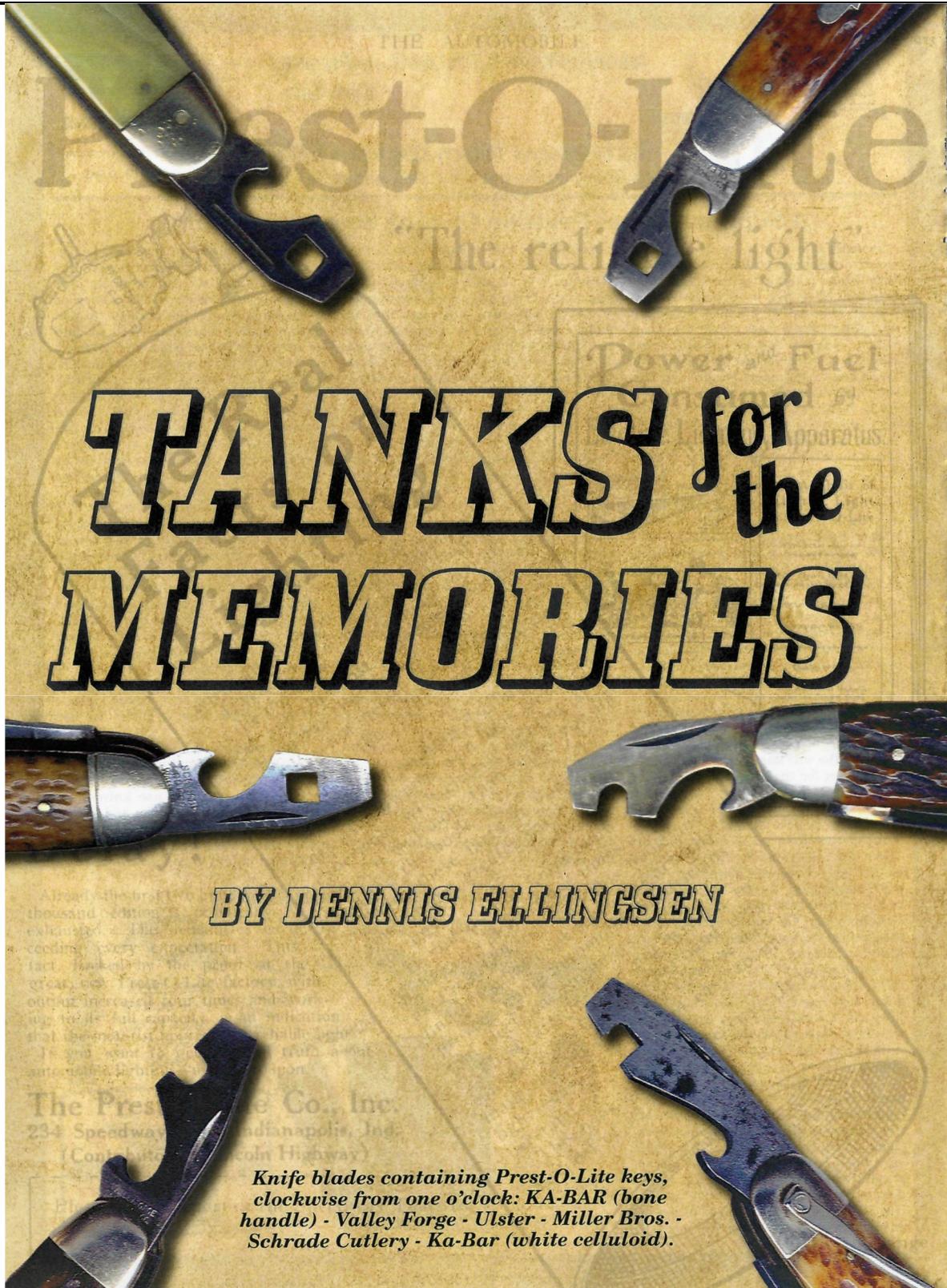


Tanks For The Memories (Square Gas Key)

By Dennis Ellingsen Knife Magazine June 2024



TANKS for the MEMORIES

BY DENNIS ELLINGSEN

Knife blades containing Prest-O-Lite keys, clockwise from one o'clock: KA-BAR (bone handle) - Valley Forge - Ulster - Miller Bros. - Schrade Cutlery - Ka-Bar (white celluloid).

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The square hole in the pocket-knife blade is not a skate key. This picture shows two skate keys, a genuine, double-ended Prest-O-Lite tank key wrench, two celluloid rulers and the pictured New York Knife pocket-knife. Together, they make up this fascinating mystery.

Many items that man has created are lost to history. Items that were a way of life and a part of most people's lives suddenly are no longer needed. This change can occur due to cultural happenings; or more than likely, the changes occur due to technological advances. There is the mystery of its intended purpose, what an item was to be used for when it was produced. The utility pocketknife often included items that were useful at one time but many times are not used today. We can date many of our knives because of this. The can opener and the leather punch (awl) are examples of this evolution. The functions were known at the time they were made, but many have become a mystery with the passing of time.

It was back in the early 1980s that I first became acquainted with the utility/scout type knives that had a square hole in the screwdriver blade. I can still remember going to the Louisville, Kentucky Knife Show when I heard someone shout across the room, "Hey, Rupert; y'all interested in a Boy Scout knife with a skate key in the blade?" I still shake my head in wonder (shudder and shiver) when I remember this; as even then I knew that this was not a skate key. I didn't know for what it was used, but I did know it wasn't for clamp-on roller skates. It seems that there were many knife books at that time that listed the square hole as being a skate key. I mean, after all, if it is in print it must be true. And to top that off, the Rupert knife wasn't even a Boy Scout knife. A utility knife, yes;

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A Prest-O-Lite acetylene tank is located on the running board of this 1911 Model T Ford. This was the pre-electric light system, before batteries were used to power the headlights.



The Prest-O-Lite tank used acetylene gas to light the headlights of early automobiles. Losing the turn of/on key supplied with the tank made the pocketknife key wrench a life saver.

a Boy Scout knife, no.

It has been a very long time ago since I put on roller skates; but I seem to recall that my skate key hung around my neck. I also recall that my key was not flat with a square hole in it, but rather it was truncated. For, you see, the square shaft was located under the skate platform, which required a truncated key to get underneath in order to tighten the skates on to one's shoes. The shaft did not extend beyond the edge of the skate, so it would be impossible to place the square hole of a knife's screwdriver blade on the shaft even if it were physically the same size.

Well, I bought the knife even though Rupert had been the intended buyer. But it would take several years before I began to get an inkling as to this square hole's use. In the meantime I purchased several real life skate keys just to have and show when someone yelled skate key and pocketknife in the same breath. Of course when I did show off my skate key, everyone wanted to know the purpose of the square hole in the pocketknife. It was only a matter of time before I was inundated with guesses as to what function the square hole served. One of the more interesting guesses was that this hole was used for winding mantle clocks. So for a short while, I carried a mantle clock

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This is a two blade New York knife that features an unusual screwdriver with the Prest-O-Lite key. Another variation on a theme of specialty offered pocket tools.



This unusual Miller Brothers utility knife also has the key wrench in its screwdriver blade.

key around my neck along with a real skate key. During the education process, I did learn how to tell an official Boy Scout knife from a utility knife. A Scout knife can be a utility knife, but a utility knife doesn't have to be a Scout knife. A Boy Scout (or Girl Scout) knife is a knife which was sanctioned by the scouting organizations. It will usually have an official logo/emblem or etching on the blade attesting to its official status. Utility knives are knives that may have a tool incorporated into them, much like the tools that one can find in an Official Scout knife. Many Scout knives have a screwdriver blade, a punch blade, a can opener and cap lifter blade, and a cutting blade. But please take note that the square hole does not appear in any official Boy Scout or Girl Scout knives. You say you have one? Then I say you might have one that is not as originally produced. Someone's fantasy maybe?

Well, the next step to answering this question of the square hole was to turn pages of old catalogs (many pages) until the next clue would surface. It did. Two sources, a Keen Kutter catalog and an older Marble's catalog, finally identified the square hole. A combination blade, with cap lifter, Prest-O-Lite key and screwdriver. Wow, wow, double wow - but whoa, again. What the heck is a Prest-O-Lite? What a wonderful discovery that went absolutely nowhere. This was the case where the solution to a mystery created another more perplexing mystery.

I've seen lots of square holes in various devices, but still there were no clues which helped identify the function of the mystery hole. A Marble's ad of 1918 lists pocket screwdrivers with a Prest-O-Lite key – a square hole appears in a common bottle opener marked the Picnic Bottle Opener with a patent date



This rare, seven blade knife has the Prest-O-Lite key on the screwdriver blade. All blades are marked "Union Cutlery Co" save for the main blade tang marked KA-BAR. The KA-BAR logo appeared in 1923, which allows me to surmise that the key was added up to 1925.

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of 1901. I thought that the Prest-O-Lite gadget might be for a camping lantern, something used on an automobile, a fancy cigarette lighter, a carbide lamp, or an "I dunno." I asked everyone for a clue, antique experts, auto buffs, scout buffs; and then finally when I least expected it, I was able to yell that immortal word, "Eureka." Dear Elayne wondered what the significance of the bathtub was to the square hole on the screwdriver blade. Oh, sigh. One day while perusing an old antique automobile book, the words jumped out of the page with a photo caption pointing out the 1911 automobile with acetylene gas supplied to the large headlights by a Prest-O-Lite tank. I was dumbstruck. It was way too simple. The search was over. Or was it? I now had to see one of these tanks to understand what this was all about. Since I was traveling at the time, I was able to see some Prest-O-Lite tanks at the Smithsonian and also at the Ford Museum in Michigan. Apparently, when the automobile was first invented, people rarely traveled at night. The early automobile had no need for a battery. When lights were added, attempts were made with candles, carbide gas generators, oil and kerosene. Sometime around 1904, the Prest-O-Lite Company was formed to produce a tank that held acetylene.

This collection of knives featuring Prest-O-Lite key blades is displayed in a vintage knife display case. Note the labels identifying the maker of each knife.

The tank had to be stout to contain the acetylene. This was the gas of choice, as it maintained a flame when other devices would not keep a flame going as well. Then around 1914, batteries were introduced to cars, and the electric headlight took off. I am told that the acetylene headlights hung around into the mid-1920s and were used by truckers that wanted the extra brightness for their night drives.

So let's go back to our square hole that we would find in the screwdriver blade of a pocket-

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knife. It is easy to figure that a key or wrench was required to turn the acetylene on and off for use. If one were to lose their regular tank key, a problem could be presented. However if one had a pocket-knife with a Prest-O-Lite key in the knife, then a tragedy could be averted. Back to the tool-in-a-pocket concept. So the mystery of the square hole was finally solved.

As a result of this study, some interesting facts surfaced. The span of the Prest-O-Lite tank for vehicles appears to be circa 1904 to 1917. With the advent of the electric light being used in automobiles, the use of acetylene gas for vehicle lights ended by the mid-1920s. The Prest-O-Lite Company was on the diversification path, since they purchased a storage battery company in 1915. The Prest-O-Lite Company continued to make tanks and torches for acetylene welding and are still active in this business today.

It is easy to see that the manufacturing of pocketknives with the square hole in them would not be needed in the mid-1920s. I find this helpful when dating these knives. Those with wrench holes would date pre-1925. The following manufacturers or representatives of pocketknives incorporated the Prest-O-Lite tank keys: Camillus, Case, Empire, Ka-Bar, Keen Kutter, Maher & Grosh, Miller Bros., Nagel Reblade, Napanoch, Riverside, Schrade, Stilleto, Union Cutlery, Ulster and Valley Forge. In addition to square holes that were placed in the center of the blades, there were variations that placed the three-sided key on one edge of the blade. Either worked quite well.

The most frequently found knives with the tank key are the Ka-Bar knives. Even the ultra-rare seven blade utility Ka-Bar has a Prest-O-Lite tank key in its screwdriver blade. Miller Bros., Ulster and Valley Forge appear to be the only companies that made the key on the edge of the blade. I have also seen many specimens that have the key blade fractured when it had extra force placed on them. These blades look quite weird, and many have been reshaped to act like a modified screwdriver. This also presented the mystery of the broken square hole that has been modified into a mystery blade. The mystery of a mystery, so to speak.

When I first became aware of the automotive Prest-O-Lite tanks, the search was on to have one of these tanks for my very own. First one on the block to own one, so to speak. It was a search that has spanned 20 years, with not even a shadow of one in the circles I traveled. And then one day I was talking to one of my customers about my knife searches and mentioned the years it took to identify the square hole in a pocketknife. I mentioned that I was still in search of a tank. "No problem," he says, "I have two of them." I think I looked pretty dumb when my mouth hung open in utter and total shock and words failed me. A pretty amazing event for a salesman.

It appears he had a tank on his 1912 Buick and had a spare, just because. I wanted that tank and he said he wanted a utility knife with a Prest-O-Lite key in it. I hated to give up a pocketknife; but considering the search I had been on, this was the easiest thing to do. The tank itself is a real treasure to me. It measures 6 inches in diameter, 20 inches long, including the stem and is chrome plated. The tank was meant to fit horizontally on the running board of a vehicle and has a gauge on the bottom of it to tell how much acetylene it contained. The Prest-O-Lite gauge has a patent date of 1910 on it. The tank empty weighs in at 24 pounds. Uff da.

I am told that acetylene tanks like this could often be found copper plated and could fit vertically on a vehicle too. I will leave that search for a tank collector as I have now satisfied my curiosity on the square hole and the tanks. The treasure hunt for this item is over now. I have a tank and my friend has a pocketknife with a key. We both be happy campers. Now if I can just find a pair of Buster Brown boots with the pouch that holds a Buster Brown utility knife ... any size will do. □