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*Pocket Knives photo by Taylor Robinson*

## Aprons & Pocket Knives – Relics of the Past?

By Bob Warren

**HEY, GUYS, WHAT'S THAT IN YOUR POCKET?** I mean besides your cell phone, blackberry and credit cards? What, no pocketknife?

Hey, gals, what's that you're wearing as you program the coffee maker, clean the microwave and polish the countertop? What, no apron?

Time was – and not too many years ago – that a self-respecting man or boy would not be caught without at least one knife in his pocket. Likewise, housewives, as they were called in the early days, could usually be found wearing from one to three aprons while they went about their daily chores.

Let's take a closer look at these yesteryear "tools" to see why they were so important – especially in the rural areas.

First, knives: They have been at man's side, or in his pocket, since cave man days, necessary tools in the hunting and fishing business. When men graduated from loincloths to overalls

with pockets, knives changed from fixed bladed hunting knives to those with folding blades. By the early 1900s manufacturers were vying to see who could make the sharpest, most attractive yet durable knives. The three bladed model became popular with its varying varying-sized blades – each designed to fit a special need.

Men and boys found all kinds of uses for their beloved pocketknives. Boys soon invented a game we called "Mumbley Peg", one only we who are "older than dirt" remember playing. The players flipped their knives, trying to make one of the blades stick in a board. Today, Mumbley Peg would be considered way too dangerous, but I recall few wounds more serious than an occasional cut or stab.

Whittling, a leisurely, and sometimes creative pastime, was one of the more passive uses of pocketknives. Old men formed unofficial "spit and whittle clubs" as they gathered faithfully in

front of country stores across the South, chewed tobacco and whittled. As a young child, I watched in wonder as my dad Dad took a piece of apple box, and with nothing more than his very sharp knife, whittled toys for me – toys he couldn't afford to buy.

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"Grandma made a pouch with her apron and used it to carry vegetables from the garden, fruit from the orchard, eggs from the hen house and sometimes to bring baby chicks in to warm by the kitchen stove"

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Our knives were handy for things such as making toothpicks from hackberry twigs, trimming and cleaning fingernails, sharpening our cedar pencils, scaling and dressing a perch, cracking a pecan, peeling a freshly pulled turnip or cutting an apple. Knives were good for performing "minor surgery" like digging a thorn or a big splinter from deep in our foot, and even for castrating a pig. (The pig might not think that qualifies as "minor surgery.") If you're wondering about germs – we sometimes "sanitized" our knife blades between uses by wiping them on our "britches leg."

But, knives were used for many other



*Dorothy Morgan models her apron  
photo by Gail Morgan*

a sweaty brow, drying hands or wiping a child's tear. Most aprons had pockets large enough to hold a few clothespins –good for clipping a dishcloth or towel to the clothesline between the weekly washing.

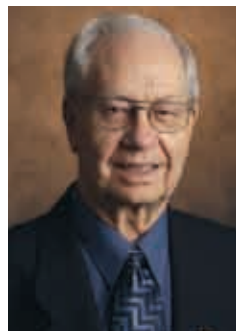
Grandma made a pouch with her apron and used it to carry vegetables from the garden, fruit from the orchard, eggs from the hen house, and sometimes to bring baby chicks in to warm by the kitchen stove. After vegetables were prepared for cooking, the apron was good for carrying out pea hulls, corn shucks and potato peelings. Then, when dinner was ready, grandma went to the door, rang the dinner bell and waved her apron to call the family in from the field, the barnyard or from play.

When unexpected company drove up, grandma yanked her top apron off, making it a fast dust cloth or a "wash cloth" to wipe the grime from the children's face. She then hastily tossed that apron aside, leaving the clean one showing as she hurried to the door to greet her visitors with a smile. Shy children sometimes hid behind momma's apron until they felt secure enough to come out and be seen.

Yes, aprons and pocketknives had many uses. Some believe nothing can be invented to fully replace these grand old "tools." Are they destined to be relics of the past, or can they make a comeback? Why don't you join us old timers as we retie our apron strings or sharpen our knives and start whittling, 'cause that's the way it was in Frisco's early days.

things – some for which they were not designed – like for a screwdriver. That often resulted in broken blades, rendering them useless for Mumbley Peg and seriously reducing their value in "knife swaps." Swapping knives was a popular sport, as was seeing whose knife was sharpest. Having one so sharp it would shave the hair on your arm – and successfully demonstrating it – was a worthy goal.

Now to aprons, pronounced "aperns" in these parts. We're not talking about those frilly, doily sized aprons French maids wear, and not those beautiful, decorative kind you can buy today, but the heavy duty, functional kind grandma wore to protect her dress. Grandmas all over the South put on one or two aprons each morning before heading for the kitchen, the garden or the chicken coop. In the kitchen, her apron doubled as a potholder for handling hot pans. It protected the dress from grease splatters, water spills and milk splashed from the churn. It was great for cleaning up crumbs, mopping



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