

A Brief History of Switchblade Knives and the Federal Switchblade Act

This edited compilation of previously published works was assembled from numerous sources including: "An Introduction to Switchblade Knives" by Ben and Lowell Meyers, "The Switchblade Menace" by Bernard Levine and published in various publications including *Knife World*, "The Toy That Kills" by Jack Pollack published in *Women's Home Companion*, "Collector's Guide to Switchblade Knives: An Illustrated Historical and Price Reference" by Richard Langston, "Knife Laws of the U.S." by Evan Nappen, and Wikipedia's entry for "Switchblade."

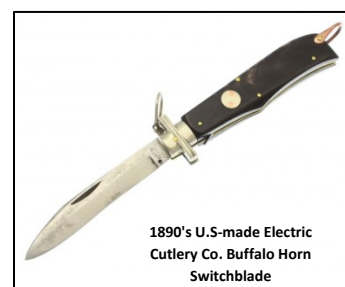
Switchblade knives date from the early- to mid-1800s. The earliest known examples of spring-operated blades were constructed by craftsmen in Europe. Examples of automatic folding knives from Sheffield England have crown markings that date to 1840.



The 1851 Crystal Palace Exhibition in London was the stimulus for production of numerous switchblades and advances in design.

Individually handmade and expensive, many European switchblades made it across the Atlantic to the United States where they were proudly possessed by individuals of significant means.

The advent of mass production after the Civil War enabled folding knives with multiple components to be produced in large numbers at lower cost. By 1880 numerous knife manufacturers began marketing much more affordable automatic knives. Automatic knife sales were never more than a fraction of sales generated by conventional folding knives, yet the type enjoyed consistent, if relatively modest, sales.



In 1892, George Schrade, a New York toolmaker and machinist, patented the first of several practical automatic knife designs. The following year Schrade founded the New York Press Button Knife Company to manufacture his switchblade knife design which had a release button in the knife bolster.

1900–1945

In the U.S., commercial development of the switchblade knife was dominated by the inventions of George Schrade and his Press Button Knife Co., though W.R. Case, Union Cutlery, Camillus Cutlery and other U.S. knife manufacturers also marketed automatic knives of their own design.



Most of Schrade's switchblade patterns were automatic versions of utilitarian jackknives and pocket knives, as well as smaller penknife models designed to appeal to women buyers. In 1903, Schrade sold his interest in the New York Press Button Knife Co. to the Walden Knife Co., and moved to Walden, New York.

There Schrade establishing a production line to manufacture several patterns of Schrade-designed switchblade knives, ranging from a large folding hunter to a small pocket knife. Walden Knife Co. would go on to sell tens of thousands of copies of Schrade's original bolster button design.

In 1904, in combination with his brothers Louis and William, George Schrade formed the Schrade Cutlery Co. in Walden and began developing a new series of switchblades, which he patented in 1906–07. Schrade's new Safety Pushbutton Knives incorporated several design improvements over his earlier work, and featured a handle-mounted operating button with a sliding safety switch.



In successive patents from 1906 through 1916 Schrade would steadily improve this design, which would later become known as the Presto series. With the Presto line, Schrade would largely dominate the automatic knife market in the United States for the next forty years. Schrade would go on to manufacture hundreds of thousands of switchblade knives under several trademarks and brands, while other companies used Schrade's patent as the basis for their own switchblade patterns.

The advertising campaigns of the day by Schrade and other automatic knife manufacturers focused on marketing to tradesmen, farmers, ranchers, hunters, and women who needed a compact pocket knife that could be brought into action safely with one hand when needed. Schrade advertised thusly:

Operated With One Hand.

No Breaking of Finger Nails.

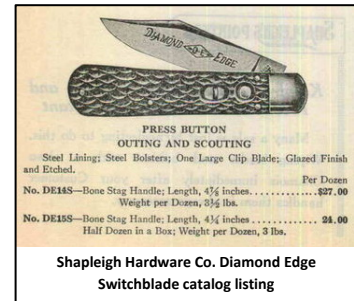
Will Not Open in Your Pocket.

Will Not Close on the Fingers When in Use.

The Schrade Safety Push Button Knife, of which we are the exclusive manufacturers, is rapidly becoming the leading knife on the market because of its many advantages over the ordinary pocket knife. Being easily operated with one hand it is far more convenient than the old style pocket knife which necessitates the use of both hands to open and frequently results in broken finger nails... This novel knife is especially suitable for a gift or souvenir, as it is something out of the ordinary, very useful, and when furnished with one of our attractive handles makes an ideal gift.

Most American-made switchblades made after 1900 were patterned after standard utilitarian pocketknives. Blade lengths rarely exceeded five inches, most were under three and a half inches. A few manufacturers introduced the double switchblade, featuring two blades that could be automatically opened and locked with the push of a button.

At the low end of the market, Shapleigh Hardware Company of St. Louis, Missouri contracted tens of thousands of switchblades under the trademark Diamond Edge. Most of these knives were novelty items, assembled at the lowest possible cost. Sold off display cards in countless hardware and general stores, many Diamond Edge switchblades failed to last more than a few months in actual use.



Other companies such as Imperial Knife and Remington Arms paid Schrade royalties in order to produce automatic "contract knives" for rebranding and sale by large mail-order catalog retailers such as Sears and Wards.

Schrade traveled to Europe in 1911, first to Sheffield, England, where he assisted Thomas Turner & Company in improving their production of switchblade knives. He next moved to the knifemaking center of Solingen, Germany where he opened a factory to produce his safety pushbutton switchblade knife. In 1915 or 1916 Schrade sold his Solingen holdings (some sources state they were seized by the German government, engaged at that time in WWI) and returned to the United States.

Swordmakers in Toledo, Spain, developed a market in the 1920s for gold plated automatic leverlock knives with pearl handles and enamel inlaid blades. Italian knifemakers had their own style of knives including both pushbutton and leverlock styles. Some Italian switchblades incorporated a spearpoint blade equipped with a blade lock release activated by picking up a lever at the pivot end. Later designs incorporated the blade lock release into a tilting bolster/cross guard.

Upon returning to the U.S., Schrade made a final improvement to his Presto series of switchblades patented on June 6, 1916. The next year, Schrade licensed his new "flylock" switchblade design to the Challenge Cutlery Company, which he then joined. Under the trademark of Flylock Knife Co., Challenge made several patterns of the flylock switchblade, including a small pen knife model specifically designed to appeal to women buyers.

A Challenge Cutlery advertisement of the day depicted a female hand operating a fly-lock automatic pen knife, accompanied by a caption urging women to buy one for their sewing kit so as not to break a nail while attempting to open a normal pen knife. Schrade pursued his knifemaking interests at both Challenge and at Schrade, where his brother George now managed one of the company's factories.

With a few ex-Challenge employees, Schrade formed a second company, the Geo. Schrade Knife Company, primarily to manufacture his Presto series of switchblade knives. In 1937, Schrade came out with a number of low-cost switchblade knives, including the widely distributed Flying Jack. The Flying Jack had a



sliding operating latch and could be produced with one or more automatically opening blades. Always looking for a new way to appeal to customers, Schrade continued to experiment with new forms of switchblade designs up to his death in 1940.

Postwar Sales and the Italian Stiletto

From the end of World War II until 1958, most U.S.-manufactured switchblades were manufactured by Schrade (now Schrade-Walden, Inc., a division of Imperial Knife Co.), and the Colonial Knife Co. After 1945, American soldiers returning home from Europe brought along individually purchased examples of what would become known as the Italian stiletto switchblade. Consumer demand for more of these knives resulted in the importation of large numbers of these switchblades, primarily from Italy. These imported switchblades were frequently referred to as stilettoes, since most incorporated a now-iconic slender bayonet-style blade with a single-ground edge and an opposing false edge, together with a slim-profile handle and vestigial cross-guard reminiscent of the medieval knife.



Many were flimsy souvenir knives made for tourists, while others were made with solid materials and workmanship. The new stiletto switchblades were a revelation to buyers accustomed to the utilitarian nature of most American-made automatic knives such as the Schrade Presto pocketknife.

1950s Controversy and Anti-Switchblade Legislation

In 1950, a sensationalist article titled *The Toy That Kills* appeared in the *Women's Home Companion*, a widely read U.S. periodical of the day. The article sparked a storm of controversy. It ultimately led to a nationwide campaign by political opportunists of the day that would eventually result in state laws restricting switchblade possession or carry and federal laws criminalizing the importation and interstate commerce in automatic-opening knives. You can read that article at: www.KnifeRights.org/thetoythatkills.pdf



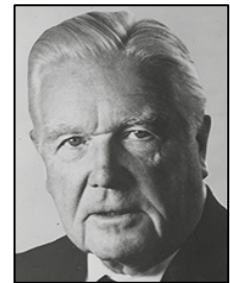
In the article, hack author Jack Harrison Pollack assured the reader that the growing switchblade "menace" could have deadly consequence "as any crook can tell you." Pollack, a former aide to Senator Harley M. Kilgore and a ghostwriter for then-Senator Harry S. Truman, had authored a series of melodramatic and sensationalist magazine articles calling for new laws to address a variety of social ills; some real, many, like this one, imaginary.

In *The Toy That Kills*, Pollack wrote that the switchblade was "designed for violence, deadly as a revolver - that's the switchblade, the 'toy' youngsters all over the country are taking up as a fad. Press the button on this new version of the pocketknife and the blade darts out like a snake's tongue. Action against this killer should be taken now." To back up his charges, Pollack provided an unsubstantiated quote from an unnamed juvenile court judge saying: "It's only a short step from carrying a switchblade to gang warfare." It is presumed by most historians that the quote was a fabrication to support the rest of the fabrications and hyperbole in the article.

Following up during the 1950s, established U.S. newspapers as well as the sensationalist tabloid press promoted the image of a young delinquent, typically Puerto Rican or black, with a stiletto switchblade. Focusing on the switchblade as a symbol of youthful evil intent, the American public's attention was attracted by lurid, and typically highly exaggerated, if not completely fictitious, stories of urban youth gang warfare and the fact that many gangs were composed of lower class youth and/or racial minorities.

The purported offensive nature of the switchblade combined with exaggerated reports of knife fights, robberies, and stabbings by youth gangs and other criminal elements in urban areas of the United States generated continuing demands from newspaper editorial rooms and opportunistic crusaders for new laws restricting the lawful possession of switchblade knives.

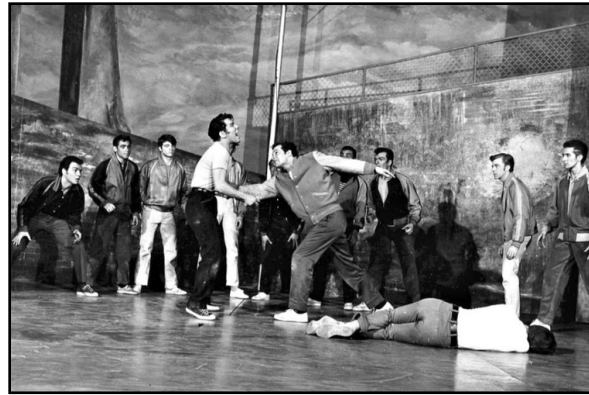
In 1954, the state of New York passed the first law banning the sale or distribution of switchblade knives, purportedly to reduce gang violence. That same year, Democratic Rep. James J. Delaney of New York authored the first bill submitted to the U.S. Congress banning the manufacture and sale of switchblades. That first effort never made it out of committee.



Some Congressmen saw the switchblade controversy as a political opportunity to capitalize on constant negative accounts of the switchblade knife and its connection to violence and youth gangs. This coverage included not only magazine articles, but also highly popular films of the mid- to late 1950s including *Rebel Without a Cause* (1955), *Crime in the Streets* (1956), *12 Angry Men* (1957), *The Delinquents* (1957), *High School Confidential* (1958), and the 1957 Broadway musical *West Side Story*.



Rebel Without a Cause (1955)



West Side Story on Broadway (1957)

Hollywood's fixation on the myth of switchblade as the symbol of youth violence, sex, and delinquency resulted in renewed demands from the public and Congress to control the sale and possession of such knives. State laws restricting or criminalizing switchblade possession and carry, of varying severity, were adopted by 24 states (16 of which have been repealed since 2010). Only 14 states enacted total bans on switchblade knives.

In 1957, with more wind behind his effort, Senator Estes Kefauver of Tennessee introduced a bill restricting the importation and possession of switchblade knives. Opposition to the bill from the U.S. knifemaking industry was muted, with the exception of Schrade-Walden and Colonial Knife. Some in the industry even supported the legislation, hoping to gain market share at the expense of Colonial and Schrade.



New York State Senator Frank J. Pino of Brooklyn testified, "Actually, these knives are, I would say inherently dangerous, they have only one purpose. They are just deadly. They are lethal weapons, and they are suited for crime, that is all they are suited for."

The only prominent public agencies with the courage to oppose the anti-switchblade measure were the two that would be charged with enforcing it: the Department of Justice and the Department of Commerce. They argued that the measure would be both costly to the government and burdensome to law-abiding citizens, yet it would accomplish no useful purpose. Moreover, it would extend the powers of the federal government into areas that had hitherto been the exclusive domain of the states. They were joined in their opposition by the Bureau of the Budget.

Deputy Attorney General William P. Rogers wrote, "The Department of Justice is unable to recommend enactment of this legislation. The committee may wish to consider whether the problem to which this legislation is addressed is one properly within the police powers of the various States. As you know, Federal law now prohibits the interstate transportation of certain inherently dangerous articles such as dynamite and nitroglycerin on carriers also transporting

passengers. The instant measures would extend the doctrine upon which such prohibitions are based by prohibiting the transportation of a single item which is not inherently dangerous but requires the introduction of a wrongful human element to make it so."

"Switchblade knives in the hands of criminals are, of course, potentially dangerous weapons. However, since they serve useful and even essential purposes in the hands of persons such as sportsmen, shipping clerks, and others engaged in lawful pursuits, the committee may deem it preferable that they be regulated at the State rather than the Federal level."

Secretary of Commerce Sinclair Weeks wrote, "The general intent of these legislative proposals appears to be to improve crime prevention by control of the use of the switchblade knife as a weapon of assault. This approach gives rise to certain objections. One is that, at best, it is an indirect approach which addresses itself to only one of many implements useable by an assailant. This casts doubt upon the resulting effectiveness in the reduction of crime in relation to its enforcement problems..."

"While this proposed legislation recognizes that there are legitimate uses that have need for switchblade knives, the exemptions would appear to assume that the most significant of these uses lie in Government activities. To us, this ignores the needs of those who derive and augment their livelihood from the 'outdoor' pursuits of hunting, fishing, trapping, and of the country's sportsmen, and many others. In our opinion there are sufficient of these that their needs must be considered."

The Department of Defense, by contrast, pusillanimously endorsed the ban, but only on condition that it be declared exempt itself. And, when a bill was later passed, it was.

While Kefauver's bill failed in 1957, a slightly revised bill prohibiting the importation or possession of switchblade knives in interstate commerce was introduced in 1958 by Senator Peter F. Mack, Jr. of Illinois.



Representative James J. Delaney of New York City, author of the first federal anti-switchblade bill back in 1954 was back testifying, "every day our newspapers report numerous muggings and attacks, most of them involving knives. Can we sit by complacently and ignore the bloodshed in our streets? Doing away with switchblades will not be a cure-all for the crime wave sweeping the Nation, but it will remove one of the favorite weapons of our juvenile and criminal element...it was not until about 1949 or 1950 that these things came into common usage. In the gathering of juvenile gangs and clans, nearly every one of them has a switchblade. It is a ritual with some of them to carry switchblades. It is not only the boys, but I was surprised to find that a great number of the girls carry them also."

Congressman Delaney's mind was made up, so it probably would have been pointless to confuse him with the facts that switchblades came into common use in the United States in the 1800s, not in the 1950s.

Another backer of the ban had an even more creative view of history. Senator Frederick G. Payne of Maine asked a witness, "Isn't it true that that type of knife, switchblade knife, in its several different forms, was developed, actually, abroad, and was developed by the so-called scum, if you want to call it, or the group who are always involved in crime?" The not-exactly unbiased witness, New York State Justice John E. Cone, co-founder of the Committee to Ban Teen-Age Weapons, enthusiastically agreed.

The most outspoken proponent of a ban, Representative Sidney R. Yates of Illinois testified, "vicious fantasies of omnipotence, idolatry... barbaric and sadistic atrocities, and monstrous violations of accepted values spring from the cult of the weapon and the switchblade knife is included in this. Minus switchblade knives and the distorted feeling of power they beget -- power that is swaggering, reckless, and itching to express itself in violence -- our delinquent adolescents would be shorn of one of their most potent means of incitement to crime."

Senator Mack's bill was enacted by Congress and signed into law as the Switchblade Knife Act of 1958.

That didn't satisfy Jack Pollack, who unable to let go of his crusade, was still writing lurid articles demanding further federal legislation prohibiting the purchase or possession of switchblade knives nationwide as late as 1968. In most states, the sale and possession of switchblade knives remained legal.

1960s to the Present Day

By the late 1960s, new production of switchblades in the United States was largely limited to military contract knives. Switchblade knives continued to be sold, carried and collected in the majority of states in which possession remained legal.

In the 1980s, automatic knife imports to the U.S. resumed with the concept of kit knives, allowing the user to assemble a working switchblade from a parts kit with the addition of a mainspring or other key part (often sold separately). Since no law prohibited importation of switchblade parts or unassembled kits, all risk of prosecution was assumed by the assembling purchaser, not the importer. This loophole was closed in 1990 by updating federal regulations (19 CFR § 12.95(a) & (b)).

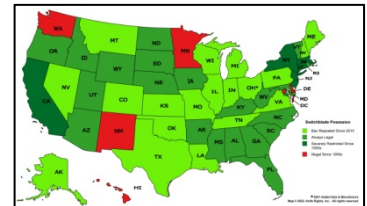
Also by the 1980s, a number of American knife manufacturers had entered or expanded into the automatic knife business, aiming their wares at civilians as well as the government. Jumping through hoops and impediments that the Federal laws required, they sold into the majority of states where civilian possession was legal and the market for these knives started growing.

Today, despite the federal restrictions, a significant number of U.S. knife companies and custom knifemakers build automatic knives, ostensibly for use by the military, law enforcement and first responders. But, once they pass legally into a state in conformity with those regulations, dealers are free to sell to civilians wherever legal.



In the mid-1990s assisted-opening knives, also known as spring-assisted knives, were developed (credit to knifemaker/designer Ken Onion) in order to circumvent switchblade bans, including the FSA. Unlike a switchblade which opens automatically when a button or device in the handle is manipulated, releasing the blade to open, an assisted-opening knife requires that the blade be manually opened part way open before a spring takes over and "assists" opening the blade the remainder of the way. In 2009 Congress passed a fifth exception to the FSA to explicitly clarify that these knives were not switchblades. This came in response to an egregious attempt by the U.S. Customs to overreach and unilaterally classify all one-hand opening knives, including assisted-opening knives, as switchblades, even though these one-hand opening knives represent over 80% of all folding knives sold in the U.S. and clearly do not meet the FSA's narrowly constrained definition.

Starting in 2010, efforts by Knife Rights to repeal existing switchblade knife bans and restrictions began in earnest. Since then 16 states have repealed their bans or restrictions, leaving just five states and the District of Columbia with outright bans in place. Additionally, since 2010 12 states have passed knife law preemption repealing local bans and ensuring that knife laws are the same no matter where one travels within the state. You can review these advances on a map at: [www.KnifeRights.org/Switchblade States](http://www.KnifeRights.org/Switchblade_States)



Automatic knives are legal to one degree or another in 45 states and legal for every-day carry in 36 states. Some well-known present-day automatic knife manufacturers include Bear & Son, Benchmade, Buck, Colonial, Heretic, Hinderer, Hogue, Kershaw, Gerber, Microtech, Paragon, Pro-Tech, SOG and Spyderco.



Examples of Contemporary Automatic (Switchblade) Knives