

Timber Scribes and Race Knives

By Neil Searle

I have three timber scribes, two are by Wynn Timmins (Heart Brand) $\frac{3}{4}$ " and a $1\frac{1}{2}$ " also one made by William Marples $\frac{1}{2}$ ". I have seen scribes and knives by a number of Sheffield edge tool makers, makers, Thomas Turner, George Barnsley & Sons and Wingfield, Rowbotham & Co., some from Continental Europe and many US makers.



Fig. 1. A standard shape (last 100 years) folding Race knife.

A Race Knife is a tool having a U or V shaped blade, used in scribing or etching permanent marks on timber work, lines, numbers and letters. Also called a Scrive knife (mainly by Shipwrights) and a Rase knife as the groove produced by the knife is called a rase.

Some trades that used these knives:

A cooper would sometimes mark the sequence (interior) of the staves prior to being fitted..... also to mark the barrels.

A Surveyor may cut distinctive marks in witness trees (USA). A Witness Tree by definition is a tree that is associated with an important historic figure or event, biological components, a tree with a remarkable age, exceptional or unusual size, and disease resistance. Also a surveyor would mark trees in forestry plots and so on until the next inventory (Bearing trees).

In forestry the race knife , is used to permanently cut marks in wood or trees "Used by timber cruisers (forest management) to mark the butt-ends of felled trees with brands that identify ownership."

Leather workers....Leather workers use a similar knife blade to make grooves in leather to bend it or to make recesses for stitching. Usually the race knife was a non-folding tool.

A Shipwright used to mark the Futtocks (frames of wooden ships) before the two molded faces of the frame are joined together. With wooden boats they used to cut a “race” at the waterline while the boat sat in the water then the boat is removed and can be painted. Race knives with solid brass handles were used near salt water.

Carpenters and lumbermen to show ownership of timber. To tally or number with Roman numerals balks or log ends. By carpenters to register junctions for heavy frame work. Carpenters commonly used Vs, Xs and multiplied I's at the mortised joints. Carpenters also used race knives to cut grooves for cabling and sometimes grooves for wires in relation to Butlers bells.



Fig.2. Race knife marks matching a joint in a timber framed building. (Marriage Marks) Marks are also found supposedly having the power to avert evil influences or bad luck. (apotropaic)

The numbering with a race knife resembles Roman numerals but the number four is usually marked IIII rather than IV and nine VIIII rather than IX because the four and nine could be mistaken for a six or eleven.

In Wineries, a non- folding race knife was kept in the cellar of wineries to mark the barrels. They often had very elaborate handles. They are called Cellarman's knives. Some Cellarman's knives also have a cork screw attachment.



Fig.3. French Customs Inspectors Timber scribe/ Race Knives. Customs inspectors in France used timber scribes. These were multi blade knives that cut 2, 3, 4 or 5 lines and were used by inspectors to verify the ships manifest was correct then he would cut his individual mark on the lumber. They had spur-like cutters, they were dragged across the wood. How far apart the lines are and the distance between the lines would designate a particular scribe that made that mark. Two, Three, four and five spur cutters were used.

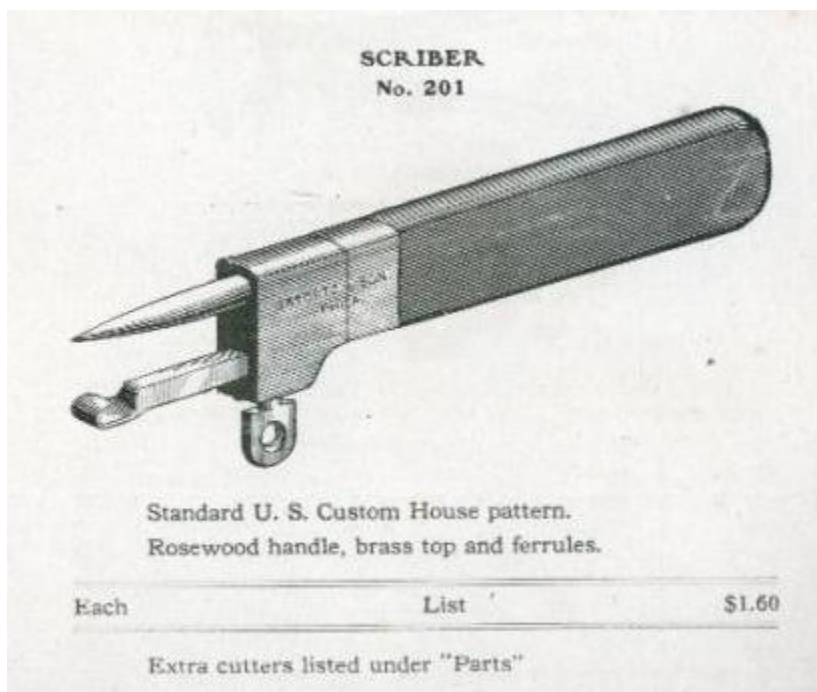


Fig.4. US Customs pattern scriber. From Colwell Cooperage Co. catalogue, NY. (1853-1920)
Manufactured by F. Weise N.Y.

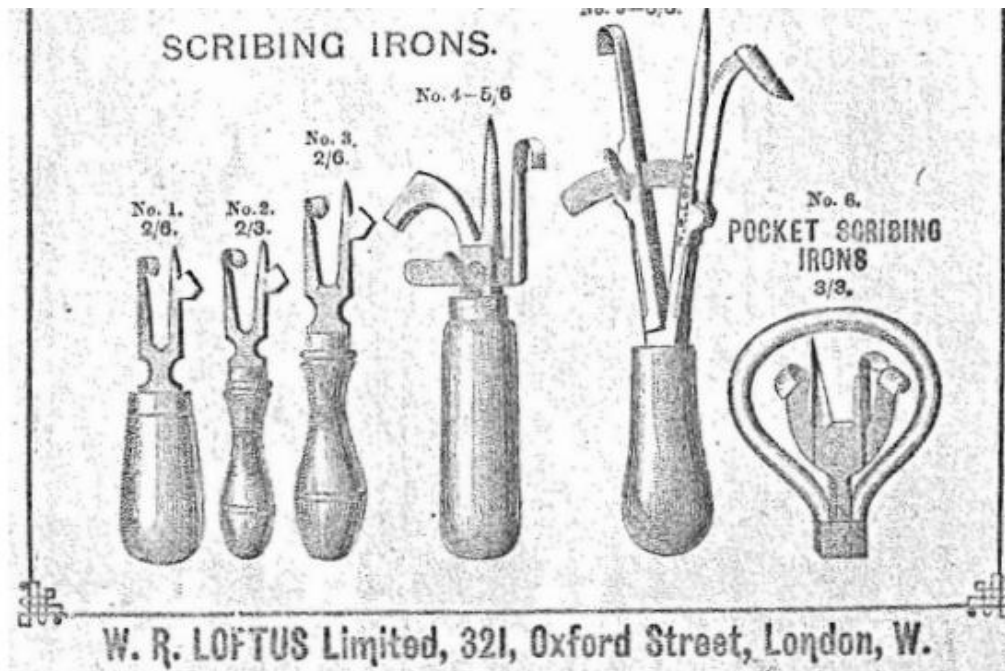


Fig.5. Timber Scribes. From the catalogue "Loftus W.R.Brewing requisites" Circa late 1800s. Oxford Street and Tottenham Court Road. William Robert Loftus (c1859-1919)



Fig. 6. Multi iron Race knife.

Timber scribes and Race knives were sold with hard cases, many of which were lost over time.

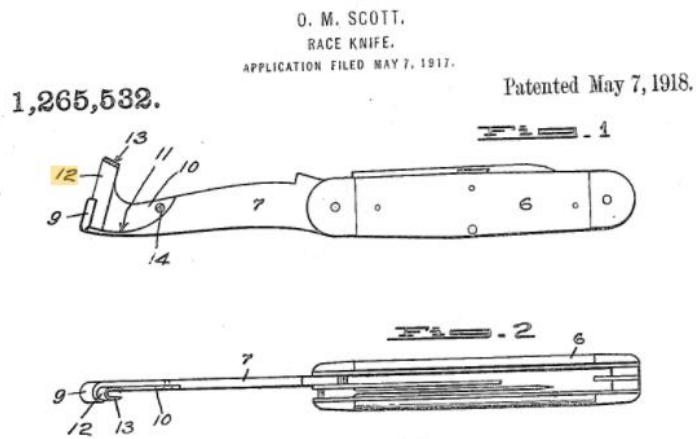


Fig. 7. O.M.Scott Patent.

OZBERT M. SCOTT, Seattle, Washington. Pat. No. 167,125 Race Knife. Patented May 7, 1918. This invention relates to improvements in race knives.

This was the precursor to the modern shape Race knife. Sales pitch at the time was *"is used to permanently cut marks in wood or trees (marking without chemical products). Pests that sit under the bark can be removed and mild tree diseases can be scratched out."*



Fig.8. A very early Timber scribe/race knife. Dated 1627. Most likely Dutch. Many were made using Buffalo Horn, boxwood and Beech.



Fig.9. A boxed timber scribe with with three groove-cutting blades.



Fig.10. Rare 17th Early 18th Century Wax Seal and Race Knife, Initalls HR. Possibly custom made for a landowner of some property and standing, and owning substantial woodlots.



Fig.11. A rare shipbuilders scribe.

Similar knives.

Rubber tree tapping knives look very similar to a race knife and are generally larger and longer so that two hands can be used. George Barnsley , Sheffield also made a variety of these, namely the “latex” , “Singon” and “Dougou”.

Farriers used a very similar tool, (Hoof Knife) a hoof-cleaning blade in the shape of a hook in the plane of the blade may also be provided for removing stones and other debris from the horse's hoof.

Ref: Jim Bode Tools. The Coopers Tool Museum. University of Reading, UK. Various Catalogues. Official Gazette of the US Patent Office. Youtube.com(The Professor, antique race knives)