Researching Imperial Schrades?

Researching Schrade knife patterns is a enjoyable, but difficult task. Maybe that is why so few attempt it. Resources are difficult to find in the first place, but even when an accumulation of factory printed materials is found, separating the facts from errors is a daunting task. Statements by knowledgeable former factory employees, though few and far between, go a long way in sorting fact from fiction, but even they contain glaring errors.

While catalog listings can help date changes, such as first introductions of a pattern, some patterns were made and sold long before they were listed in the catalogs. Likewise, some patterns listed ran into manufacturing difficulties (material supply, process changes, design changes, etc.), and were introduced late, or even not at all. One must also be careful taking the catalog illustration details as verbatim. Many illustrations were reused year after year with no notice of minor changes (minor to the manufacturer at the time, though thought of as milestones for dating by collectors today).

Now, this is not to say that the catalogs and advertisements are not a very valuable resource, because they definitely are. Without them, the research field would be relegated to collecting anecdotal information, and hoping to chance across provenance history examples. These pattern examples, when available, do show a provable historical timeline for some vague details, and sometimes for the actual introduction of a pattern. The older a pattern is, the harder it is to find such examples that have not been tampered with, put in wrong boxes, paperwork missing or mismatched.

Packaging itself offers many clues as well, at least for general time periods. However, packaging use often overlapped, or was shortlived. I don't have to mention how often the packaging was tossed, often the first thing to hit the trash, with paperwork eventually following, sheaths (particularly from the sixties back) had a finite life as well. Most of the earlier surviving packaging is fancier gift or "presentation" boxes. Often, dealers themselves removed the knives from their boxes for retail sale, and many earlier pattern knives were sold in bulk to the dealers There was never any packaging to save for these.

Warranty sheets and instruction sheets often have a copyright date or illustrate other available models, giving important clues to a particular knife's production date.

The knives themselves provide clues to chronology, beyond the well recognized factory name changes reflected in the tangstamps. Minor changes in text styles, shields, guards, pommels/butt caps and blade and handle materials can sometimes help, particularly when supported by either dated paperwork, or factory printed materials. Serial numbers, during the all too brief time period of the 1960's through mid seventies (later for some patterns) help immensly, thoug it is very time consuming to survey and document them.

Included accessory items like lanyards (thongs), sheaths, stones, care kits (oil, cloths, etc.) and even bonus items provide hints, though these items were seldom used before the late seventies / early eighties. Sheaths can be very important, but also deceiving. Schrade was good about keeping replacement sheaths on hand, and owners are renowned for replacing damaged or lost sheaths with an odd sheath that "sort-of fits" from any number of makers. Even collectors dispersing their stock are renowned for mix-and-match. Catalog illustrations and provenance original box sets help, but as stated before, even the catalogs were wrong at times. Schrade themselves did not adhere to strict observance of sheath chronology. Several times, I have run across sheaths for a pattern that seem out of place, as if they bought from an outside source to help meet demand, or to fill in the gap while waiting for inhouse sheath makers to come online with a sufficient supply of a new design. Often, small tweeks can be found among sheaths of one pattern. These are most difficult to pin down as to chronology, unless they can be directly associated to a knife known to have only been issued in one particular year, like a Scrimshaw or other limited edition.

Actual patents are a prime example of datable materials for some patterns. Usually they are design patents (the ornamental appearance of an item), not utility patents (the indepth description of construction methods, and features which contribute to an improvement of usefulness). Seldom would a pattern be produced and sold before the patent was filed, and likewise, seldom produced with patent pending marks

after the patent issued. One untapped area is that of copyright filings and issuance. This would be a treasure trove in identifying timelines for shields, blade etches, and logos. And even pattern names.

Magazine advertisements also offer good clues, when they can be found. I have not pursued the buying of classic and antique outdoor magazines and catalogs, but have saved and transcribed a few old articles, and bought some odd cutout ads from magazines, mostly from the mid sixties to late seventies.

Factory production records, which I am certain still exist in private hands, and the memories of retired and former workers and management would be a gold mine, in my opinion. Someday perhaps someone with access and whatever credentials deemed suitable, will begin to access this wealth of information for the benefit of all Schrade knife collectors.

Any materials you guys can throw my way would be appreciated. And further the cause of Schradeophilia!

Codger