

iKnife Collector
Hosted by Gus Marsh
Topic: Ka-Bar Cutlery Company
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Ka-Bar Cutlery Company

In 1898, a small cutlery firm in Tidioute, Pennsylvania, begins turning out pocketknives under the name Tidioute Cutlery Company. The company struggles for two years in a competitive marketplace, and is dissolved in 1900.

Not far from Tidioute in Little Valley, New York, a grandson of Job R. Case by the name of Wallace R. Brown founds a razor jobbing operations in 1899. He names this firm the Union Razor Company, and a successful start leads Brown to expand the business. In January 1902, Brown purchases the Tidioute Cutlery Company's assets and begins manufacturing knives and razors there under the Union Razor name.

The company's name was changed to Union Cutlery Company on January 15, 2009, a reflection of the company's ever-increasing emphasis on knives. Soon thereafter, the nearby town of Olean, New York, offered Union Cutlery several enticements to relocate its factory there, and in 1911, the factory was relocated to Olean.

The knives made at this time were stamped "Union Cutlery Company, Olean, N.Y.". Union was soon making an extensive line of pocketknives and fixed blade knives bearing such stamps as "Olcut", "Keenwell", "Viking", "John Jay", and by 1923, another trademark that became popular on their large folding hunter patterns: Ka-Bar.

According to legend, this last trademark came from a testimonial letter. An old trapper whose life had allegedly been saved in a bear fight by a well-made Union Cutlery Company knife wrote it. Due to his lack of education, the written account of how he had been able to "kil a bar" was shortened and appeared as KA-BAR.

A trademark was born, and the Ka-Bar name soon became more popular than the Union Cutlery name stamping. During World War II, countless troops were exposed to the brand stamped on the blades of their reliable U.S. Navy Mark 2 and U.S. Marine 1219C2 knives. That timeless design became famously known as a "Ka-Bar", regardless of weather the knife in hand was made by Union Cutlery Company or another equally respected American manufacture.

In 1951, the corporate name was changed to Ka-Bar Cutlery Company, Inc and the tang stamping was changed from Ka-Bar to Kabar. In 1954, Ka-bar attempted to move the production of pocketknives to Dawsonville, Georgia, hoping to take advantage of the inexpensive labor supply in the North Georgia Mountains. Ka-Bar management, however, failed to reckon with the area residents taking off work completely for much of the planting and harvest season. Then, too, although laborers were plentiful, there was a general lack of skilled workers in the area. Within a year, the company moved back to Olean, New York.

After Danforth Brown's death in 1960, the company changed ownership several times and, for a brief time in the 1960's, completely stopped knife production. Then, in 1966, Cole National Corporation of Cleveland, Ohio purchased the company and again started national distribution with emphasis upon marketing through several large discount stores.

Collector interest in the old brand was growing in the 1970s, and in 1976 the company issued its first commemorative knives and formed a Ka-Bar Collectors Club.

In 1982, Cole National filed for bankruptcy, and the Ka-Bar product line was purchased by American Consumer Products and moved to Solon, Ohio. American Consumer Products would retain ownership until May 1996, when Ka-Bar was sold to the Alcas Corporation of Olean, New York, returning the company to the "home" they had first set foot in 85 years before. In 2003, Ka-Bar moved to its current location on Olean's Homer Street.

Since the late 1970s, a varying portion of the company's production have been made overseas, first in Japan and more recently in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and China. The company's famed Mark 2 and variations thereof have remained "Made in the U.S.A." as have Ka-Bar's special limited-edition knives such as those made for the Ka-Bar Collectors Club. The company is not currently offering traditional style pocketknives, and the Ka-Bar Collectors Club became inactive in 2006.

Ka-Bar Pocketknives

Unfortunately for collectors, the company failed to stamp pattern numbers on the majority of its knives. Once one becomes familiar with those that are stamped, the pattern numbers on Ka-Bar knives can tell quite a bit about them. The first number represents the handle material, designated as follows:

- 1 – Ebony or Stainless Steel
- 2 – Genuine Stag
- 3 – Redwood

- 4 – White Imitation Ivory
- 5 – Black Celluloid
- 6 – Bone Stag
- 7 – Mother of Pearl
- 8 – Shell Celluloid
- 9 – Silver or Gray Celluloid
- X – Metal
- D or R – Rainbow Celluloid
- G – Green & White Pyraline or Gunmetal
- H – Horn
- L – Aluminum
- M or X – Metal or Brown & White Celluloid
- O – Candy Stripe & Fancy Celluloid
- P – Imitation Pearl
- S – Silver Chrome
- T – Abalone Pearl (early) Cream Celluloid (later)
- W – Golden Celluloid

The second digit in the pattern number signifies the number of blades. The company made knives with up to seven blades. Four-blade knives by Ka-Bar are not very commonplace but the seven-blade knife is a very rare find. The remaining digits designate the factory pattern number.

Letter codes following the factory pattern number indicate the knife's features or variations from the standard pattern as follows.

- C – Cap Bolster
- CC – California Clip Blade
- EO – Easy Open Notch
- EMB – Special Emblem in Handle
- EX – Extended Bolsters

F – Flat Ground Blade
G – Guard
I – Iron Liners
J – Jack, both Blades of One End
K&F – Knife & Fork Blades
L – Locking Blade
Pen – Pen Blade
PU – Punch Blade
R – Razor Point Blade
RG – Ring or Bail
RT – Rat Tail Bolster
SH – Sheepfoot Blade (early) Shadow (later)
T – Tip Bolsters
X – Shadow (no bolsters)
½ - Clip Blade

Although a few early knives were made with iron liners, most Ka-Bar will be found with brass liners and nickel silver bolsters. Knives with every blade stamped will bring a 10-15% premium over those with just the master blade stamped. Of extra rarity and extra value is a “Kabar” stamped bone handle knife since, by the time this stamping was used, almost all the company’s knives were made with plastic handles. Several Ka-Bar folding hunters featured a shield shaped like the silhouette of a dog’s head. Popularly known as “dogs head Ka-Bars”, these knives are quite desirable and are valued considerably higher than most other knives produced by the company.

Knives with the “UNION RAZOR CO. TIDIOUTE, PA”, stamping should be worth up to 50% more than the same knife in a “UNION CUT CO. OLEAN, NY”. Stamping and knives with the extremely rare “UNION CUTLERY CO, TIDIOUTE, PA” stamping will bring as much as 100% more. Likewise the “Union” mark inside an outline of North America is quite rare and will fetch a premium of about 30%.

Ka-Bar Stampings

Ka-Bar has used numerous tang stampings during the several stages of its long tenure. Some that the collector may encounter are:

Union Razor Co., Tidioute, PA. (1902-1909)

Union Cutlery Co., Tidioute, PA. (1909-1911)

Union Cut Co. Tidioute (1909-1911)

Union (inside a North American shield) (1911-1920s)

Union Cut Co., Olean, N.Y. (1911-1951)

Ka-Bar (paired with a Union Cut marking) (1923-1951)

Ka-Bar, Reg. U.S. Pat Off. (1925-1930)

Ka-Bar, Olean, N.Y. (1923-1951)

Ka-Bar-Lo (stamped on bolsters of some Barlow's (1930-1935)

Akbar (lowercase letters) (1951-1970s)

Kabar USA (1970-1996)

Kabar Cleveland, Ohio (1980-1996)

Olcut, Keenwell, Viking, & John Jay are brands that Ka-Bar used, primarily on mid-quality knives of the 1920s and 1930s.

Sabre was a brand of inexpensive Japanese knives imported and sold by Cole National during their ownership of Ka-Bar.

Khyber is a brand name Ka-Bar used on high quality Japanese knives from 1976 to 1983.

Collectors should be aware that some of the older markings were used on the company's limited-edition knives, and indications that the knife is a later reproduction may be subtle.

Two of the hardest to spot are the stag handled 21107 and 22107 doghead folding hunters that have their inner liners stamped with the 1977 production date. Most are more obvious than this, but be careful.

