

Have You Checked Your Pocketknife Lately?

Pocketknife with the tortoise-shell handle.

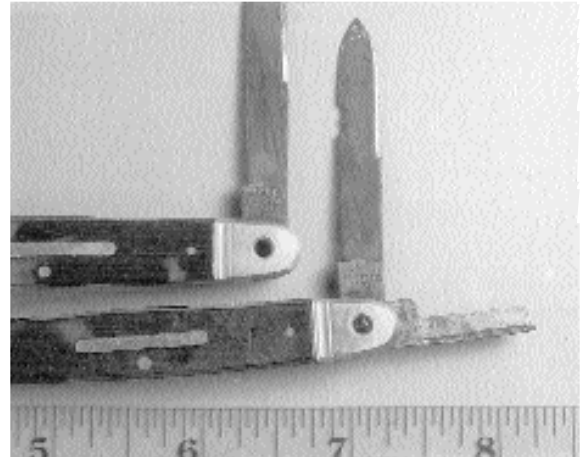
In 1865, the Steamboat Bertrand hit a snag on the Missouri River and sank about 25 miles north of Omaha, Nebraska. In her hold, she carried supplies bound for the gold rush towns of Montana Territory. Many of these objects were targeted for consumption by ambitious prospectors. Instant coffee and lemonade, canned sardines and oysters, whiskey in "lady's legs" bottles, as well as shovels, pick-axes, and hobnail boots would have been quickly bought up by the eager miners, had the ill-fated vessel reached its destination. The loss included a box of pocketknives, many of which contained tiny lenses which exhibit photographic images.

Poster advertising the Bertrand's trip.

In 1969, the wreck of the steamboat was excavated by the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the National Park Service, and the two salvors who had located the Bertrand a few years earlier.

These salvors were also prospecting for precious metal. A treasure in mercury was said to have been aboard the vessel. Unfortunately for the modern salvors, most of the quicksilver had been salvaged by the boat's insurers in the few weeks after the Bertrand sank.

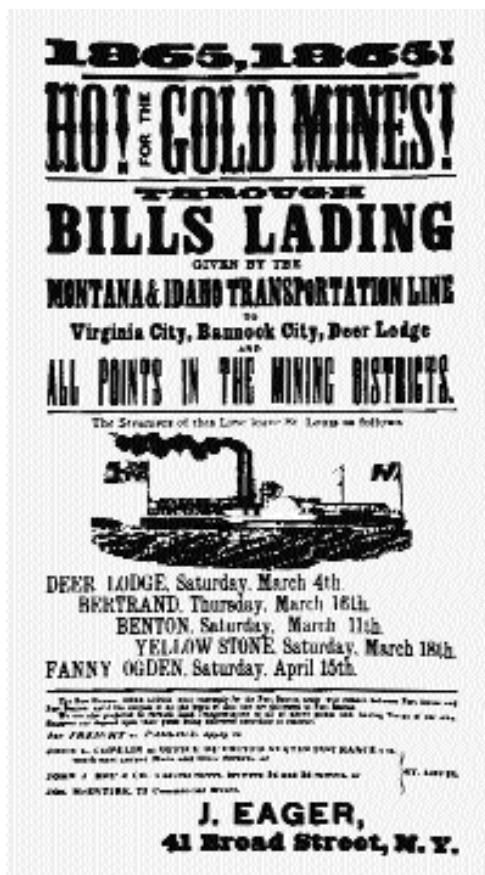
Now, nearly 30 years after the excavation, we at the Bertrand Museum work with the historic treasures on a daily basis. We occasionally find out new and interesting facts about the objects, as was recently the case. Working with Mark Zalesky, a researcher/knife expert who was in



the process of writing an article on our butcher knives, we unearthed a fact that had been "hidden" for 130 years. Some of the pocketknives from the Bertrand have Stanhope lenses, which contain pornographic photographs. The images are French, as two bear the inscription "Made in LeMans". The images are either drawings, or, in one case, an actual photograph of a Civil-War-era lady and two gentlemen. These may well be the earliest, definitively dateable Stanhope lenses in existence.

The Bertrand Collection contains two different types of pocketknives with Stanhope lenses in the bolsters. Stanhope lenses were invented in the mid-1800s by Lord Charles Stanhope in England. These lenses are about 1/8" in diameter and 3/8" in length. The viewing end of the lens is convex, and allows for high magnification in such a short focal length. The images are on collodion film, and are the precursors of microfilm. The diminutive lenses are not often recognized as such by curators and collectors. For instance, catalogers at the Bertrand Museum identified the lenses as glass rivets. They are not, however, structural components at all, but, are merely "entertaining" accessories, produced to encourage sales.

The first type of knives have mother-of-pearl handles, while the second type have tortoise-shell handles. Both types have steel blades (four), and nickel silver or German silver (white brass, with 18% nickel added to the alloy) bolsters. There are nine knives, and, of the 18 lenses (one on each bolster), only six images are still intact, and only four of these are clearly discernable. The knives



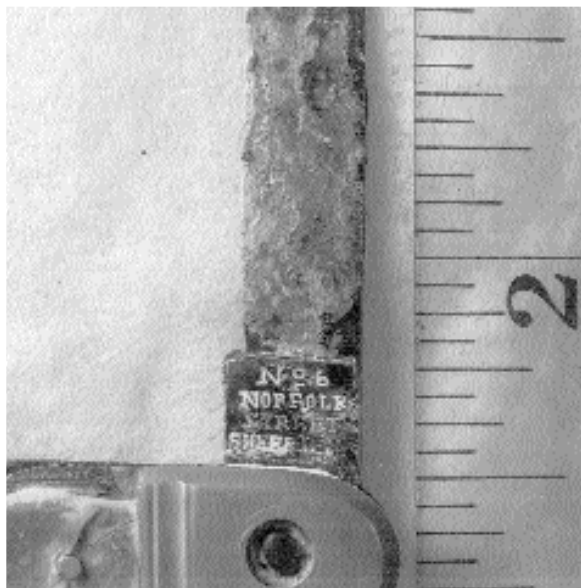
Knives with the mother-of-pearl handle and the extant images.



were manufactured by Joseph Rodgers and Sons, in Sheffield, England. This company produced knives labeled as "Cutlers to Her Majesty" (Queen Victoria), and was the most famous cutlery firm in the world during the 19th century.

The knives are of the Senator Pen Pattern, with bar shield and threaded bolsters. There are four blades: spear, pen, coping, and manicure. The

Close up of the makers mark and Stanhope lens on the knife with the mother-of-pearl handle.



knives are 3-3/8" in length closed, and 6-5/8" in length when open: 1/2" wide: and, 3/8" thick. Each has a narrow, oblong casement with two thumb-nail depressions on each handle for lifting the blades. Each has a German silver shield on the top handle.

In the early 1970s, these pocketknives were conserved without the knowledge that there were fragile photographs involved. Conservators

believed that they were dealing strictly with metal, shell, and glass. Unfortunately, treatments involved soaking in penetrating oil or alcohol, and localized cleaning with acetone, butylacetate, and muriatic acid. Six of the knives (those which have tortoise-shell handles) were first soaked in alcohol, cleaned with muriatic acid, and then rinsed in acetone. None of the photographs on these six survived. The three knives with mother-of-pearl handles were not treated with the alcohol, acetone, or acid, and all of the photographs are extant. Had the curators and conservators only known about these obscure little lenses, the outcome certainly would have been different.

Obviously, something in the conservation process of the knives with tortoise shell handles destroyed the photographs. Dr. Howard Melnick, an expert on Stanhope lenses, states that the lenses were adhered with Canada Balsam glue, and that this is soluble in xylene. It would make sense, then, that the adhesive also could be soluble in acetone, and possibly alcohol. Perhaps the muriatic acid came into contact with the images. One of these three solvents, or a combination, is probably responsible for the destruction of the tiny photographs or drawings.

Perhaps other museums, parks, and visitor centers possess objects within their collections that contain Stanhope lenses. Lenses were routinely set into any number of utilitarian utensils and memorabilia, such as; pens, letter openers, jewelry, trinkets, tape measures, even canes and umbrellas. Very special care must be taken in the conservation treatment, handling, and storage of these fragile objects. Look out for these little treasures, and treat them appropriately!

Reference

Howard B. Melnick, "Stanhopes: World in Miniature", *Knife World*, November, 1990, pp. 33-38.

Jeanne M. Harold has been the Conservator for the Bertrand Collection at the DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge for five years. Prior to this, she worked for the National Park Service for five years in Harpers Ferry, WV and Tucson, AZ.

Special thanks to Mark Zalesky, who was the first to uncover the Bertrand lenses, and Dr. Howard Melnick, both of whom supplied a wealth of information on the subject, and to George E. Gage, Refuge Manager at the DeSoto National Wildlife Refuge.