

Whittlers  
Roy Humenick

When I was a young lad, my father taught me how to carve a whistle out of a willow branch using a small pocketknife. After getting more familiar with the knife, I tried my hand at carving various figurines. For this I used a Western States jack knife, having never heard of a whittler knife. Most everyone at some point has used a knife to carve on a piece of wood. Maybe even do some whittling. A style of pocketknife evolved for this purpose and earned the name. A whittler does not have a specific shape or size. The blades that go into a whittler are quite varied. You may have wondered, what exactly defines a knife to be a whittler?



Case 6380 - Serpentine whittler

A whittler has three blades, where the most prominent blade, when folded, sits between the other two blades. That is the bare bones definition, but pretty much covers it. This blade configuration has been used in a lot of different patterns. Two of the most common whittler patterns are likely the swell center and the serpentine. The Case 6383 and 6380 patterns are good examples of this. There are many other patterns that have had whittler blades in them. Some patterns are the sleeveboard, cigar, carpenter's, congress and even a canoe pattern. Somehow the words "canoe" and "whittler" got smashed together to create the name "Cannitler" for a canoe pattern with whittler blades.



Case 6383 Swell center whittler



Bill Ruple - Canoe whittler - "Cannitler"

Most of the whittlers manufactured have a large master blade at one end of the knife. The other end has two smaller blades. The master blade is usually thicker than normal at the pivot end. With the blade closed, the point of the master blade rests between the two smaller blades. The master blade can be a clip blade, a wharncliffe, spear, sheepsfoot or any shape that serves the user of that knife. The two smaller blades are usually a pen and a coping blade, but many different smaller blade types have also been used in whittlers.

As one might expect, several variations of the whittler have been made. One such variation is the three backspring whittler. All three blades in this knife may appear to be equally large master blades. As long as one of the blades, when closed, rests between the other two, it is considered a whittler. A half whittler is a knife with two blades, where one of the small blades has been removed. The half whittler has a master blade at one end of the knife, and a small blade at the other end. The term "half whittler" seems to come into play most often when a pattern first makes its appearance as a three blade whittler, and a later version loses one of the small blades. Stay tuned right here for more upcoming tidbits of information regarding whittlers.



Roy Humenick - Warncliff whittler



Remington R3983 Whittler with punch blade

## Whittlers - Part 2

Roy Humenick

In their day, whittlers enjoyed quite a bit of popularity. Almost all knife companies had a whittler or two in their lineup. Yet there is something about a whittler knife that sets it apart from other knives. Something more than just three blades set in a variety of patterns. It could have something to do with the knife being a functional working tool in an elegant package. Or maybe it is the various features that are unique to whittlers.

With the exception of the three back spring whittler, all whittlers have two back springs. One of the things that make whittlers unique is that both of the back springs bear on the tang of the master blade. That is, two springs ride on the tang of only one blade. The two smaller blades at the other end of the knife each ride on one of the two back springs. Getting the spring tension just right for each of the smaller blades may result in too much tension for the master blade. This is one of the challenges for the whittler maker who tries to balance the spring tensions for all three blades. Quite often one will find whittlers with half stop tang configurations for both of the small blades and no half stop used for the master blade.



Cactus made whittler



Cactus with tapered back springs



Schrade 804 whittler

Another characteristic that is only found in whittlers is the tapered back spacer. This is a spacer that separates the two smaller blades and extends along the back of the knife between the two springs. This spacer tapers down to nothing, making it appear like a wedge. Better than 90% of all whittlers have this feature. The ones that do not, have both springs sitting right next to one another and in some cases, it appears that the springs themselves are tapered. These whittlers use a short spacer to separate the two smaller blades. The term “split back whittler” has been used to describe a whittler with the tapered back spacer. Since all whittlers have two back springs, adding the descriptor “split back” should define those with the wedge-like spacer. Think of a wedge used to “split” firewood as an analogy for the term “split back”.



Schrade split back configuration

Having the wedge-like spacer between the two back springs adds another level of difficulty in making the knife. As a result, the scales are not parallel to one another putting a slight angle into all of the parts. Even the holes that the assembly pins pass through must accommodate this angle. This may be why many knife makers of yesteryear chose the whittler as a platform to test their skills. Whittlers tended to be upscale knives with premium handle materials like pearl, stag and ivory. Many had carved or fluted bolsters. Whittlers can be found with fancier shields, filed or milled liners and even a few with integral bolsters and liners.

It is easy to see why there would be interest in collecting whittlers. With all of the variety and embellishments available it is possible to find that certain type of whittler that appeals to you. A very different whittler that is not a split back whittler will be discussed in “Part 3”. So, stay tuned right here for more info about whittlers in our next issue.



Case 63046

By now, you should be well on your way to a better understanding of some of the attributes of the whittler. Part 1 and Part 2 of this topic revealed that whittlers have some unique characteristics. All whittlers have three blades, with a master blade on one end, and typically two smaller blades on the other end. And we know that “split back” whittlers have a tapered spacer between the two back springs. This applies to most whittler knives, but there are a few exceptions. It might be worth a moment to examine some exceptions to the rule. One of those has been mentioned before – the three, back spring whittler.



Case 63046 back springs

With the three, back spring whittler, each blade has its own back spring to work with. If all three blades opened or pivoted on the same end of the knife, it would most likely be called a jack knife. Since the blade in the middle folds out from one end of the knife and the two outside blades fold out from the other

end, it is called a whittler. You can see how each blade could be full sized in this type of configuration. These knives do not have a large following, and only a handful of manufacturers have produced them.



Case\_Bose\_Lockback\_Whittler



Case\_Bose\_Lockback\_Whittler

Knives with three back springs might tend to get a little thick or wide. Could be why all of the three, back spring whittlers I have seen do not have liners or spacers between the back springs. All three back springs lay right next to one another. These knives should be more economical to build with fewer parts and no kinking of blades required. The blade shapes that are used match those that might appeal to users of cattleman knives – farm hands and ranchers.

Another “exception to the rule” whittler is the lock back whittler. It has only two back springs and is not a split back whittler. The master blade can lock open, and the two smaller blades are considered slip joint blades (do not lock). Very few knife companies have undertaken the challenge of making a lock back whittler. Needless to say, these are very hard to find, and if found, come with a pretty high price tag.



Hammer Brand\_with\_Punch\_Blade

I find whittlers interesting because they offer a little more - more geometry, more variety; and they are more challenging to make. Imagine producing whittler knives using the tools of early America in shops that had no electricity. How and why did they do it? The whittler blade configuration has been used in many different knife patterns. New ones show up from time to time. All of these factors help to increase one’s appreciation for this unique breed of pocket knife. You may want to discover some obscure whittler lore for yourself. There is much more to whittlers than what has been described here.

And remember: The whittler is not really a pattern, but a blade configuration with a purpose.