. However, if you ask the folks at the tables, quite a few have one that they can pull out and sell you.

Most collectors still don't know a whole lot about them, so I decided to write a little about them to help educate anyone who is interested. I believe that these knives were one of the most ingenious designs ever conceived because of their simplicity and their great functionality. I still carry one with me for every day use. I prefer the pruner blade and the 1926 version because I like the steel in that one better as it is slightly higher in carbon and cuts real well.

The earliest patent for a wire handle jack knife was granted to George E. Finkenbiner on October 13, 1914. He filed for the patent on July 8, 1913. The sketch on this patent is similar to the George Schrade 3 & 1/4 inch spear blade without a cap lifter. Another patent was granted to Frank P. Hemming on December 4, 1917. He filed for his patent on July 12, 1917. The sketch on this patent is similar to the George Schrade 4 & 3/4 inch clip blade knife. However, I am not aware that either of these two knives were actually ever manufactured or marketed. Later in 1926, George Schrade also filed for and also received a patent for his version of the wire handled jack knife and these were produced and sold by the millions.

George Schrade was born in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, 2/13/1860. He learned the toolmaker and machinist trades. In the mid 1880s he work in a small shop in New York City making mechanical models for the U.S. Patent office, he also had patents on many inventions of his own. George is probably most famous for developing various types of switchblade knives, and there is a lot of information available about them. However, George also invented an improved version of the "Wire Jack" knife and this is the focus of this article.

George started the Press Button Knife Co., a Licensed division of Walden Knife Company, (1892 - 1923) Walden, NY. In 1904 George left the Walden Knife Co. and

started Schrade Cutlery (1904 - 1946), also in Walden, along with his two brothers, Jacob Louis and William. Early knives were contract made in Germany.

Sometime later (around 1910) George traveled to Europe, initially trying to find outlets to sell his cutlery machinery. He had some success in England, but by 1913 he ended up in Solingen, Germany where he set up a push-button knife factory. He returned to the US in 1916 due to WWI (after having all of his equipment and supplies confiscated by the German government). George then began working for Challenge Cutlery in Bridgeport, CT. He manufactured the Flylock knife for Challenge at his plant at 46 Seymour Street in Bridgeport.

In 1928 Challenge Cutlery went out of business, never making the "Wire Jack" that George patented in 9/21/1926. The patent stated, "The object of the invention is to produce a pocket knife of simple construction comprising but two main parts which are economical to manufacture and convenient and efficient in use."

In early 1929, George started his own company making "Wire Jacks" at Kossuth Street in Bridgeport, using equipment he got from Challenge Cutlery - in exchange for money they owed him for the rights for the Flylock invention. I now believe that the very first wire jacks were stamped "G. SCHRADER B-PORR CONN PAT. APLD. FOR". These are very rare and I only have ever seen two of them, both have spear blades. Like other small wire jacks, neither of them has the thumbnail opener on the blade.

The earliest *common* "Wire Jacks" are stamped "WIRE JACK" on the tang with a patent date of 9/21/1926. These are 3 & 1/4 inch closed. In addition to the spear blades, George made a lot of the pruner or hawk bill patterns that were widely used as advertising knives for various other companies. Later 1926 versions are stamped "Geo Schrade" (curved) and some of them spell out the word "BRIDGEPORT"; some forks also have this 1926 stamp. The 1926 spear blades came with and without a cap lifter slot.

The Case Cutlery Company also sold a "Wire Jack" pattern knife (W1216) using a couple of variations on their tang stamps e.g. "CASE TESTED XX" and "CASE PAT. 9-21-26". In both of these stamps, the word "CASE" is the older "tested" 1920-1940 version. The stamp could appear either above or below the cap lifter. These "Case" knives were made entirely in the Schrade company in Bridgeport, Ct. This was common for one knife company to make knives for another, incidentally, Schrade also made "Pull Balls" for Case and large switchblades for Remington.

Both Boy and Girl Scouts used these "Wire Jack" knives in their utensil kits. The first Boy Scout kits were available in their October 1932 catalog item #1384 and the three piece set sold for only one dollar. The Girl Scout versions came later. Many of the forks (about 1/2) are stamped "1/27/42" in error, the correct stamp is "1/27/42". However, before the three piece Boy Scout kits, George Schrade had a "Scout Chow Kit" that came in a smaller leather case and did NOT have a spoon. In this older kit, the knife was usually either a "1926 curved Geo Schrade" stamp or a "Wirejack" stamp w/cap lifter slot. The fork looked the same as the other forks and came with one of the older tang stamps. Many of these kits had customized embossing on the leather pouch, e.g. "Souvenir of Mohawk Trail".

George died in 1940 and had 35 employees at the time. George's heirs continued to run the business after his death. By 1942 George M. Schrade (son) reapplied for new patents and started using a newer tang stamp with the 1942 date. The earliest 1942 knives still had "GEO SCHRADE" curved; newer versions straightened out the name and eventually changed the abbreviation of the state to "CT". These knives were now made with more stainless steel whereas the older knives were higher in carbon. They also produced several larger "Wire Jack" knives of 4 inch and 4 & 3/4 inch and added a fish blade pattern in the large knife (*all of the 3 & 1/4 inch 1942 spear blades now had cap lifter slots*). I have also seen a picture of a Wire Jack Axe on a 4 & 3/4 inch wire frame. The family ran the business until 1956 when they sold out to Boker. At that time the company had grown to 100 employees. Boker continued the small 3 & 1/4 inch pruner "Wire Jack" pattern with their own stamp until 1958 when they were discontinued (*I have never seen any other Boker patterns*). Boker's main product in the old Schrade plant was switchblades and in 1958 when Congress banned switchblades they had to close.

One other very rare Schrade wirejack came with a copper blade for working around explosives. One I have seen had the words "Heitzman Blasting Plug Co. Shamokin, Penn." etched on the copper blade, but those letters were barely visible. The tang was stamped "GEO. SCHRADE PAT. 9-21-26 B'PORT, CONN."

I also have a few mis-stamped wire jacks, some with missing information, some stamped on the back of the tang. I even have one with "W1216" stamped on the back but without any stamp on the front. I have seen one other tang stamp on a wirejack frame; it was A.W. Wadsworth & Sons, Germany. Because wirejacks were so inexpensive, it seemed odd that someone would put another blade on one of them; therefore, I explored the possibility that Schrade had some early models made in Germany. I had really hoped this was a valid tang stamp as it would be a unique addition to my collection. I completed a thorough study that included sending it to another collector (Dennis Ellingsen) for his inspection and opinion. After all that, I am convinced that the knife is NOT real. (It also had a useless thumbnail opener on the blade). This raises the question of why anyone would put a Wadsworth blade on a wirejack frame? The most likely scenario that I can envision is that 75 or so years ago someone owned a new Wadsworth knife and broke the handle. Not wanting to waste a perfectly good blade, a wirejack frame was easy to mount the blade on. Then for the next 75 years, the knife and frame wore, pitted and aged together so that today they look like they have always been together.

Well, this is where this story ends for now. However, with the success that this pattern has had in the past, I wouldn't be surprised to see some company make it again sometime in the future.

For your information, some of this information in this story comes from my own observations from collecting Wire Jacks for many years, I currently own about 300 of the knives plus a fair amount the complete chow kits; however, most of my information comes from the following individuals who were very generous in sharing their valuable time and information with me:

Bill Schrade, personal conversations and his book "George Schrade and His Accomplishments" George Schrade Knife Company 1982.

Dennis Ellingsen, personal conversations and his September 1981 article in Knife World

magazine.

Ed Holbrook, personal conversations and his book, "Official Scout Blades" 2nd printing 1998.



This was probably the earliest tang stamp used on wire jacks. This is a very rare knife. Like all small wire jacks, there is NO thumbnail clip on this blade.



The first common wire jacks that had the 1926 patent date and did not use the Schrade name.



Later Schrade began using the "Geo. Schrade" tang stamp. This stamp uses very small letters on the date.



George Schrade made wire jacks for Case. They were completely made, including the Case stamp in the Bridgeport plant. There are several variations of the Case stamp used. Some say Case Tested XX and do not have a patent date.



Here is a later version of the Schrade stamp with slightly larger letters than the one shown earlier. This was the stamp used on the extremely rare copper blade wire jack.



The last 1926 stamp had 5 lines on the tang. It also spelled the whole name "Bridgeport".



The earliest 1942 stamps still had the curved name "Geo. Schrade" on them. Some of these were stamped on the rear with the words "Stainless Steel".



Later the name "Geo. Schrade" was straightened out. This slightly rare stamp has "INC." after Knife Co, and also has the country "USA" on it.



This was the first stamp with "Stainless" on the front and the last one with the state abbreviation of "CONN."



At some point Schrade started using a state abbreviation of "CT".



The most common wire jacks have the words "Stainless Steel" in the upper right corner. These are plentiful as they were used in both Boy & Girl Scout chow kits.



The last wire jacks made by Schrade had slightly larger letters.



Boker used their own stamp after buying the Schrade company. Most Boker wire jacks have a small name etched on the tang - this one has the larger stamped name.