

What's a Jackknife?

He thought everyone carried one.

By Tommy C. Faris as told to John Silab

A few years ago, I was in charge of a steak fry for my local service club. I knew I would be short on steak knives, so I told the guys, "Bring your own jackknives."

"What's a jackknife, Tommy?" they asked.

"Are you kidding me?" I laughed in disbelief. I thought they were putting me on. But it was true. No one knew what a jackknife was.

"It's a folding knife," I explained simply. "A pocketknife."

The day of the steak fry, some brought steak knives from home. One guy brought a hunting knife. No one had a jackknife. I thought everyone carried one. That started me thinking back to when I was a kid.

I was born in 1934. For a while, I lived with my grandparents.

About once a week, the Lebanese-Americans who had emigrated from Beirut would meet at someone's house. When they came to my grandmother's house, the men would sit in one room and the women in another to talk. My grandmother would come in with a large wooden bowl filled with apples, oranges or pears. The men would reach into their pockets and pull out their jackknives. They would peel the fruit while they talked.

Years later, I mentioned this ritual to my Uncle Myron. He was surprised that I remembered it since I had been only 4 years old at the time. He said that he was fascinated by the way one of the men could peel a fruit so that the narrow peeling spiraled all the way to the floor without breaking.

Each spring, my grandfather and my father, Jim, would go into the country to search for a spring where



Tommy holds his jackknife.

they could find watercress growing. When they found some, they would pull out their jackknives and cut it.

I wanted to be like the men, so I took out my own little knife. It was a tiny, cheap knife that I had gotten in a box of Guess What. These small packages, which sold for 2 cents, contained a couple of caramel candies and a surprise. Sometimes the surprise was a tiny doll, sometimes a spinning top and sometimes a tin jackknife.

But when I tried to cut the watercress with my toy knife, the knife broke apart. I cried. My grandfather scolded me: "Little men don't cry."

My dad smiled. The next day he bought me a real jackknife. "If you cut yourself or throw it in the mud or scratch the furniture with it, I'll take it away from you," he told me. "I treat you like a man, so I expect you to act like a man."

I was proud and happy. That jackknife was my treasure. Like a Leatherman or a Swiss Army Knife today, the jackknife was the all-purpose tool of its day. It is still useful for so many things: cutting weeds, cutting string or twine, cutting meat on a hunting trip and countless other tasks. I am now 75 years old, and I still carry a jackknife.

In 1957, when I graduated from college and got my first car—a 1954 Ford—my father gave me a flashlight and a jackknife for the glove compartment. "Keep it there," he told me. "When you need it, it's worth its weight in gold."

When my sons graduated from college, I gave each of them a flashlight and a fishing tackle box with a Swiss Army knife. It has become a rite of passage and a family tradition. ❁