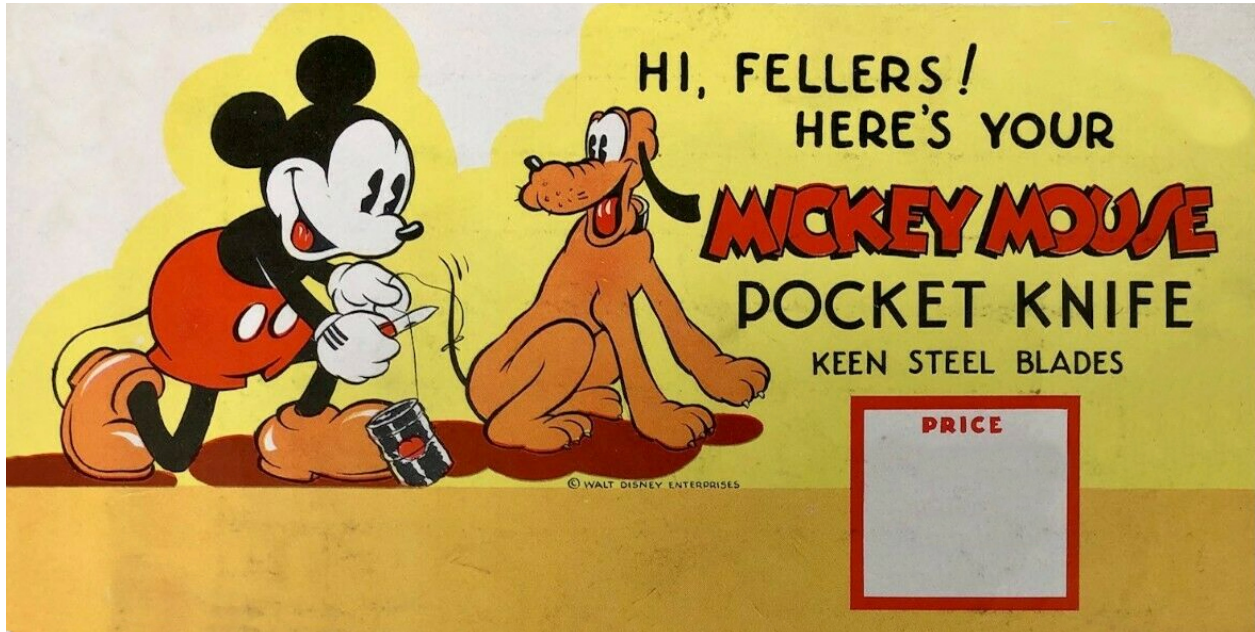


Cutting Into the Mickey Mouse Pocket Knife

By Dave Bossert



(The top portion of a 1937 in-store point-of-purchase advertisement for the official Mickey Mouse pocket knife manufactured in Rhode Island by the Imperial Knife Company. The text is appealing to the “fellers” and speaks to a different time. Thankfully we have evolved much further, even if we have a ways to go. Private collection.)

If you were ever involved with a scouting organization or just had a great outdoors kind of childhood, likely at one time or another, you had a pocket knife. Maybe it was a coveted ubiquitous red Swiss Army knife complete with tiny scissors<sup>i</sup> and a plastic toothpick, or it was just a simple canoe style double blade foldout pocket knife with a faux stag antler handle.<sup>ii</sup>

These pocket knives are small handy utility tools, some with can or bottle openers, easily transported in a pants pocket. They were never viewed necessarily as a dangerous weapon but more as just a handy tool. It could be produced at a moment’s notice to cut a piece of rope or string, whittle a stick just for the sake of whittling a stick to pass the time, or maybe to carve your initials into the bark of a tree or some other object that you shouldn’t cut.

My brother and I had several different kinds of pocket knives, including our official ones from the Boy Scouts of America. One of our sisters had a Girl Scout pocket knife sporting a teal green handle with a gold scouts emblem embedded. Many branded pocket knives are produced for organizations beyond the Boys and Girls Scouts, businesses like Coca-Cola and Pepsi-Cola, television shows like Walt Disney's Davy Crockett, and cartoon characters such as Popeye and Mickey Mouse have all adorned pocket knives.



(This is the officially licensed Walt Disney's Davy Crockett pocket knife made by the Imperial Knife Company in 1955. Private Collection.)

In the 1930s, Disney licensed Mickey Mouse for a pocket knife made by the Imperial Knife Company, at that time located in Providence, Rhode Island. The company made hunting knives, pocket knives, utility knives, and bayonets during much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and early 21<sup>st</sup> century. Through a series of mergers, Imperial Knife Company absorbed smaller competitors and purchased the venerable Schrade Cutlery Company, which became a division of the Imperial Knife Associated Companies group. The company used the Imperial tang stamp up until 1988.



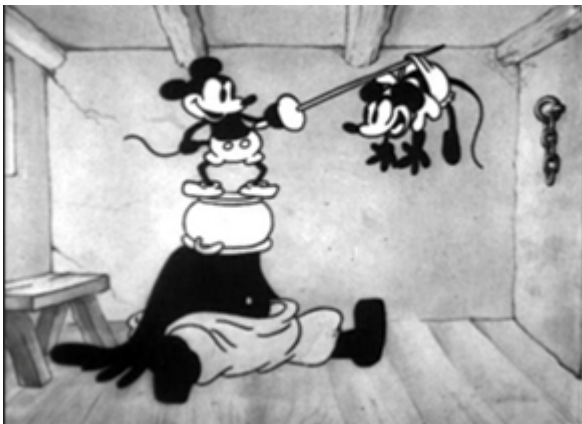
(The officially licensed single and two-blade Mickey Mouse pocket knife manufactured between 1936 and 1938 by the Imperial Knife Company. The Imperial tang stamp appears at the base of the large blade, as illustrated in the photo below. Double blade pocket knife, courtesy Hake's Auctions; Single blade, Private Collection.)



The official Mickey Mouse pocket knives were manufactured as a single blade and a two-blade version from 1936 through 1938.<sup>iii</sup> The handle features the text “MICKEY MOUSE” along with a black, white, and red image of the pie-eyed Mickey Mouse character model. There are three rivets visible in the handle that holds the blades, case, and handle parts together.

There are two size varieties; one is three inches long and the other two and three-quarter inches long. On both, to the right of Mickey's foot, is the copyright, ©WD ENT. (Walt Disney Enterprises). The Disney copyright generally appears on all merchandise, but there are instances where copyright is missing—either left off by mistake or forgotten. The company copyright changed to Walt Disney Productions after 1939 and has changed since to ©Disney and ©Disney Enterprises and the most common.

The Mickey Mouse pocket knives were sold by the dozen wholesale to retail establishments. They came packaged on a point-of-purchase display card with each of twelve pocket knives held in place individually with an elastic band. The top portion of the display was die-cut around an illustration of Mickey Mouse and Pluto. Of course, Mickey is holding one of the pocket knives as he cuts a string tied to a can and Pluto's tail. Pluto is happily looking on.<sup>iv</sup>



(From L to R, *The Gallopin' Gaucho* (1928) still frame and a cel setup from *Two Gun Mickey* (1934) showing the sword and six-shooters Mickey Mouse used in those respective short films. Cel setup courtesy HA.com)

As a side note, Mickey Mouse brandishing any kind of knife today would likely not be permitted. But back in the 1930s, it was not usual to see a Mickey Mouse with a weapon. He used a sword in *The Gallopin' Gaucho* (1928), a six-shooter pistol in *Two Gun Mickey* (1934), and even a shotgun in *Lonesome Ghosts* (1937) and *Mickey's Parrot* (1938), to name a few.



(A still frame from and *Mickey's Parrot* (1938) in which Mickey Mouse brandishes and uses a shotgun throughout much of the short. For the edited Have-A-Laugh version, the gun was digitally replaced with a broom to conform to new Disney corporate franchise guidelines so that it could air on television.)

The characters on the point-of-purchase display card are the pie-eyed versions indicative of the mid-1930s. Although I like this design period at Disney, nothing beats the eye-appeal of the Fred Moore re-design of Mickey Mouse for *The Sorcerer's Apprentice* that appeared several years later in the release of *Fantasia* (1940).

To the right of the characters is the text "HI, FELLERS! HERE'S YOUR MICKEY MOUSE POCKET KNIFE" with "KEEN STEEL BLADES" in a small font beneath. Below the text is a white square box outlined in red where the merchant could write in the price that they sold the

pocket knives for at their store. This top portion of the display was also used for 8 ½ X 10 ½ notepaper, presumably a premium for the retailer.<sup>v</sup>

These Mickey Mouse pocket knives appeared in the Herman “Kay” Kamen Disney catalog that displayed all the official Disney licensed merchandise during that period. Kamen had the licensing agreement for all the Disney merchandise and helped promote the Disney characters on various products, including developing the first Mickey Mouse watch.<sup>vi</sup> An entire book can and should be written about Kay Kamen, his relationship with Walt and Roy O. Disney, and his merchandising and marketing genius. My focus for the piece is just on the Mickey Mouse pocket knife and related advertising ephemera.



(The opening day at Disneyland Mickey Mouse “fantasy” pocket knife. One of several counterfeit pocket knives that appeared in the 1970s. Note that there is no Disney copyright, which would have appeared next to Mickey’s shoe if this was authorized merchandise. Private collection.)

The interesting thing about the Mickey Mouse pocket knife is that several fake or “fantasy” pocket knives have appeared in the marketplace over the years. The most notable is the 1933 World Fair and opening day of Disneyland pocket knives, both featuring Mickey Mouse. “A pocket knife or any other item with Mickey Mouse and a 1933 World Fair imprint cannot be original Disney merchandise,” according to Dave Smith (1940—2019), Disney Archivist, in an interview many years ago. He went on to state, “the knives were “fantasy” items, a term used for new merchandise without any old counterpart.”<sup>vii</sup> In other words, the 1933 World Fair and Disneyland opening day Mickey Mouse pocket knives are unauthorized knockoffs— counterfeit merchandise.

POCKET KNIFE ASSORTMENTS

POPEYE

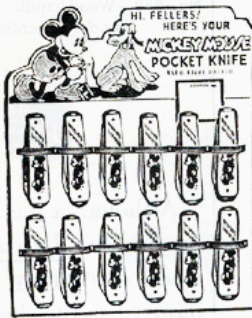


Two Blades.

Jack knives with character of Popeye stamped on handle. Steel lining; polished blades. Each box contains a window streamer size 6x24 inches.

No. 25 P1—Length knives 3 1/4 ins. Per Doz \$6 75  
 (Sold only in full dozens.)  
 One doz in cardboard display box; wt doz 1 1/2 lbs.

MICKEY MOUSE



Two Blades.

High quality cutlery steel blades, full polished. All white handle with reproduction of Mickey Mouse in colors.

No. MM25—Length 3 1/4 ins. Per Doz \$6 30  
 (Sold only in full dozens.)  
 One doz on counter display card; wt doz 1 1/2 lbs.

POCKET KNIFE ASSORTMENTS

IMPERIAL "TOPSY"

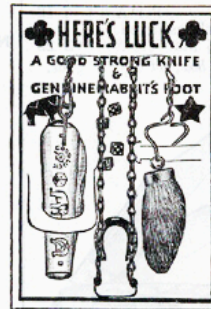


One Blade.

Assortment includes 12 knives with nickel silver bolsters and brass lining. High quality cutlery steel clip blade, fully polished. Assorted colored pyralin handles.

No. 910—Length knives 2 1/2 ins. Per Doz \$6 30  
 One doz on display card; wt doz 1 1/2 lbs.

RABBIT FOOT AND KNIFE COMBINATION



One Blade.

High quality cutlery steel blade, fully polished. White handle printed on one side with good luck symbols. Complete with 14 inch jack chain and genuine Rabbit's foot charm.

No. RFK—Length knife 3 1/8 ins. Per Doz \$6 30  
 One on card wrapped in cellophane; one doz in cardboard box; wt doz 1 3/8 lbs.

(A page out of the Belknap Hardware & Manufacturing Co. catalog that shows the Popeye (top left) and Mickey Mouse (bottom left) Pocket Knife displays, with both sold wholesale "only in full dozens. Private collection.)



When Disney-related items are offered for sale, it is best to do your research. The “1933 World Fair Mickey Mouse” pocket knives appeared on the market in the 1970s<sup>viii</sup> and have been around for so long that many believe them authentic. They are not. That is a blow to any collector who paid a hundred or even several hundred dollars for one thinking it was the real deal.



(The World Fair Chicago 1933 Mickey Mouse “fantasy” pocket knife. This counterfeit pocket knife appeared in the 1970s and has been around long enough, passed off as authentic, that it has fooled many collectors. Note that there is no Disney copyright, which would have appeared next to Mickey’s shoe if this was authorized merchandise. Also, this is a more contemporary model of Mickey Mouse compared to the officially licensed single and double blade pocket knives issued between 1936 and 1938. Private collection)

Knockoffs and counterfeit merchandise are a common problem with famous brands and especially Disney characters. I have spotted many counterfeit Disney merchandise items in my travels, whether at a street market in Mexico City, a night market in Hanoi, Vietnam, a ramshackle shop in Jakarta, Malaysia, or anywhere cash-based commerce is taking place around the world. Many of these items are easy to spot because the characters are grossly off-

model, but there are other items where the characters are spot-on, and it is difficult to determine whether or not the thing is counterfeit. *Caveat emptor*—buyer beware!

It is crucial as a collector to know what you are buying. Just because someone says the item is authentic doesn't mean it is. The other critical aspect of research is to use multiple sources whenever possible. Yet, even then, you can still be burned with a fake or “fantasy” item. Unless, of course, you are actively collecting counterfeit merchandise, which is certainly a worthwhile pursuit for Disney branded items.

For those just starting, there are numerous auction houses for Disney collectibles, like Heritage Auctions, Hake's Auctions, Van Eaton Galleries, and others, with their vast libraries of past auction results where valuable information can be gleaned in item descriptions. Reference books like *Tomart's Illustrated Disneyana Catalog and Price Guide* or *The Official Price Guide to Disney Collectibles* by Ted Hake, among others, offer a wealth of information for collectors in understanding the origins, varieties, editions, values, etc. of Disney collectibles.

Ultimately, when collectors decide to make a purchase, they hopefully do it because it brings them enjoyment, which is what collecting is all about. You simply enjoy accumulating a collection of items that strike a chord with you, your interests, and that spark curiosity and your imagination. If the collection is built over years or decades and happens to garner intrinsic value, that is the icing on the cake. After all, collectors are merely keepers of an item for a specific period before passing them on to the next collector for safekeeping and so forth along the time continuum.

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<sup>i</sup> Swiss Knife Shop, <https://www.swissknifeshop.com/products/huntsman-swiss-army-knife>

<sup>ii</sup> Knife Country USA, <https://www.knifecountryusa.com/store/product/207864.207893/schrade-11uh-uncle-henry-large-canoe-folding-pocket-knife-with-staglon-handle.html>

<sup>iii</sup> Tom Tumbusch (1985), *Tomart's Illustrated Disneyana Catalog and Price Guide*.

<sup>iv</sup> Mickey Mouse Pocket Knife point-of-purchase display, Private Collection.

<sup>v</sup> *ibid*

<sup>vi</sup> Alan Bryman (2004). *The Disneyization of Society*. p. 83.

<sup>vii</sup> Mark Chervenka, *All 1933 Worlds [sic] Fair Mickey Mouse Knives are Fake, Real or Repo, 1998-2021*.

<sup>viii</sup> *Ibid*, Tom Tumbusch quote.