

The Life, Times, and Knives of W.W. Scagel

Jim Lucie

Good morning dear hearts and gentle souls. You will learn this morning of a man who, by universal agreement among all knife makers and blade smiths and knife collectors, enjoys the universal reputation of being America's earliest 20th Century knife maker. It all begins with the birth of William Wales Scagel on Lincoln's birthday, February 12, 1875, in a small town near Sarnia, Ontario. It is profoundly difficult in the time allotted to give an in-depth view of just how great a man Bill Scagel was. I will attempt to outline to you exactly what he did and why he is so important in the annals of blade smithing and knife making and how it ties in to people of the American Society of Arms Collectors, since he did make military knives.

I feel it is important in any biographical and historical presentation to give some background to the genealogical and ancestral facts. I had much help from a living grand-nephew, Robert F. Scagel, who lives in Vancouver, and also from the Mormon genealogical files. As a matter of fact, the people out at Salt Lake City, Utah, were absolutely thrilled that I had any knowledge of William Scagel, because they were doing a complete file on the ancestry of the Scagel family, and since they all lived in Canada and they were all Canadians, with William Scagel being the only one that came to the States, they had absolutely nothing on Bill, so we were able to get into a very proficient swap of information and material and I gleaned much of this from the Mormon ancestral files as well as from his grand-nephew. The more I got into Bill's background, the more exciting it became. Some of the early family settled in the township of Chatham along the Ottawa River near the Carillon Rapids in Quebec. Other members of the family settled in Gray County, Ontario. We can go back to 1715, with Christopher Scagel, who married and had four known children. One of these children's names was Jacob and he is the ancestor of William Scagel. From Jacob Scagel came Jacob Scagel II and records show he was Bill's great-grandfather who joined the Revolutionary War army and was at the battle of Saratoga in 1777, was with Washington's troops at Valley Forge, and was at Yorktown. One of Jacob II's sons was Samuel Dalton Scagel, who married Jemima Clark in 1827 at St. Andrews in the Carillon area. Now their third son was named John and he was William's father and John had married Anna Lee. Anna Lee came from the same Lee family whose name is



enshrined in the history of the Lee Enfield rifle: it was her brother who was the inventor and developer of the Lee Enfield rifle and he had also invented a typewriter, the patent for which he sold to the Remington Company. John, as I said, was born in Carillon, Quebec, April 15, 1833, and he died in Sarnia, Ontario, December 17, 1912. Anna Lee, his wife, was born on July 11, 1839, and she died in Sarnia October 2, 1925. John and Anna had six children, four sons and two daughters. The daughters' names were Jemima Olivia Scagel and Margaret Annie Scagel. The four boys were named Samuel George Scagel, who was the grandfather to the living nephew from whom I was able to obtain much information. Another son was James Dalton Scagel, and John Arthur Clark Scagel, and then, of course, the subject of our presentation, the youngest son, William Wales Scagel. Enough of genealogy.

We now should turn our attention to exactly what kind of person William Scagel was. Who was he, what did he do, and why has he posthumously become so famous? Bill's father, John, was a fairly well-to-do ship builder in Sarnia. About 1905 or 1906, Bill joined the British Merchant Marine, and he made several trips around the world. By 1916 or 1917, he married and here we undergo one of my problems. I have scoured the entire area of courthouses and can find no certificates of marriage; however, we have enough substantial documentation and historical background from people who knew Bill prior to my meeting him, that he did get married. He had no children and he was quickly divorced and it is a subject of great speculation as to how that happened. Ostensibly, one of his sisters didn't like his wife, and I guess it was consid-

ered that she interfered and the marriage was dissolved. But in any event, in 1917, he married and he settled in Durand, Michigan, and he began to go to work for the Grand Trunk Railroad as a troubleshooter for their locomotives. Bill left Durand about 1920. He moved across the Michigan Peninsula to Muskegon and there he set up a blacksmith and cutlery shop on Marquette Avenue. In 1935, his shop had burned to the ground, destroying everything Scagel owned. Undaunted, Bill set up a corrugated iron shed, pitched a tent to live in and was back to work within days. In 1937, he had saved up enough money to purchase a one acre piece of ground in Fruitport which he named Dogwood Nub. Here, Bill built a new shop and moved to this property and, at age 64, began to manufacture some of the world's finest cutlery and general artistic blacksmithing work.

There has been much said about Bill's so-called rather reclusive personality. This requires some explanation. It was true that he was a bit reclusive, but he had a heart of gold. If he could help someone who was in need, he readily did this. He did have some strange quirks. Amongst them were his political beliefs. Bill Scagel would make a John Bircher look like a bleeding heart liberal. His whole philosophy of living was if you don't work, you don't eat. He had no use for Democrats, Union people who were on relief that could work and wouldn't, and this is an area on which much time could be spent; however, I think I've made the point.

During the 1938 and 1939 polio epidemics, Bill made many, many fine braces for children that were from plans given to him by physicians in the area. He never charged a penny for any of these braces. I have seen one of these braces with his little mark and his name stamped on them and they are absolute works of art. Bill would do this for free. Bill lived alone. His only true companions were his dogs. He loved Labrador Retrievers, and they were his true friends. I will show some slides along the way that will illustrate just how important his dogs were.

Bill began to make knives approximately in the years 1908 and 1909, and he made them continuously until 1962, just a year prior to his death, at which time he was approaching 90 years of age and he was finally getting too old and too feeble to work a forge and an anvil and the smithing hammers. He was extremely independent and somewhere in the mid to late 1930s, he had a squabble with the local power company and told them to get their wires and equipment off of his property. He erected a tall windmill, very well made, and he used several World War I submarine batteries buried in the ground to supply his power and when he didn't have power from those, he had an old five horsepower one lugger hit and miss gas engine

that supplied all of his power for his workshop. You will see in the display many other items of beauty besides knives. He made magnificent dutch ovens, copper, brass, and silver beer steins, wrought iron hatchets and trophies. He was a favorite person of the Muskegon Police Department. He did pistol repair work for them, made many fine knives as trophies for other police marksmen and made some small boats for people.

I came into Bill's life in the summer of 1956 when I had finished my medical schooling and went to Fruitport and opened up my family practice office. Bill would never run to the doctor much and he used to walk by my office several times a week to a local grocery store where he would stock up on a week's supply of staples for his cabin and I began to ask people who he was. This was 1956 and he was considered then to be the local blacksmith and knife maker and sort of a strange man. Many wealthy sportsmen and hunters and fishermen beat a path to his door to get a fine Scagel-made knife. People from all over the country heard about Scagel's fine cutlery. I have letters from retired army captains and majors dated 1939 and 1940 and during World War II, attesting to the fine quality of his knives and ordering more. It was in 1937 that Bo Randall of the famous Randall Knife Company discovered the likes of Bill Scagel. This is an old documented story that has been often times repeated and it is true. It was Bill Scagel's knives that became the inspiration and the beginning of Bo Randall making knives. Sometime during the summer of 1936, Bo Randall and his family owned a large log summer home up on the shores of Walloon Lake in Northern Michigan. One day, Bo Randall was watching a neighbor scraping paint from the bottom of a boat using the finest hunting knife Bo had ever seen. He was able to obtain that knife from that individual and chased down Bill Scagel in Fruitport and spent some time with him and that was the beginning of Bo Randall becoming a knife maker. When he returned to his home in Orlando, Florida, he started to copy the Scagel knife and, as you all know, the Bo Randall knife became quite famous. Bill was not a business entrepreneur. Bo Randall was. Hence, the Randall knife, as I mentioned, became a very famous knife and it was the one that went on one of the trips to the moon and that became a good fighting knife during World War II.

Bill Scagel also made quite a few fine fighting knives for the marines, sailors and soldiers involved in the fighting in the South Pacific. In my display on the table, you will see two such knives that I was very fortunately able to obtain from two ex-marines. One was used in the battle of Guadalcanal and one was used in the fighting on Marshall Islands.

It is accurate to say that Bill was eccentric in many ways, but then, aren't we all? Bill's eccentricities sometimes were quite remarkable. For example, he never had a drivers license, but he did buy a 1926 Cadillac sedan from which he promptly tore out the transmission, motor and differential, and used them in the shop to provide machinery and power for his cutlery with the hulk of the rest of the car laying out rusting away in the field next to his shop. For most of his 90 years, he did lead a rather reclusive life in a somewhat hermit-like existence with only his beloved dogs for company. He read a lot, was obviously well-educated and seemed not to get too lonely. In his most active years as a knife crafter, starting around 1909, he personally produced more hand crafted treasures and cutlery than perhaps any other knife maker in America, before or since. His hunting knives, especially, enjoyed such a fabulous reputation among the hunters of Michigan and elsewhere that they literally would beat a path to his door. You will never find any two of his knives exactly alike. Each had its own individual design. They were hand-forged from fine Swedish or English steel. His hallmark was what we call a Malay kris, a small, curved dagger, and the stamp, "W. SCAGEL/HAND MADE". This identification was stamped into the steel, just below the guard. You will see some of these in the following pictures. The handle of each knife was an absolute beauty in itself, artistically combining various metals, fibers, leather and horn. He made many priceless sets of steak knives and kitchen cutlery and carving sets for many people in the Muskegon/Grand Rapids area.

I frequently would get an afternoon free in the week and I would spend it visiting with Bill. The problem was, I wasn't interested in knives in those days. I wasn't paying a whole lot of attention to what he was doing. And besides that, Bill loved to talk politics. As long as you were in his camp and agreed with some of the philosophy he had, you were a really true friend. If not, he would just simply ask you to quietly leave. The Smithsonian Institution purchased from him a lot of his knives and machetes and other chopping instruments for their expeditions and explorations during the first half of the 20th Century. He made knives for Abercrombie and Fitch and for the sporting goods shop of Von Lengerke and Antoine in Chicago, who are now out of the business. You will see many knives with the VL&A and/or Abercrombie and Fitch stamp on them. These knives were the ultimate quality knives that Bill produced. Most of Bill's hand tools he made himself and, interestingly enough, every hand tool he made, he always stamped with his name and/or his little kris dagger. I have many of Bill's tools. I was fortunate to be able to get just about all of Bill's hand tools

after his death.

Some other interesting facts about Bill: He was the original do-it-yourself person. He pulled his own teeth and he made his own gold teeth of which I have several. This is unbelievable, really, when you think about it, but it is true. Bill's knives, axes and hatchets can be found in all parts of the world. When I was actively trying to put together a collection of Bill's knives, I would find correspondence from just about every state in the Union, people who had his knives or knew where they were, people who had known Bill, and of course at this point in time, Bill would be 118 years old, so obviously many of the contemporaries have gone to the great beyond. I have talked to many people who were children of some of Bill's customers, and from them, have been able to get a sizable amount of information.

The problem with the Scagel saga is that he has so much mystique about him that one has to begin to separate the fact and fiction. There are many strange myths about Bill, some of them unbelievable, but the man was so mysterious that it is exactly this type of individual that the people make stories up like these stories about him, and it is difficult to sometimes imagine some of the things that have been said. There are, however, some things that we do know. For example, during World War II in Muskegon, the Continental Motors Corporation was going full bore producing engines for tanks that fought in the desert warfare. Many hunters, sportsmen and fishermen who at that time worked for the Continental, would come out to Bill's cabin with a piece of steel that they garnered from the Continental factory and asked Bill to make a knife out of that piece of steel. Bill would grumble a bit about it, and he said, "Well, he'd make the knife, but since it was not his steel and he did not know the origin of the steel, he would not stamp his name or his kris on it." I have seen many of these knives. There is one in my display. It is a very fine knife, but we don't know what kind of steel it is because Bill simply would not put his name on it.

One of the areas of great surprise, even to the well-known Scagel collectors, has been the discovery of the fact that Bill made miniatures. These have got to be the rarest, scarcest miniatures of any type of maker. I have on my table three or four examples of his miniatures and the stories about them I have documented from the previous owners, either prior to their death or from their spouses or children.

Sometime, during the late 1930s, early 40s, Bill built himself what he referred to as his little log cabin memorial. It was a small building away from his main shop where he lived and did his work. You will see pictures of this. It is

a log cabin measuring about 8 X 12 feet, an absolute thing of beauty with stained glass windows all done by Bill and some oil paintings hanging inside. Bill was quite an avid oil painter of land and seascape scenes. We discovered an interesting thing about this cabin. The new owners, somewhere back in the 1970s, a couple by the name of Scott and Phyllis Reyburn, were doing some repair work. They found a bit of a leak in one of the eaves of this beautiful log cabin and they investigated to repair the leak and they came across a leather so-called time capsule and in this time capsule, there was a letter that Bill had written and I am going to read this to you because, even though it is in my slides, I don't know if we will be able to read it from your vantage point on the slide projector screen. At the time of the discovery of this little time capsule, we found out that a mouse had chewed through this leather capsule and had chewed out a very important part, regarding his birth place. Of course as I said earlier, we have found out where he was born and the year he was born and so on, but at the time, it was a rather strange set of circumstances that this little mouse had chewed precisely through an area that left us befuddled for some time. I will read this letter to you because I feel it is very important. This is some of Bill's stationery and, incidentally, I have the copper stationery plate showing his black lab with the big Bowie knife clenched in his teeth swimming across Spring Lake. The letterhead says "W. Scagel hand forged and finished hunting knives and axes", and is dated Thursday, October 21, 1948, and it says: To wit:

To the dumbbells that pull this building down. I built this shack and did all my own iron work. No one else worked on it. I am seventy-four years old and was born in the lumbering town of (and here is where a mouse chewed a hole in it) near the village of _____ February 12, 1875 and I am still going strong. (Here is the mouse's hole again) and do my own ornamental iron work. I did the work on the Dr. Durham's new home at Lake Harbor. Also, the stair rails and the banister inside without any help, but conditions are so rotten in the country caused by rotten politics, unionism and graft. If you are not one of the gang of criminals, you have a tough time getting material to do business. I have worked, done mechanical work for 55 years and never saw conditions as bad as they are today caused by our rotten government this last 16 years, but we are due for a change this November 2nd, 1948 and I think a change for the better.

William Scagel

Now, that was the election the following day between Thomas Dewey and Harry Truman that the New York Times made a rather strange error and declared Thomas Dewey as the new President and I am sure that

old Bill was quite disappointed when he found out that that had not really happened.

Well, time and years ran on and it was in March of 1963 when the lady who lived next door came frantically to my office and said that old Bill was sick and would I come over and see him, and I went over to see Bill and all you could think of was a great, proud stag who was too old to function and too proud to give up. He was in very dire straits of terminal illness. He was in congestive heart failure. It was winter. It was cold. He was lying on the floor next to his wood heater on an old mattress trying to put the stove back together and he had decubitus bed sores all over him and he was just a pathetic looking thing and I told him he had to go to the hospital. He fought valiantly, but he wound up in the hospital where we tried to reverse some of the severe damage caused by delayed medical treatment and the following day in March, Bill died. He willed his body to the University of Michigan Medical School for purposes of dissection, wanting to get the last bit of good from raw materials that he felt were important and the remains are buried out behind the University of Michigan Medical School in sort of a potter's field. He really did die as a pauper. Bill would be absolutely amazed today to know what his knives are doing, what has happened to them, the tremendous amount of excitement about the kind of man he was, the knives he made and the prices they bring.

Many of you know from my conversation with you in the past about Scagel that I plan to bring out a book on Bill's life, and now that I am retired, I hope to go full bore into bringing out a book. It is a difficult thing to write a book about one man, particularly when there is no living family to speak of. I have been fortunate over the years in putting together a substantial amount of tape recordings back in the 1950s and 1960s and 1970s of those people who worked with Bill and/or knew him, and now I have the pleasant task of separating the wheat from the chaff. Like all true artists, it seems as though we have to die before we can become famous and I guess it was ever thus.

The following pictures will illustrate the variety and quality of Bill Scagel's work. I hope those who see them will find them as interesting as I do.

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The only known photo of Scagel in his 40s, ca. 1920-25...



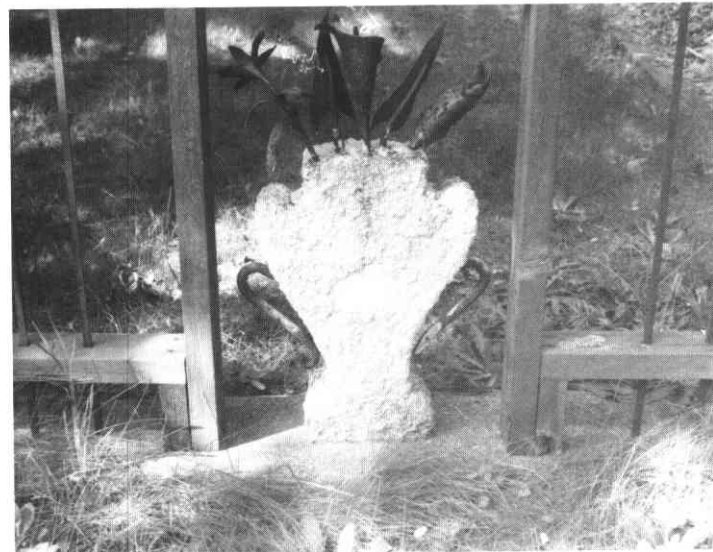
...and a picture one year before his death in 1962.



His house and workshop.



A picture taken by Scagel of his black lab swimming across Spring Lake with a Bowie knife in his teeth.



Part of a fence section with wrought iron flowers made by Scagel...



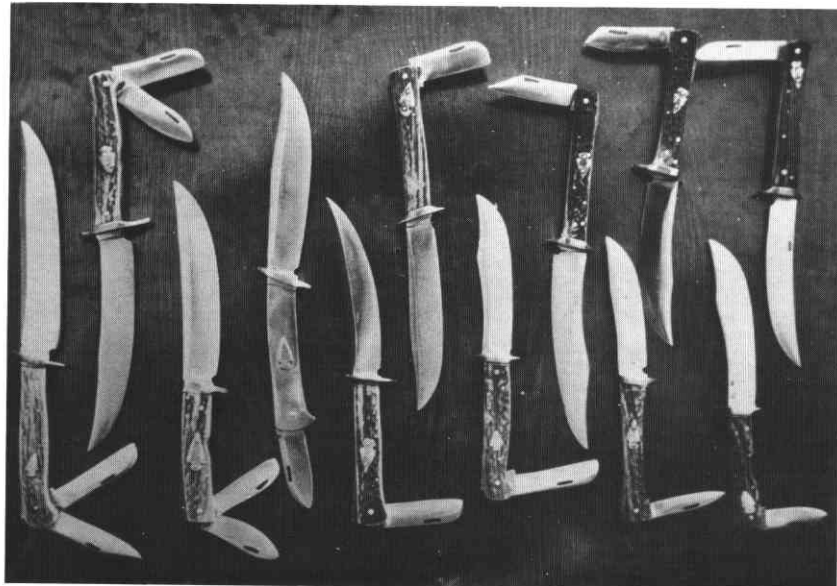
...and another part with a plaque in memory of his dogs.



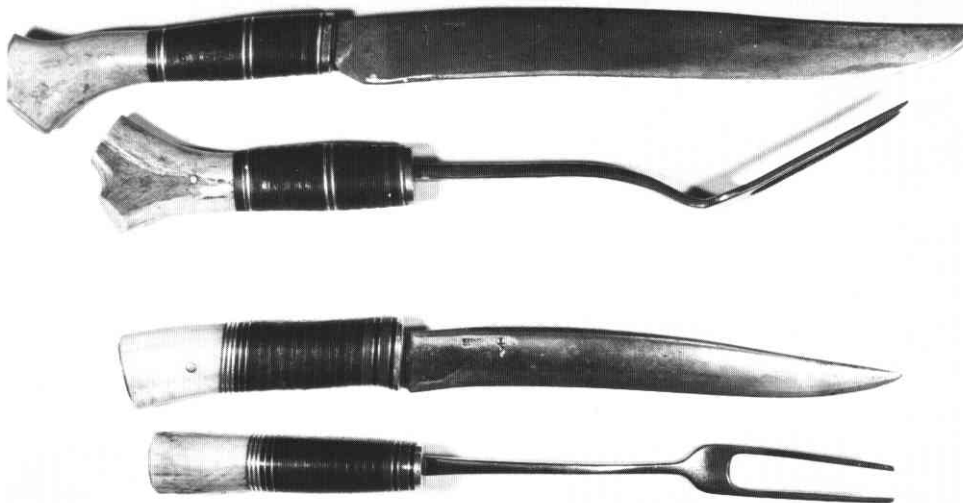
A Scagel sign for the Jim Lucie collection.



Bill Scagel's personal folder with his stamp on the arrowhead.

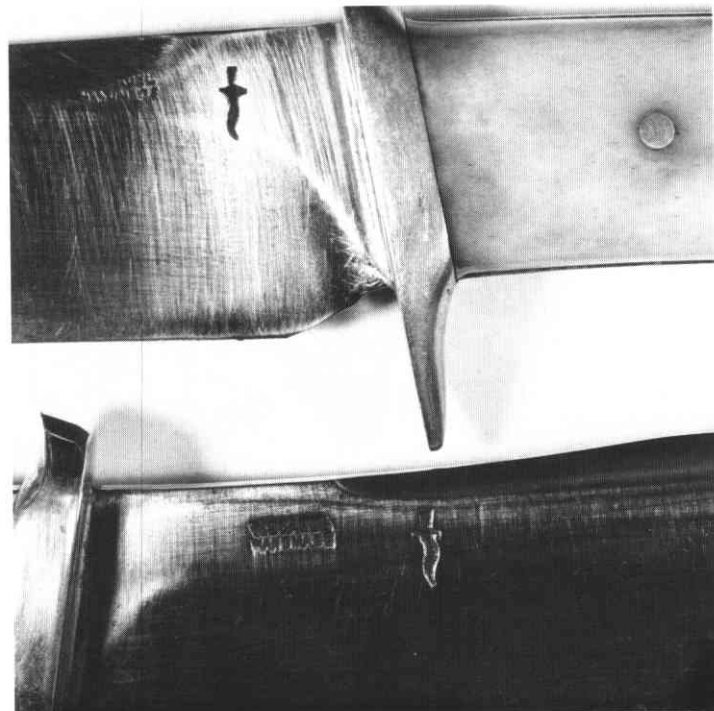


Scagel's picture of the only groups of his fixed-blade knives with a folder in the handle; they are marked VL&A or Abercrombie & Fitch.

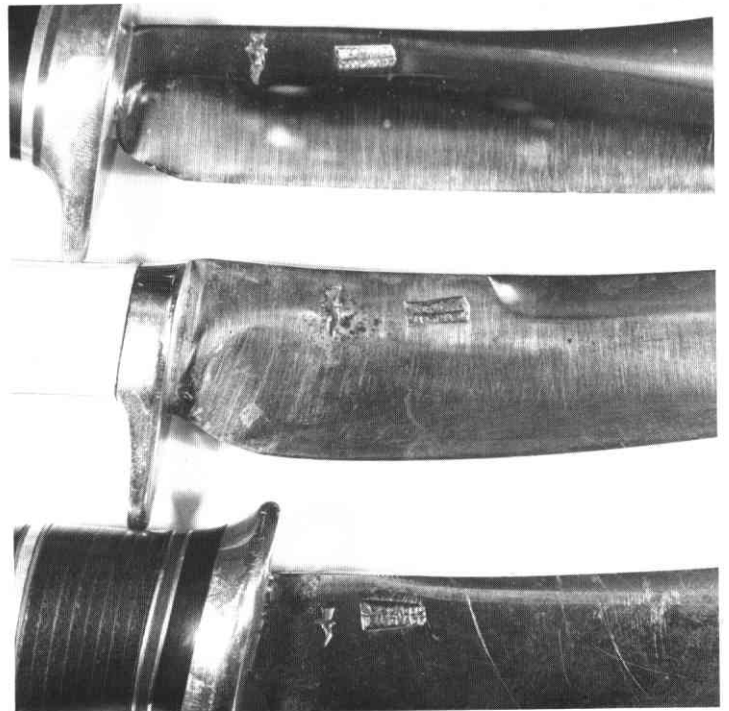


Two of Scagel's carving sets.

Markings on Scagel knives.



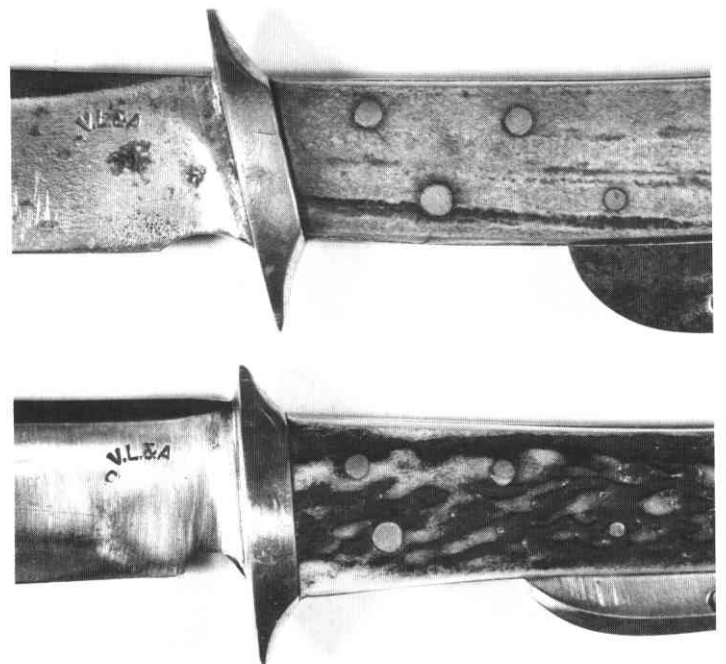
"SCAGEL/HAND MADE" and his kris stamp on two skinners.



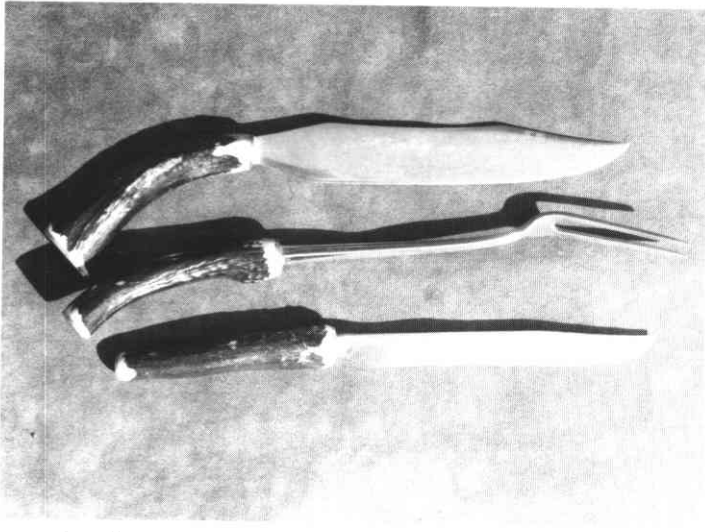
The same markings on three hunters.



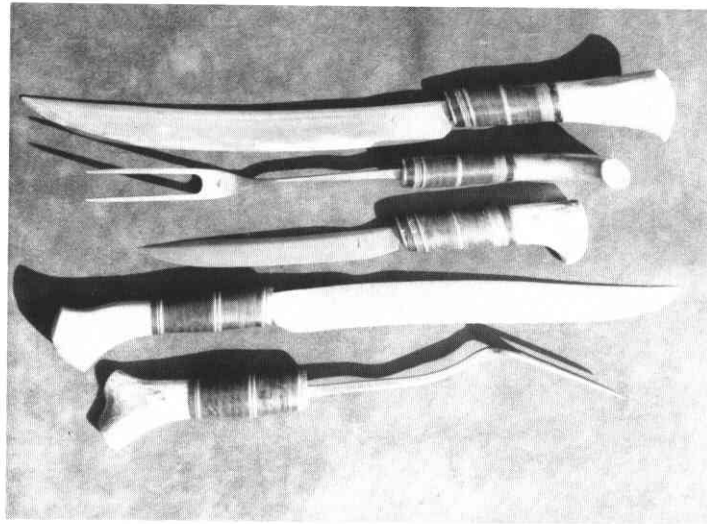
Scagel's stamps and signatures on two blades.



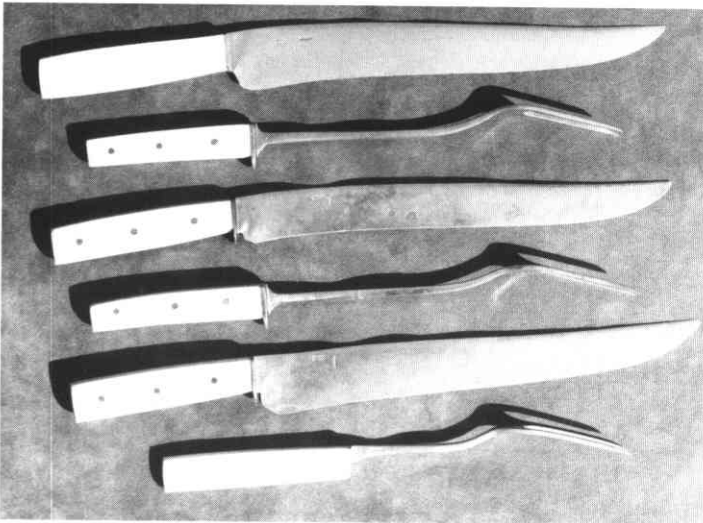
V.L. & A. stamps on two knives with folders in the handles.



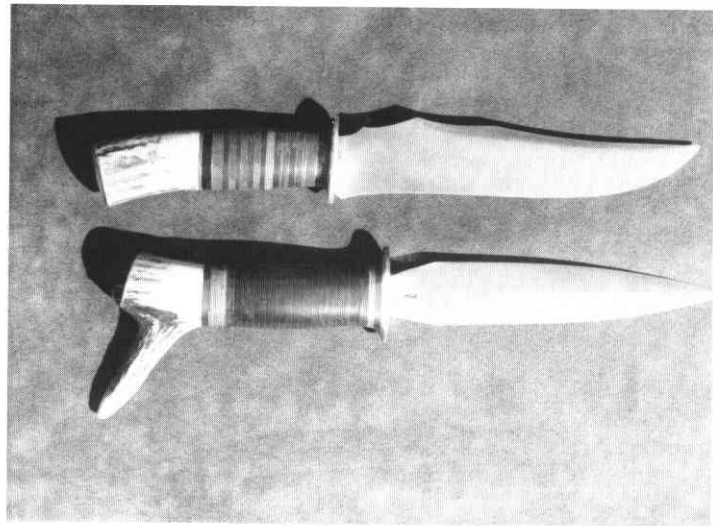
Horn-handled 3-piece carving set.



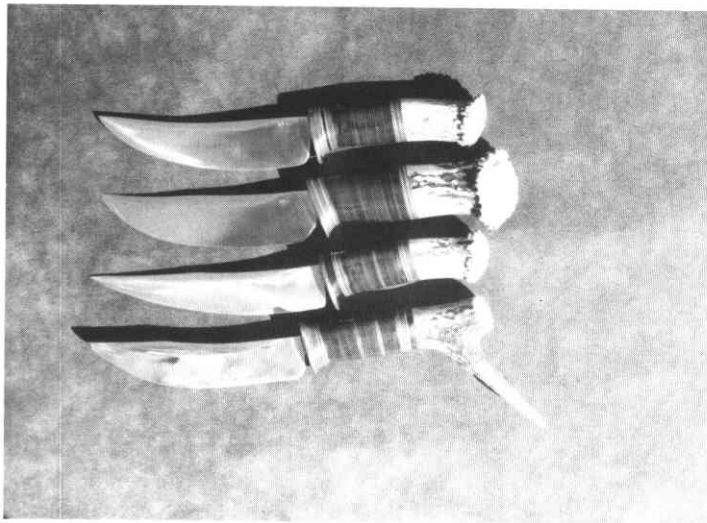
More horn-handled carving sets.



Three ivory handled carving sets.



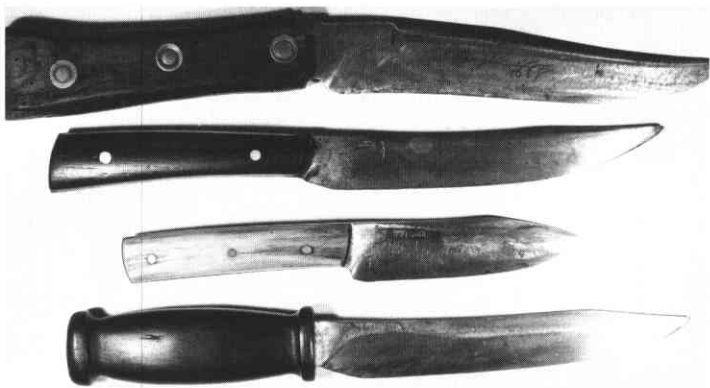
Two military knives made for two marines.



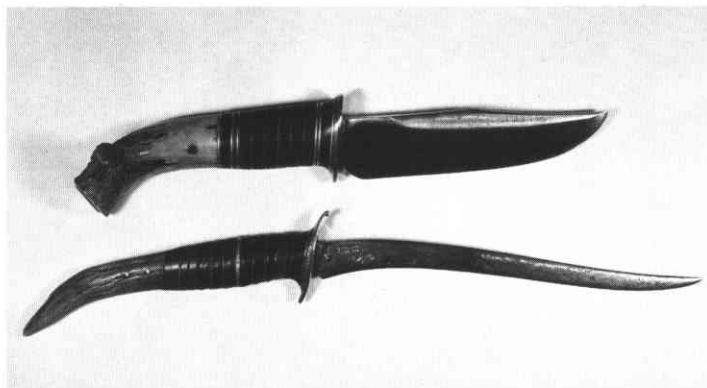
Four more Scagel hunters...



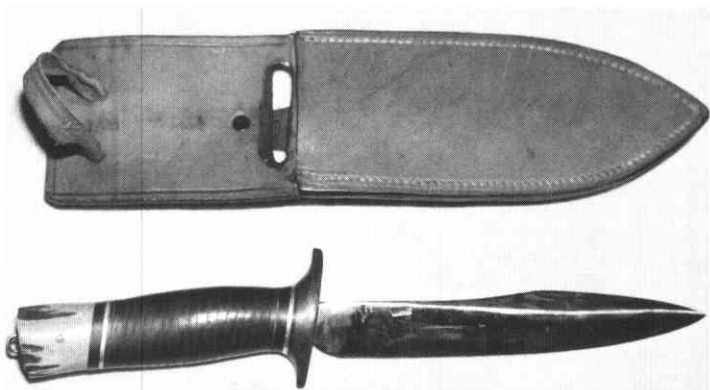
...and three more of them!



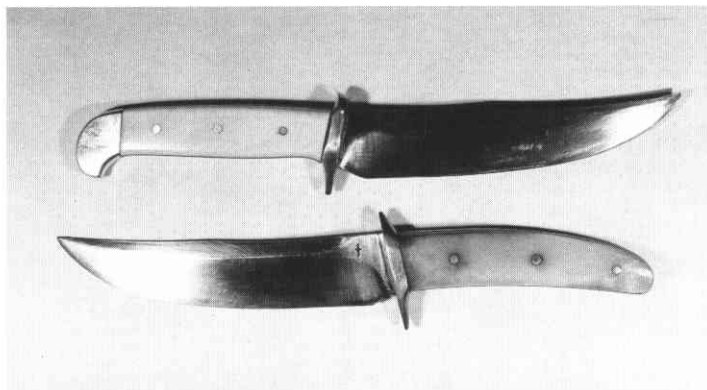
A varied group of Scagel knives, some with signatures.



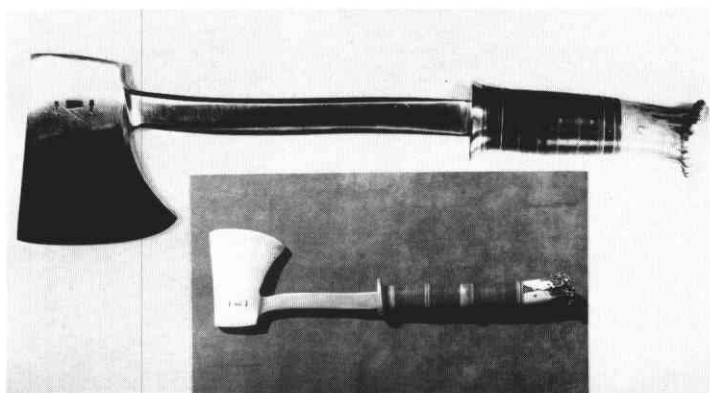
A Scagel hunter over a fish-scaling knife.



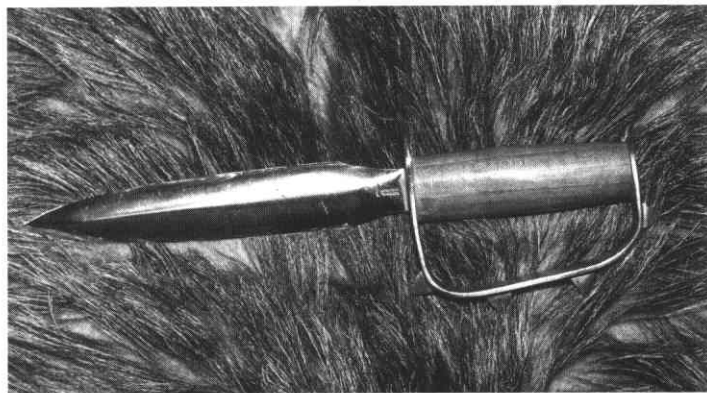
A mean fighting knife and scabbard.



Two silver-mounted hunters with ivory grips.



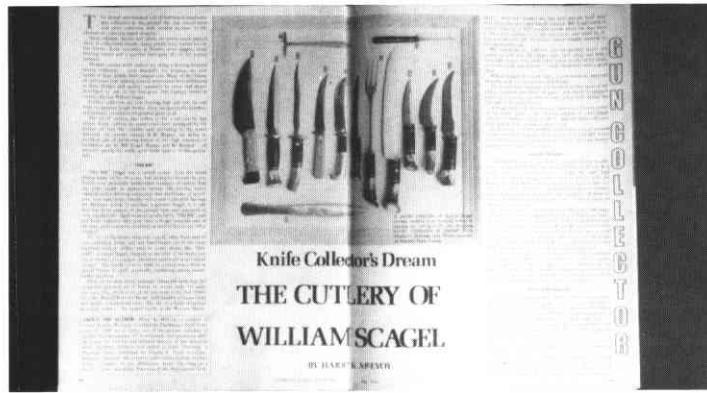
Two Scagel-made hatchets.



A fighting D-guard knife made for a WWII marine.



Three Scagel miniatures and a piece of candy.
Photo by Jim Weyer of Toledo, Oh.



More horn-handled carving sets.