

WHERE IN THE WORLD ARE THE WHITE MELAMINES?!

Unless you have visited the Buck Knives' factory museum or one of the knife shows with BCCI member displays, you may have never seen even one of the white melamine Buck fixed blade knives from the early factory production era (1961 – 1963). In some fifteen years of aggressively pursuing these elusive knives, I have yet to find one for sale on a knife show table. Nonetheless, with a lot of effort and considerable assistance from others, I have been able to accumulate a complete set of them. They are my favorite finds, hands down. But why are they so difficult to locate and what makes them special?

Melamine, as used on early Buck factory production fixed blade knives, is a type of plastic resin shaped into a handle. I still remember a set of melamine dishes my mother used in the early 1960s. These dishes came in various "pastel" hues with a gray flecking throughout the material. The colors I recall include turquoise, tangerine, green and yellow and there may have been a few others. Trendy decorating fads come and go, but I would never choose these selections for dishware. Thankfully, Buck Knives opted to offer an eye pleasing ivory hued melamine to supplement their original lineup of black phenolic handled knives. Early Buck advertising stated that "Knives are equipped with phenolic handles of ivory or ebony ...impervious to heat, cold and shock and (are) practically indestructible".

Apparently, this was only true as regards the black handled models. According to Vern Taylor, founder of the Buck Collectors Club and a Buck sales representative in the 1960s, Buck was forced to discontinue the white melamine knives when complaints began to surface due the handles' propensity to crack if dropped in extremely frigid temperatures. Since much hunting is done in sub-freezing conditions, it was obvious that knives primarily marketed to hunters could not fail in the harsh conditions customary with their sport. It is rather puzzling to me that Buck chose to identify both handle types as phenolic.

Should owners of these Buck white melamine knives take special care to ensure they are never dropped or handled in a rough manner? Most all the collectors we know do so with each of their collectible, non-using knives anyway. I have made it a point to ask those sending me white melamine knives to take extra precautions when preparing the knives for shipment. My major emphasis has been to request that they wrap the handles with a thick layer of cushioning material, preferably polyfoam wrap of some sort. The main issue is the prevention of any sort of rough contact with the handles whether from inside or outside

the shipping container. I can say that most of my white melamine knives have a few tiny fissures generally located near the ends of the material but there is absolutely no evidence that the integrity of any of the handles is in any way compromised. All that aside, I promise you I would not be comfortable handling them outside during one of our nasty northern Indiana winters. No, I will keep these babies in the house – nice, safe and at room temperature! I do not want to risk a repeat of the apparent problems encountered by early Buck knife users.

In the beginning of Buck factory production (1961), the oldest brochures I have seen list the following models and again, they could be obtained with either phenolic handle choice:

102 Woodsman
118 Personal
105 Pathfinder
119 Special
110 Skinner (later changed to model 103)
120 General
210 Buck Twin Set (110 Skinner and 102 Woodsman in a combination sheath)

In late 1962 or early 1963, the model 116 Caper was added to the Buck line-up. The very first model 116s started out as model 118 Personal knives and then the blade was ground down to the Caper design. As a result, these knives are not uniform in blade shape and some even had the guard ground away. White melamine was still available when the model 116 Caper was added to the product line and each of the seven early models can be found with original leather and later, rock hard fiber spacers. Those of you who are very familiar with the early Buck fixed blade knives will also recall that Buck sometimes used an extra aluminum spacer to compensate for handle variances so you may find them with five, rather than four spacers. Sometimes, the handle blanks were cut a bit too short. I suppose they failed to follow the adage "measure twice, cut once".

The May 2007 BCCI newsletter contained an article on the Model 116 Caper that proposed circumstantial evidence leading to my conclusion that barrel-nut construction extended from the commencement of factory production through sometime in 1963. In the very next BCCI newsletter (September 2007), Joe Houser provided indisputable proof that this conclusion based upon circumstantial evidence was indeed correct and that Buck Knives actually stopped using the barrel-nut construction method in May



Non-standard white melamine "butter knife" • Picture courtesy of Heath Stone

1963. I encourage you to look at those two articles for a more complete explanation. Remember, all previous BCCI newsletters are archived on our club website.

It is known from advertising of this era that the 210 Twin Set containing a model 110 Skinner paired with a model 102 Woodsman was available in white melamine. However, this begs the question of whether Buck was still using white melamine by the time the two other double sets (115 & 117) were introduced. For those not familiar with the double sets, the 115 Sportsman Set paired a 103 Skinner with a 118 Personal while the 117 Trophy Set combined the 103 with a 116 Capar. At the risk of confusing my readers, I need to point out that Buck made some changes to model numbers sometime around 1962 or 1963. The model 210 Twin Set became the model 104 Twin Set and the model 110 Skinner was re-numbered to the model 103 still in production today. I have carefully researched all the Buck Knives literature I have from this era, including early sales brochures and price list correspondence to dealers. In every case, the white melamine knives are pictured in brochures that feature the early model numbers 110 Skinner and 210 Twin Set or the later 103 Skinner and 104 Twin Set but they are never pictured in later brochures and price lists that feature the model 116 Capar and the three double sets with the later model designations of 104, 115 and 117. In each of these later brochures, only black handled knives are shown and the verbiage only references ebony phenolic handles.

Given the above, I believe it is safe to say that Buck never marketed the two later double sets (115 and 117) with white melamine as an option. I cannot prove it and of course, a white melamine model 118 or model 116 could now be paired with a white melamine 103 to make my assertion appear wrong. But, I rest my case on the amount of Buck advertising and literature I have studied as well as the very narrow time window between the beginning of production on model 116s and the introduction of the two later double sets. Joe's research of sales totals for 1963 indicate that far fewer 115 and 117 sets were sold in 1963 when compared to 104 sets. In fact, the total number of 104 sets sold is over two times the sales number of the two later sets combined. This could be solely a popularity factor but I tend to think that it was also a function of timing – that the 115 and 117 sets were not offered until later in the year leaving much less time for them to be in the marketplace and making it much less likely that they were offered in white melamine.

All Buck standard factory production white melamine models were built with barrel-nut construction. I have seen a few pinned tang white melamine standard Buck models, but in every instance, it was established that the knife had been re-handled, either by Buck Knives or by a former Buck employee who confirmed that the work was done well after factory production of melamine knives

ceased. I am also aware of a few non-standard, white melamine handled Buck knives that were constructed with pinned tangs. Joe Houser, found a few such knives in Chuck Buck's garage a few years ago. While searching in Chuck's garage for a tool, a set of four model 102s and a matching slicer, each with white melamine handles were discovered in an old box. While the model 102 knives were standard, the slicer was not. Joe recollected that the knives had leather handle spacers and were in rather rough condition, showing a lot of past use before being relegated to storage. Chuck had built the knives many years ago and hand engraved each of the blades with some sort of endearing message to his wife Lori. Joe knew they would have great sentimental value. Desiring to please them with something special from their past, Joe secreted the knives back to the Buck factory and refurbished them. You can imagine how pleased Chuck and Lori were to see a now treasured family heirloom set restored. Of course, Joe made good points with his in-laws with that little surprise.

Recently, a similar white melamine handled butter knife showed up on eBay with hard fiber spacers. This one was purchased by club member Heath Stone and no surprise, it came out of California. The 8 inch knife with a 4 inch blade was not marked with the Buck name but it obviously had Buck "roots". Heath sent pictures to Joe and triggered Joe's memory of the set that he refurbished for Chuck and Lori. He concurred that the knife looked like it was made at Buck or at least by a Buck employee using Buck parts and that if made at the Buck factory it would have been as a special request or by an employee who decided on his own to make such a knife.

All of this answers the question as to why the white melamine handled Buck knives are so difficult to find. Buck did not make them very long and they did not make very many of them! So you may ask, "What makes them special?" Now, that question requires a very subjective answer. For me, they have a classic look and are rare enough to be justifiably exclusive. The ivory melamine has a rich appearance that I find especially appealing. When looked at with a black leather sheath as a backdrop, they almost scream "I am a knife of distinction". I might not feel the same way if they were as easy to locate as their black phenolic brethren. I suppose their scarcity provides a cachet of exclusivity.

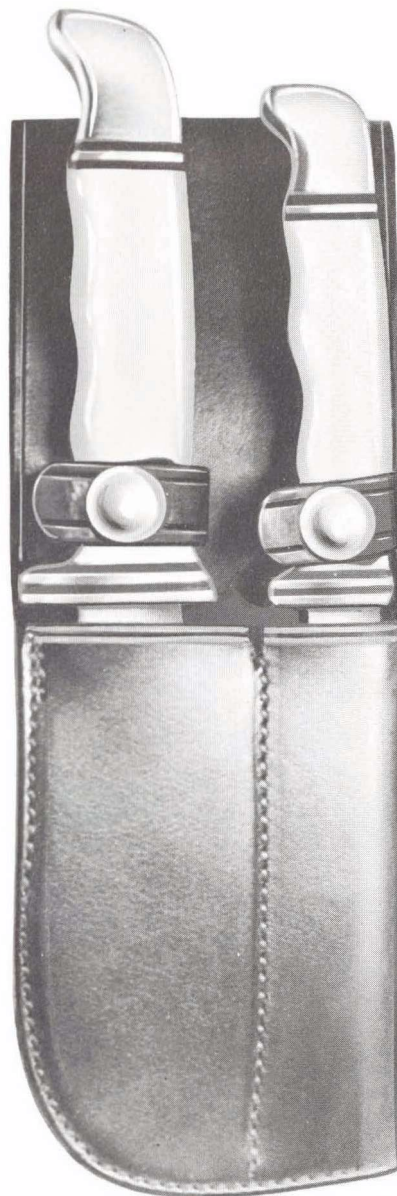
I also appreciate the sheer amount of effort I expended in my efforts to obtain at least one of each model with both leather and hard fiber spacers. It was a task I could never have completed without the help of other collectors who contributed their efforts to my search.

I did a quick rundown on the sources of the seventeen white melamine knives in my collection. Three of the knives were obtained solely by good fortune – by being at the right place at the right time. Yet, part of this luck was aided by the fact that I knew what I was looking at and

many others who could have obtained the knives were oblivious to their collectability. This was particularly true of the two white melamine models I obtained as the winning bidder in the early days of eBay! Had the knives been auctioned just a year or two later, I would probably have been outbid or would have only won the auctions with much, much higher bids. Nine more came into my possession due to assistance from or outright sales transactions with BCCI members – another benefit of club membership. Two each came from Buck employees and from a referral of my name by friends at Buck Knives who knew what I was seeking. I did find one in a consignment sale list for knife collectors. It was not properly described but I knew it had to be white melamine based upon a rather poor picture with an incorrect statement that this was a knife from the Buck Custom Shop. Knowledge is a great advantage in the hobby of knife collecting.

Finally, please note that all white melamine knives would have been accompanied with unmarked sheaths of the keeper strap variety. Buck introduced the later flap-over sheaths in mid- to late 1964 and I lean toward thinking that the white melamine handle option was eliminated by May 1963 when barrel-nut construction ceased. Also, it is known that the model 121 Fisherman debuted in 1964 and there are no known examples of white melamine model 121 knives. By the way, the early model 121 knives can be found with both keeper strap type sheaths and the later flap-over style.

So, where in the world are these knives? I have found them from New Hampshire to California and from Wisconsin and Michigan to Florida. I am confident there are more of them out there to be located...but they are not an easy find. Luck will play a part in your search but if you really want to find one (or more!), I advise that you invest a lot of effort. I have found it to be most rewarding. Good luck.



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