

Thank you so very much for the great pics of your Scagels. They surely are great pieces. There is a very good friend of mine who is a physician colleague who lives in Denver who has probably the most incredible set of Scagels I have ever seen. I believe you two should meet since you live nearby and between the two of you, there exists some of the best Scagels I have ever seen. I have given him your name and will give you his name and numbers. He is an MD about your age and frankly "stumbled" onto this set. I believe it is the only one in existence.

Tomorrow I plan on sending you via snailmail some computer pics of his set and I have taken the liberty of getting copies of yours to him.

I believe I have come upon some documentation which you will enjoy having. I have copies of a couple of letters written by Bill Scagel that we published in a 1982 issue of BLADE magazine dated 1937 and 1939 to some one whom I do not know because the top of the letter was missing wherein Scagel tells of making a fine silver mounted Ivory handled knife that was sent to Toledo, Ohio.

It is more than mere circumstance that he made a "fine silver mounted Ivory handled knife" sent to Toledo and since the knife, as I understand it, is not marked VLA, it would date the birth of this knife in the mid-thirties. If it has a VLA stamp on it, then it would date the piece 1929 or earlier. **So I am feeling quite strongly that the knife referred to in Bill's letter is the one and same that your grandfather owned.**

I will send you copies of these letters when I gather up stuff to send you.

Regarding the script style writing you referred to as possibly "someone else" did, I can assure you that this is Scagel's work. I have many examples of this in my collection. The proof of this lies in the long scriptic arrow he always etched under the owners name. I believe I sent you a calendar I published in 1996. If you will look at the June page you will see Scagels name which he put on his personal knife with an arrow underneath and also on the Nov page where he etched in the owners name, again with an arrow beneath it.

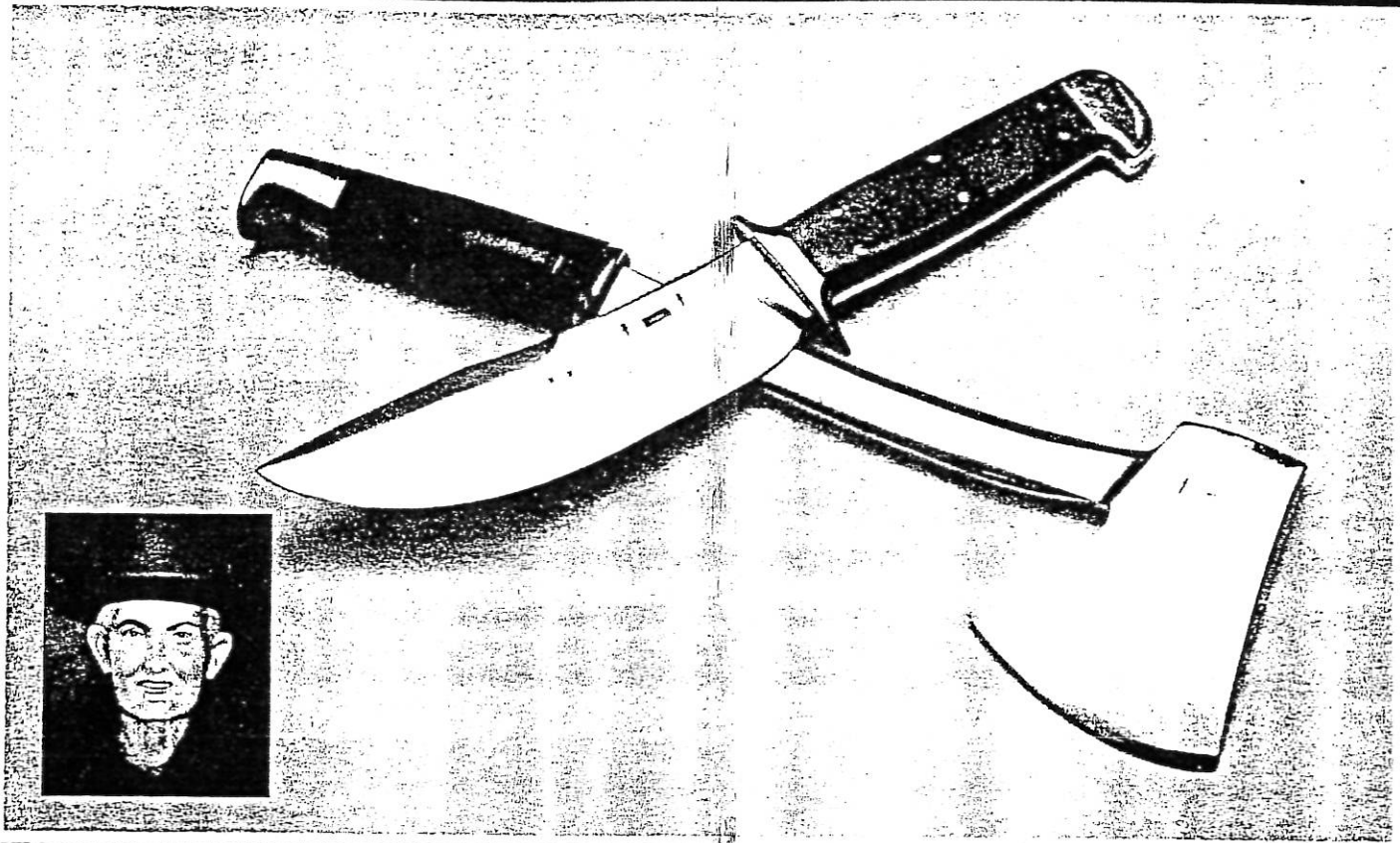
I will try to get the other info off to you in the morning.

My best regards,

Jim

Jim Lucie
Bladesmith
Scagel Style Knives
Please Note My New EMAIL ADDRESS

The Artistry of William W. "Who?"



by Norris McDowell

“I got my start,” Bo Randall says frankly, “by copying Scagel’s knife, and in the 38 years since, I’ve watched about 80 guys get their start copying my knife.”

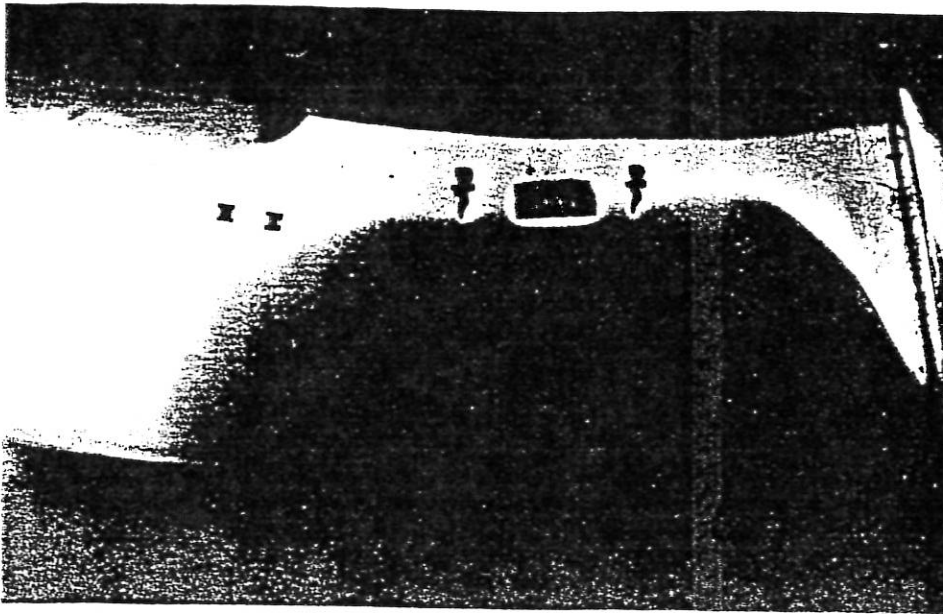
Scagel. Once in a while significance slips by without much head-turning. William Wales Scagel.

Known nationwide by a small but devoted following, this unusual man spent much of his life in a crowded workshop near Fruitport, Michigan. Some who knew him call him a recluse, an eccentric, even a hermit. And it is generally acknowledged that he did little to encourage social contact. But this blacksmith extraordinaire, gunsmith, boat builder, machinist, and creator of wondrous things was truly a remarkable man.

William Scagel’s abilities shine brightest at us through his cutlery. No one knows how many knives, swords, axes, and other bladed instruments Scagel produced between 1910, when he began his career as a cutler, and his death in 1963. No two of his products were quite alike, a Scagel trademark, each being painstakingly fashioned from “scratch” by his steady hands—which were said to always bear fresh lacerations, hazards of the cutler’s craft. In the 1930’s, Scagel sold his “ordinary” knives for about \$10, his fancy models for up to five times

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Knives from Glen Lambert Collection



that. In those days, that was a lot of money to pay for a knife. Yet if you were among the knowing few who trekked to Scagel's rustic workshop to order a knife from "Old Bill," you would have known that a knife then is a treasure now. Some individual Scagel knives have, in fact, brought hundreds of dollars from collectors, who consider them masterpieces. Today, however, you would be lucky to find anyone who would part with a Scagel—at any price. They are rare and valuable.

"Scagel could take a sledge and a hunk of steel and work miracles" says machinist Harvey Matthews of Fruitport. "I knew he was something special," says retired Muskegon Police Chief Arthur Siplon, 81, "but I never realized back then what an unusual talent he had, or that he would become so respected in his field." Respected? Many who make knives by hand today consider William Scagel the father of American knifemaking. Ask W. D. "Bo" Randall, internationally known custom knifemaker, whose products are known and respected by sportsmen everywhere. In fact, some of his knives blasted off into space with the Mercury astronauts. "I got my start," Randall says frankly, "by copying Scagel's knife, and in the 38 years since, I've watched about 80 guys get their start by copying my knife."

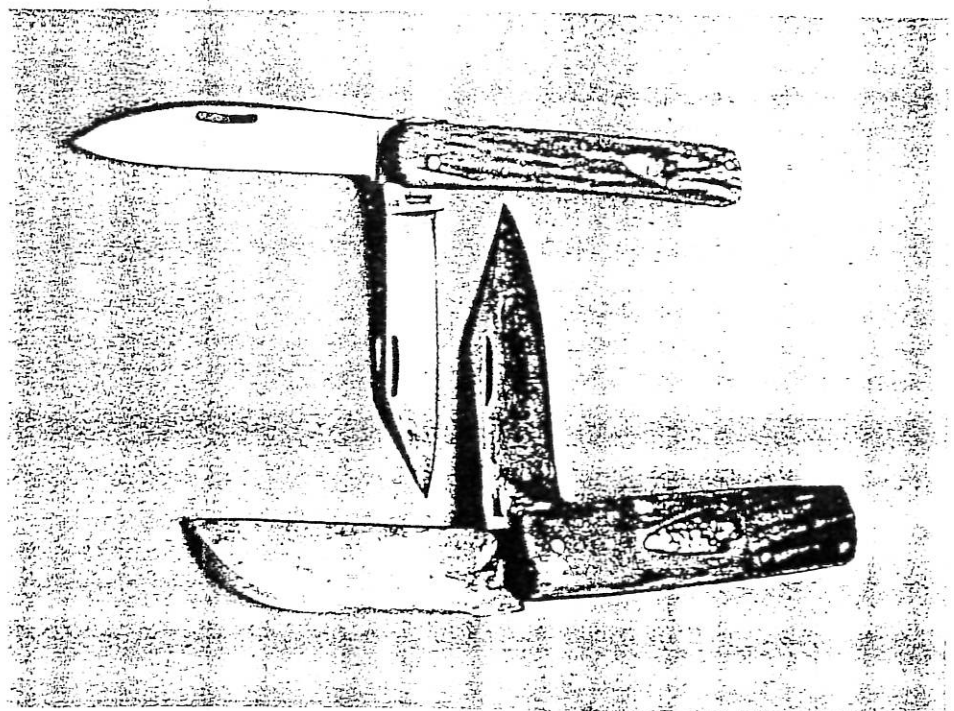
Randall, who for years has owned a summer home on Walloon Lake near Petoskey, spotted the knife he was to copy on the shore of that lake, where a man was using it to scrape the hull of

an old fishing boat. Randall dickered with the man, bought the knife, and the cornerstone of the Randall knife empire was laid. Bo Randall has written of William Scagel: "I always felt that he was then—and would have been today—the tops of them all in pure ability to make *anything* from steel. I think he turned out a greater variety of knives—all of top craftsmanship—than any other knifemaker of this century. They were well designed to do the jobs for which they were intended. Scagel never compromised on quality or workmanship. If someone brought him a piece of steel out of

which to make a knife, he might go ahead and use it, but he would not stamp his name and mark into the blade unless that steel was actually of the best quality. Most other modern knifemakers, myself included, have drawn great inspiration from cutlery designs that Scagel originated. Although many makers do not realize it, almost every hunting or fishing knife on the market today can be traced back to an old design of Bill Scagel's."

A rusty windmill tower looms silently alongside the ramshackle two-story building near Fruitport that served as William Scagel's workshop and living quarters. Scagel built both structures, as he did just about everything else he needed or wanted. Scott and Phyllis Reyburn, who live on the property, have come to feel a kinship with the late master craftsman. They never met him, but his artifacts surround them. In fact, for purposes of history, the Reyburns have assembled a modest assortment of Scagel papers and other mementoes discovered on the property. "We've found no knives, though," Phyllis shrugs. "I guess any Mr. Scagel left behind were taken away long before we moved in."

Those ordering a Scagel-made knife faced a wait of several months for its delivery. It didn't take him that long to make a knife, but other pursuits demanded much of his time. Hospitals,



for example, kept him busy with orders for orthopedic braces. Charles Johnson of Muskegon, another who liked to watch Scagel at work, recalls that those braces were unusually well built and much in demand. And discriminating surgeons made "incisive points" with Scagel scalpels. Scagel's cutlery was stocked by Von Lengerke & Antoine, for years a prestigious Chicago sporting-goods supply house. His knives and machetes were purchased by the Smithsonian Institution to equip various early 20th-century expeditions to remote corners of the world.

Few who've seen a Scagel knife would deny it is a thing of beauty, of grace. And those who've used one know the unusual quality of performance given by Scagel knives. Why? "His tempering art was his greatest secret, and unfortunately it died with him," says Harry K. McEvoy of Grand Rapids. He should know. A knife-maker himself (the Tru-Balance Knife Company), McEvoy is Scagel's unofficial biographer. Like others who knew Old Bill, McEvoy realized there was something about Scagel that needed to be recorded for posterity. Unlike those others, however, Harry McEvoy has done something about it. McEvoy has spent countless hours researching Scagel's life and times. And although he knew the old man for only the last 10 years of his life, McEvoy has accumulated a storehouse of knowledge from which he has written several articles. He writes of Scagel: "His blades were razor sharp and held a keen edge longer than most other knives produced by rivals, yet were tough and durable—easily sharpened with a good stone."

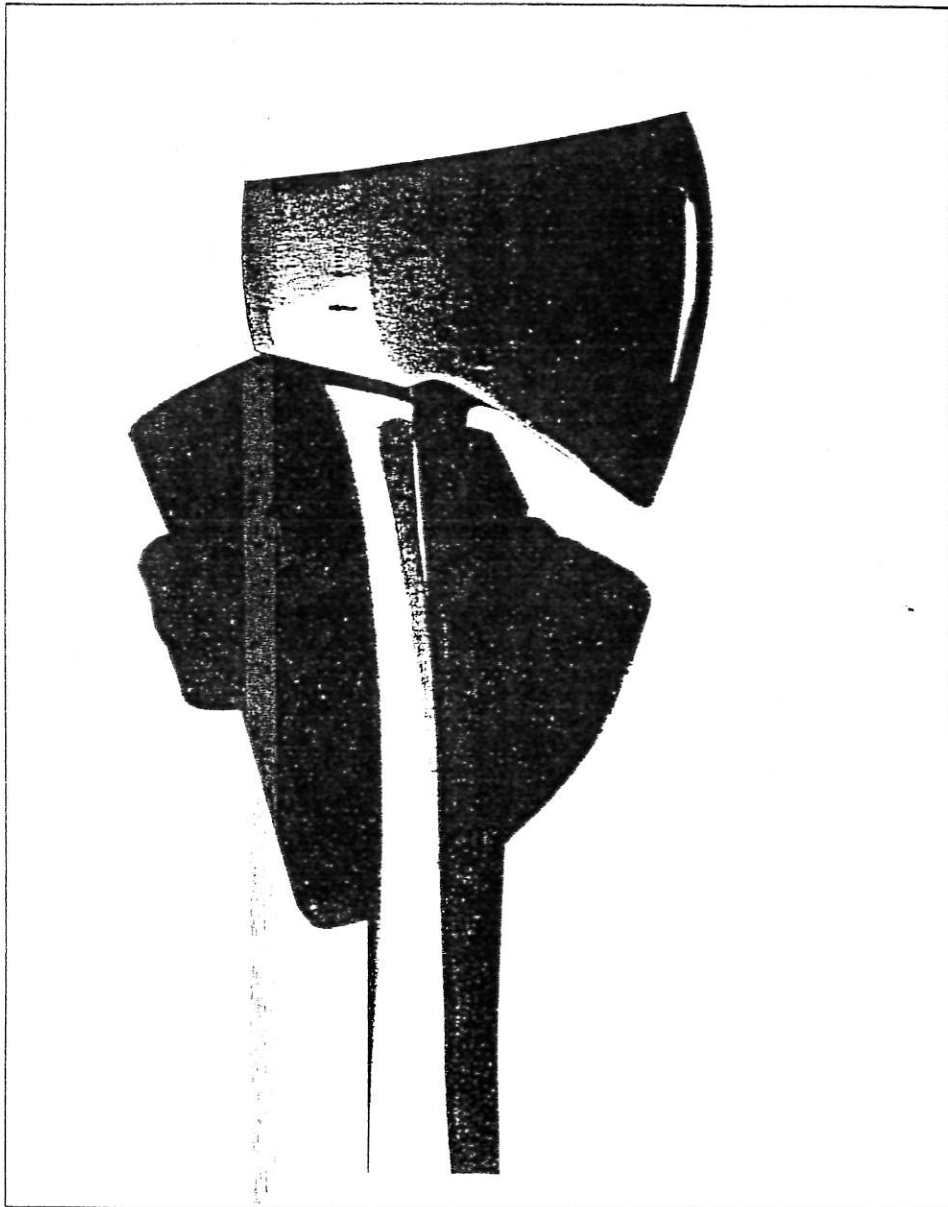
Speaking of stones, Scagel built a stone fence on his Fruitport property, decorating it with graceful wrought iron flowers, leaves, and other natural forms. Christening his acre "Dogwood Nub," Scagel planted rows of dogwood trees and erected a memorial plaque to "my true friends, my dogs." Several of those expired true friends are said to lie beneath the stone and iron of that ornate fence. A wrought iron weather vane atop a pillar depicts an age-old theme. One end depicts a hunting scene with man and dog in field, flushing pheasant. But the other end depicts a dragon. Puzzling. Why a

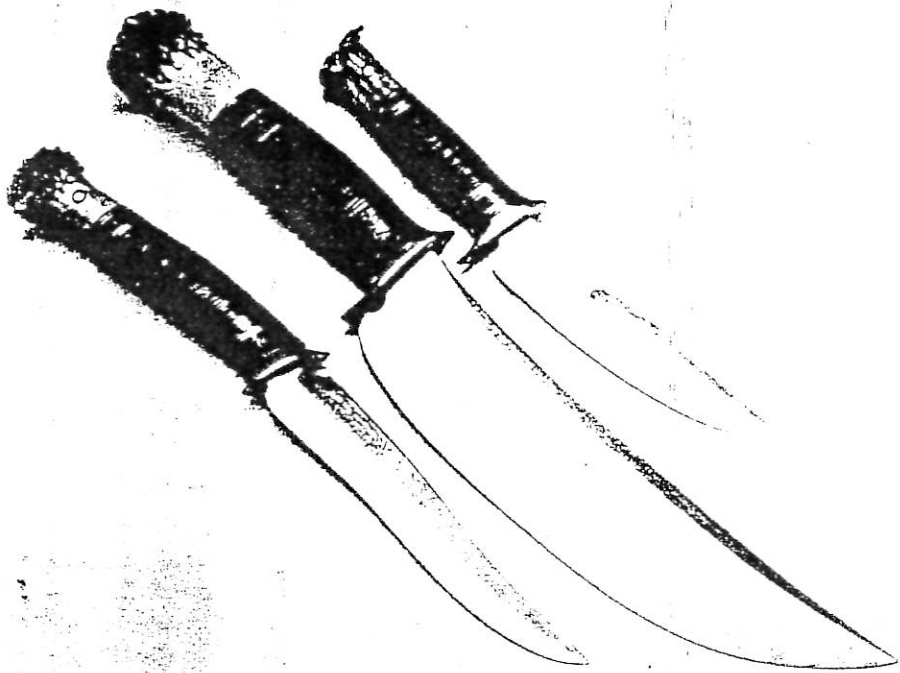
dragon? Was it symbolic, perhaps, of that mysterious side of nature that only a recluse like William Scagel comes close to facing?

As with any man who chooses to live apart from society's mainstream, much about William Scagel remains unknown, lending an aura of mystery to his life. Many stories are told about the reclusive blacksmith, some confirmed, others not. And, as one might expect, there is disagreement on certain points, even on such a seemingly simple thing as the correct pronunciation of his name. McEvoy and others pronounce Scagel as if it rhymed with "bagel." Mrs. Lillian Botbyl of Muskegon, however, pronounces it more softly as "Skay-jell." Scagel became Mrs. Botbyl's "grandpa" when she was a youngster living near Dogwood Nub, and she cared for him in his waning

years after he became too feeble to care for himself. If pronunciation is in doubt, there's also some question about the time and place of Scagel's birth. Canadian records list it as having occurred on February 12, 1875, in Grey County, Ontario. A close Scagel friend, however, has stated he heard Scagel say time and again that he was born on that day and month, but in 1873, not 1875, and not in Canada, but in Michigan. On the other hand, Scagel himself wrote that he was born February 12, 1875, in Alpena County, Michigan.

Details of Scagel's early life also are vague. He is said to have made several trips around the world while serving with the British Merchant Marine. Later, says McEvoy, the young Scagel worked as a bridge builder for the Grand Trunk Railroad in Michigan,





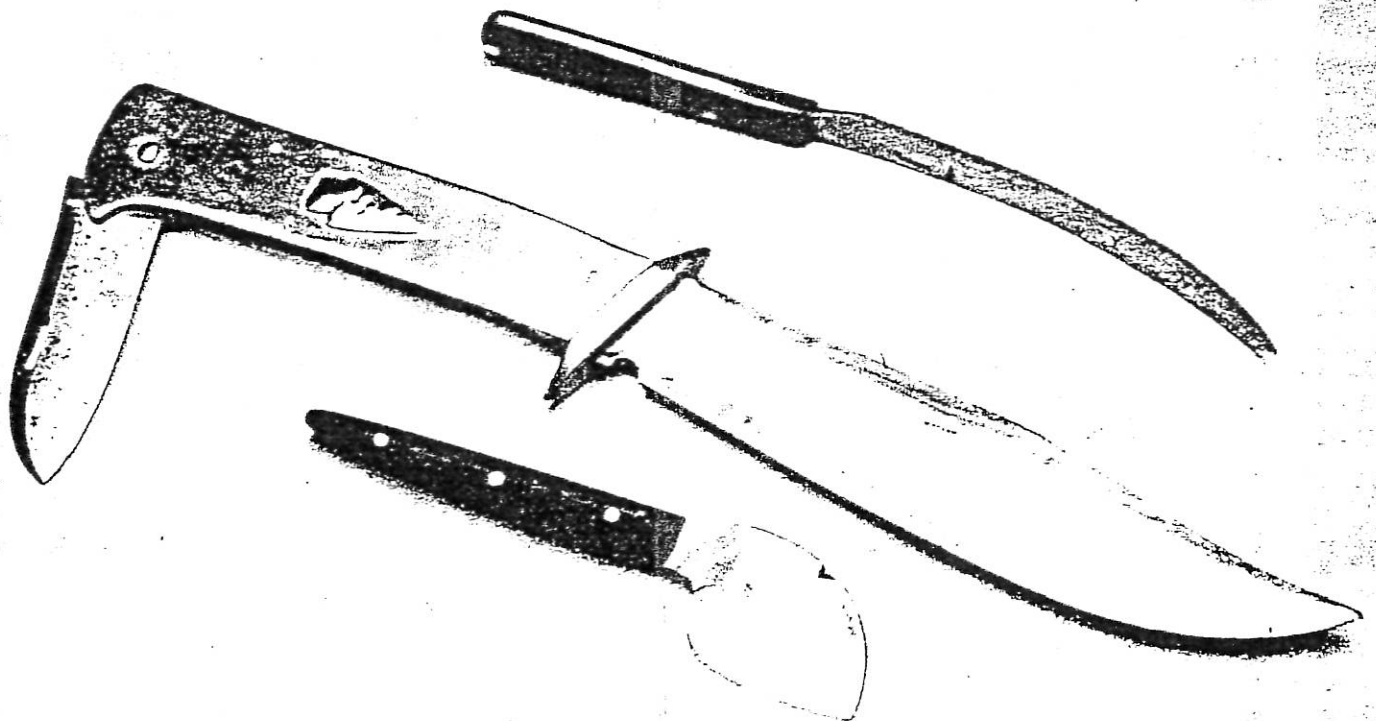
doubling as a troubleshooter, blacksmith and mechanic. He settled in Muskegon during World War I after a short, unhappy marriage that left him forever wary of women. One account has it that his wife was unfaithful,

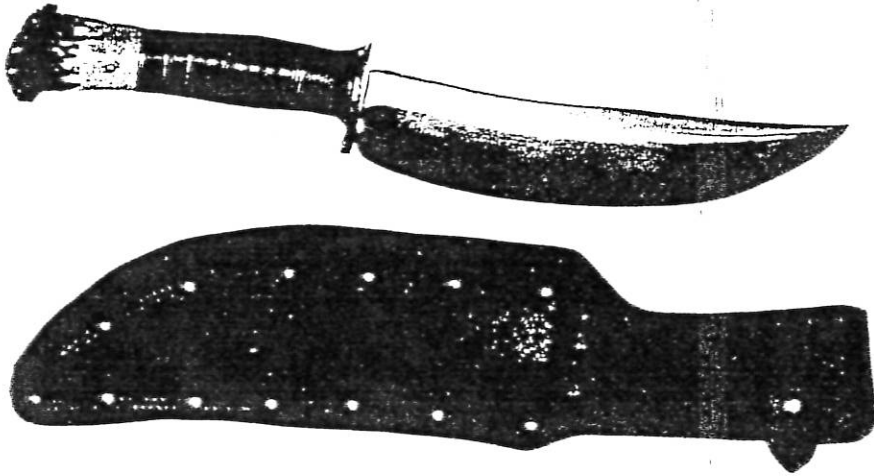
making him bitter and distrustful. Another tale claims she died during their honeymoon which, if true, may have left him heartsick and forlorn.

The story of William Scagel takes on more clarity with his move to Mus-

kegon, where he set up shop on Jackson Hill, south of the city, and quickly established his reputation as an excellent cutler and fine boat builder. The latter enterprise gave rise to a story that old-timers in Muskegon still tell. About the year 1930, they say, Scagel and his Labrador retriever sailed from Muskegon to Milwaukee and back. So what? Well, their Scagel-made vessel was of steel, open to the elements and only eight feet long! In it they braved 140 miles of choppy Lake Michigan.

Scagel bought his Dogwood Nub property in the spring of 1936, not long after a fire wiped out the Muskegon shop and perhaps persuaded him to seek a more secluded country spot. "His only request from the world," writes McEvoy, "was to leave him in peace with his dogs and his work." It was during his quarter-century at Fruitport that Scagel's reputation as a loner became firmly established. Those who took the trouble to seek out the old master cutler, however, found a generous man who aimed to please; a busy man, though never too busy to chat; and an opinionated man who drew much of his political philosophy from the editorial pages of the old arch-conservative *Chicago Daily Tri-*





bune. Scagel might have grown wealthy, says Harvey Matthews, only half kidding, had he not "given away two knives for each one he sold." A retired Muskegon policeman, Matthews recalls with his former chief Arthur Siplon that Scagel donated many knives as trophies to promote pistol marksmanship by department members. But the ever-shy Scagel, who hated being photographed, was never around when those trophies were presented. "I used to stop by his workshop and talk to him," says Siplon, "and he would stop in to see us now and then. He liked the police department." Mrs. Botbyl tells of the time a kindly woman motorist spotted Old Bill walking to town and stopped to give him a lift. One day not long after, she found a package on her doorstep. It contained a new set of Scagel knives, whose maker had left them there without ceremony. "He simply wouldn't go into anyone's house," explains Mrs. Botbyl.

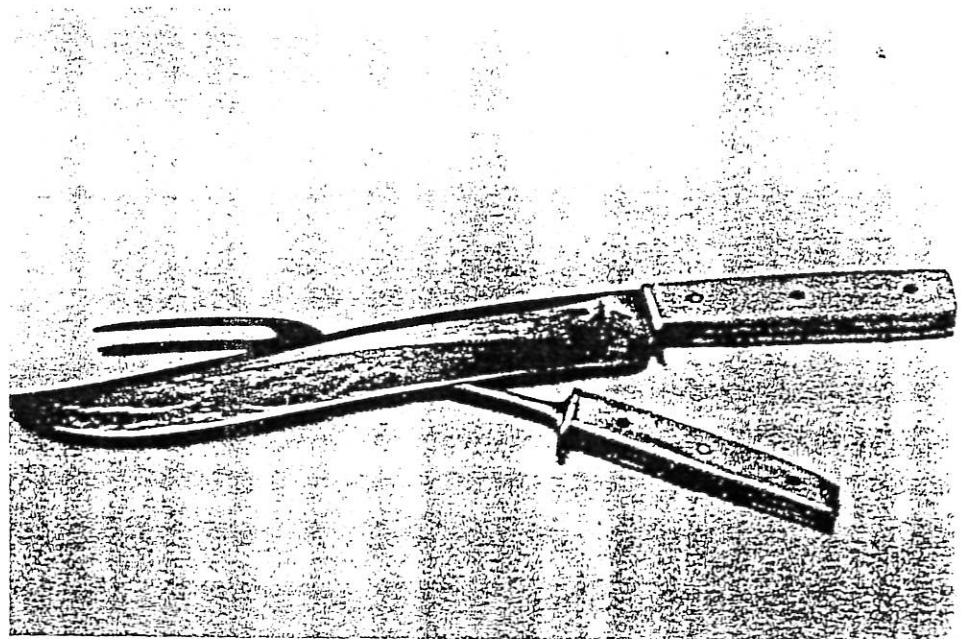
Although the old blacksmith often sold his work to physicians, he steadfastly refused their services, choosing to treat his own ailments and even pull his own teeth. When sick or injured, he clung to advice from a revered medical manual. Mrs. Botbyl tells of Scagel breaking his wrist in a workshop accident. She pleaded with him to see a doctor, but his reply was to grit his teeth and set the broken bone with his other hand! Once, after he and the local power company clashed, Scagel

decided he didn't need their services any more. McEvoy writes: "There was no electric power of any kind on the premises, so Coleman lanterns provided light at night and on dark winter days, while the potbellied old iron stove, burning coal and wood, furnished most of the heat—except when the forge was in operation. An intricate system of belts and pulleys drove the various moving parts of his equipment, and all power was derived from an ancient gasoline engine, which he had purchased years before from some mail order house."

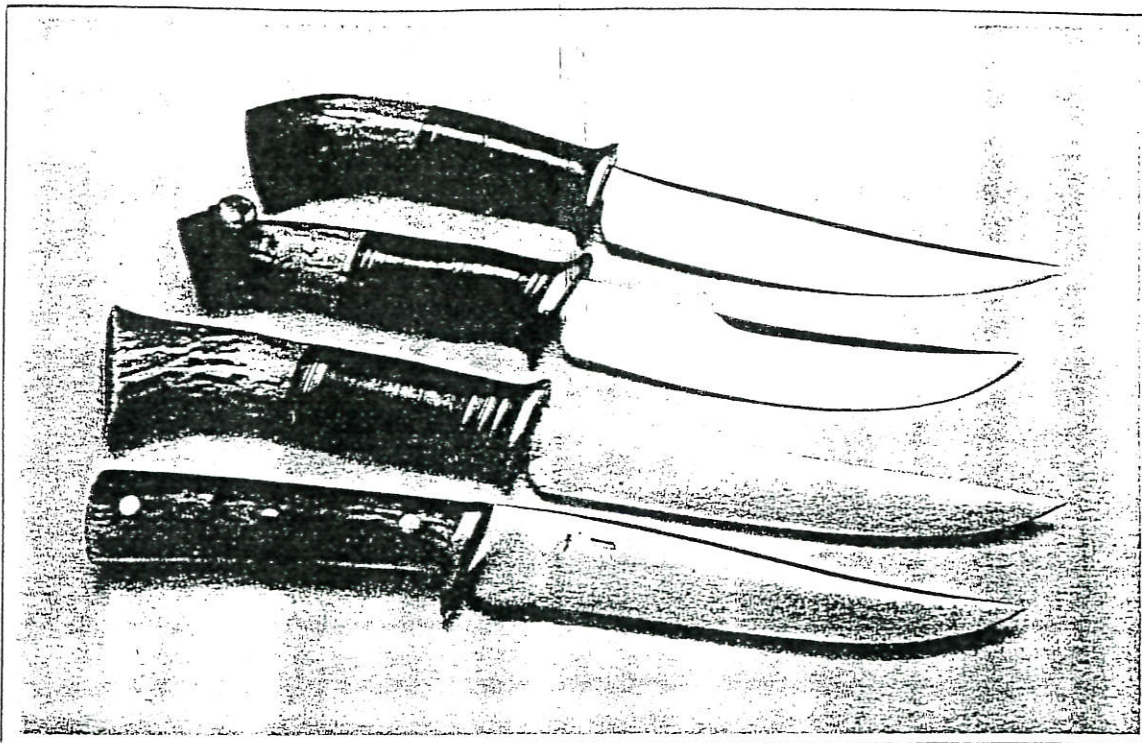
One can but wonder if Scagel had

just finished reading the *Chicago Tribune* when he made the prediction contained in a letter of October 21, 1948: "Conditions are so rotten in this country, caused by rotten politics, unionism and graft. If you are not one of the gang of criminals (sic) you have a tough time getting material to do business. I have worked at mechanical (sic) work for 55 years and never saw conditions as bad as they are today, caused by our rotten government this last 16 years. But we are due for a change for the better." Of course, in a memorable goof, the *Tribune* published an election night "Extra" proclaiming Thomas E. Dewey the new President of the United States. Harry S. Truman had a big laugh about that the next day. There is no record of William W. Scagel's reaction, however, although he probably went out to his forge and pounded the daylight out of a couple of knife blades.

Scagel died March 26, 1963. McEvoy writes: "He was an unusual man, very unique, and the most unforgettable character I ever met—filled with the strengths and weaknesses of most mortals. A confirmed atheist, or so he claimed, he had a great secret fear of being buried alive. It was, therefore, at his specific request that his remains be sent to the University of Michigan Medical School for 'anatomical purposes.' Perhaps during one of his more reflective moods, he reasoned that he could perform one final service for a world he often shunned."



*H*is only request from the world was to leave him in peace with his dogs and his work.



Letters from Scagel

*Made available by
Glen Lambert*

9/21/1939

"I am finally getting to where I can work again in my shop. When you were at Muskegon recently and stopped by at my place, I was just about as angry as a man could be (not at you). That morning I had taken two loads to Spring Lake and at noon the bird I had moving wanted some money—his wife had to buy groceries, so I gave him \$10.00. He was supposed to finish moving that afternoon and he never showed up until 10 a.m. the next day. Said his wife threw a party and they were all drunk. That was why I was at my old shop and everything torn down and on the floor. I slept in an old car

and I was tired and mad.

Now about your order in that letter for the knife with the blade in the handle. I am shipping that knife today.

They are the hardest I have to make. They take from 30-35 hours for me to finish, from forging to the finished article. Try one. You will find the handle is no guess work. Now about steels for knives. I am using Swedish and Jessops and about out and as the war is on, cannot get more. I will let you know in the near future about other steels I am going to try out, several out of American makers.

In polishing, I get the final finish with coarse buffer and crocus . . ."

* * * * *

Sept., 1937

"You will just have to let me off this time for not answering your letter, but it could not be helped. I crushed the bone in the forefinger of my right hand and had to wait until it got better. It was too late to write then, so I just

made the knife and sent it off yesterday. If it is not just what you want, please send it back at my expense for some of the lines on your sketch I could not follow.

I note the article you sent on the only custom knife maker, but I do not make freaks & daggers. I make an effort to give a man something serviceable and practical. This fellow thinks he is practical and the only one I note in the piece he has, has been working at it for 6 years and doing different knives, 116 in all."

"I have been making knives for A & F, N.Y., VL & A, Chicago, P. A. Co., San Francisco, Alcook, Late & Wetwood, Toronto and also their house in London, England for this past 34 years and in all the hundreds of knives I have made, there have never been no two alike. I have several private customers all over the world. Some have goods made that are ivory and silver or gold and platinum trimmed. I just finished one in Ivory and silver along with yours. That went to Toledo, Ohio."