



HAND-CRAFTING KNIVES IN BRADFORD, PA

By William C. Mellon

This year, W.R. Case & Sons Cutlery Company has been celebrating 125th years of hand-crafting pocketknives. Throughout those 125 years, Case has made the best knives in the world, right here in the USA. Knives bearing the Case logo have been produced in many different locations across Pennsylvania and New York. In fact, the history of American-made cutlery can be traced back to what is referred to as the “100 Mile Magic Circle.” This region covers the area from just south of Bradford, PA to north of Springville, NY. During the late 1800’s, 74 different cutlery companies operated in this area, with many of them bearing association to the Case family. The area was much like Sheffield, England and Solingen, Germany, as it was the heartland of American-made cutlery. While many

cutlery companies formed in this region, none of them stood the test of time like W.R. Case & Sons. While the brand had its origins in Cattaraugus County of New York State, the history of W.R. Case & Sons owes itself to three factories of which all manufactured knives in Bradford.

The first of these factories was located on Bank Street. After leaving Case Brothers and running his own successful jobbing firm, John Russell (Russ) Case decided to open his own factory. With his brother-in-law Harvey Platts at his side, Russ oversaw the building of the factory in 1905. It had a price tag of \$6,500 and he projected to employ 125 people. During the Bank Street Era, Russ’s father William Russell (W.R.) was President, Russ served as Vice President and Sales Manager, and Harvey was the Secretary and Factory

Superintendent. Much of the equipment for the factory came from C. Platts’ Sons, which operated in Eldred, PA until 1905, when Harvey merged with Russ. The largest shareholder and who would ultimately be responsible for much of the equipment at the factory was Russ’s brother-in-law, Herbert Crandall. Throughout the early 1900’s, the factory continued to thrive and output grew at a very fast pace. In 1917, production shifted to support World War I efforts. In response to the growing war demand for knives, employees at the Bank Street factory produced over 81,000 Jack knives selling for 39 ½ cents each. Eventually, the company outgrew the factory and a new manufacturing building was built on land previously reserved by Russ.

The second factory of W.R. Case & Sons was located on Russell Boulevard and was named after Russ. Employees moved into the factory on Black Friday, October 29, 1929. The layout of the building included two floors and additional facilities in the back. Initially, the second floor housed offices, Genco Razors, and an employee cafeteria. Needing additional space, an office building was constructed later on, and several employees moved into this new building on the day that will forever live in infamy: December 7, 1941. A “Quonset Hut” (a remnant from World



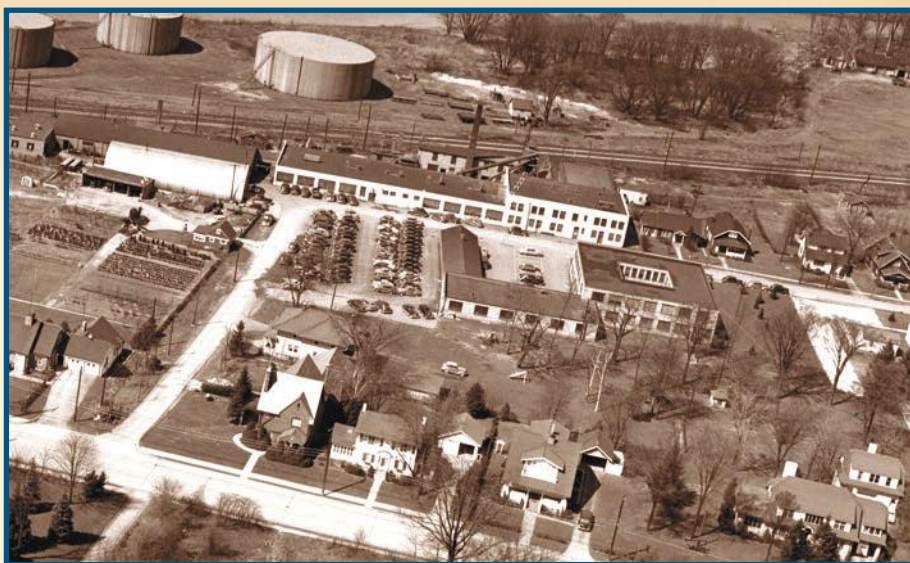
W.R. Case & Sons Bank Street factory was built in 1905 by the Tuna Manufacturing Company for a cost of \$6,500.

War II) also sat on the grounds and was used for storage of company automobiles. This location on Russell Boulevard is where Master Craftsman Tom Hart designed some of the most famous pocketknives in company history. What is really intriguing about the Russell Boulevard area is that Russ purchased land and built homes for not only himself, but for his employees as well. He wanted to ensure that his management team could live and work on the grounds. This factory would outlive Russ, who passed away in 1953. At its peak, in the 1960's, Case employed more than 1,000 people and was the largest employer in McKean County.

In 1973, the Case family sold W.R. Case & Sons Cutlery Company to American Brands. As sales continued to increase, capacity constraints combined with an increasing demand for knives resulted in the need for a bigger factory and construction began on the current Owens Way facility located in South Bradford. For several years after Case's third factory opened in 1975, the Russell Boulevard production facility was still in operation. After manufacturing knives in the Russell Boulevard facility for sixty years, production finally ended in 1987, as the plant was sold, and all operations moved to the current Owens Way location. The buildings still stand today and are monuments to the early days of W.R. Case & Sons.

In May of 1993, Zippo Manufacturing purchased Case, and the partnership we all know so well began. This ownership gave Case the security and financial backing that was needed. W.R. Case & Sons Cutlery Company proudly celebrates a remarkable milestone in Case history, 125 years of hand-crafting knives in America. Case Artisans still build each and every knife in the Owens Way facility, with the same pride and craftsmanship that collectors have admired for all these years.

The "100 Mile Magic Circle" is arguably the birthplace of American-made cutlery and W.R. Case & Sons is a product of this area. From facing the First World War at Bank Street to the Second at Russell Boulevard, the story of W.R. Case & Sons was forged by these early locations and continues to grow on Owens Way. As we move forward, we will always remember the three Bradford factories that have produced knives bearing the Case name, and we will never forget all of the hard work and dedication that went into making these locations successful.



This is an aerial view of the Russell Boulevard factory from the 1940's. Factory buildings start with the Quonset Hut (Top Left) followed by the main factory building (with bone room and Old Forge Shop behind).



The Owens Way factory looks much cleaner and brighter than days on Russell Boulevard but Case knives are still hand-crafted following traditions of 125 years of making knives in America.



Office space in the South Bradford plant was very limited, so an addition was added to the building in 1985. By the end of 1987, all operations moved from the Russell Boulevard plant to Owens Way. The giant Kodiak that was formerly on the Case Checker Aerobus can be seen on the top of the sign.