

Westward Ho! The Green River Knife 1840 - 1850



Matthew Chapman's arrival in Greenfield in 1840 was a turning point for the Russell Company. For seven years, Russell had been successful because the factory used high grade materials, insisted upon fine workmanship, developed an inventiveness typical of "Yankee ingenuity," and refused to quit. A fantastic string of circumstances favorable to the Company had also been a decisive factor in keeping the Company in operation, but by 1840 it appeared that Russell's luck was about to give out. The Sheffield guilds, having recovered from the effects of the 1837 Panic, once more set out to eliminate American competition. This was a crucial period for the American cutlery industry, for in order to meet the threat of English underpricing, two things had to be accomplished: production costs had to be cut by any means possible so that American goods could economically compete with the English, and someone had to prove to the American public once and for all that cutlery made in the United States could hold its own against any made abroad. The man to accomplish this was Matthew Chapman.

Born in 1814 in Sterlingshire, Scotland, Matthew Chapman came to the United States with a friend, Joseph Gardner. Upon their arrival in New York, Chapman was hired by Russell, Gardner by an agent of the Lamson & Goodnow Cutlery Company of Shelburne Falls. Both men were skilled cutlers and mechanical geniuses in their own right. They added their badly-needed knowledge of the cutlery business to the processes developed by the two companies. Their contributions were the deciding factor in keeping the two cutleries in competition with the Sheffield guilds.

Chapman was hired originally as a laborer but it soon became evident that his talents were being wasted. Before his first year in Greenfield was complete, Chapman was made mechanical director of the factory and was designing machines. In a short time, Russell's twelve trip hammers and hundred and seventy grinding and polishing stones had been complemented with the addition of machines that blanked and leveled knife blades in a single stroke, punched rivet holes in handles, cut and bent tines of forks, and rough-sawed handles.

These machines did most of the work in the factory and the money saved was used in obtaining more and better

materials. Chapman was a boon in this respect, also; his first invention for the Company was a series of heated dies and screw frames which subjected cheap local woods such as apple to hot oil immersion and great pressure, giving the wood increased hardness and form and allowing the wood to be substituted for harder, more expensive woods. As these devices were put to greater and more widespread use in American cutleries (Gardner's achievements for Lamson were probably very similar to Chapman's devices because of the close association of the two men in their days at Sheffield), the cost of making a knife in America dropped. By 1842, production costs were the same in the United States and Great Britain, seriously curtailing Sheffield's efforts to successfully underprice its wares on the American market. The machines developed by Russell and Chapman were not solely responsible for reducing American production costs, for other companies also began experimenting with new methods of production. It was, however, a Russell knife, the "Green River Knife," that proved to the American people the quality of domestically produced cutlery.

When the migrations westward began, Russell decided to begin manufacturing an American hunting knife. English hunting knives were fancy and lightweight, made for the moors and hunting forests of Britain, not for the woods, mountains and plains of the New World. Russell started to produce a ruggedly constructed hunting knife that would serve in any situation that might conceivably arise. The knife had an 8 $\frac{3}{4}$ " blade and a plain wooden handle. Knives were often shipped dull so that individual owners could sharpen them as they wished. For instance, in scraping skins it was good to have a blade sharpened on one side only, so that the dull edge would not gouge the hide.

Collectors often confuse this rugged hunting knife with another knife that was produced later in the Company's history. The original hunting knife was very plain. Actually, many of them were broken and thrown away, for they were heavily used, and their owners, though glad to have them, thought of them only in terms of what they would do. It was this knife, the Green River Knife, that became known in fame and fable as the best knife in the West. It was this knife that, in a sense, brought success to the Russell Cutlery Company. The agent of the revelation was the breed of frontiersman known as the Mountain Man.

