

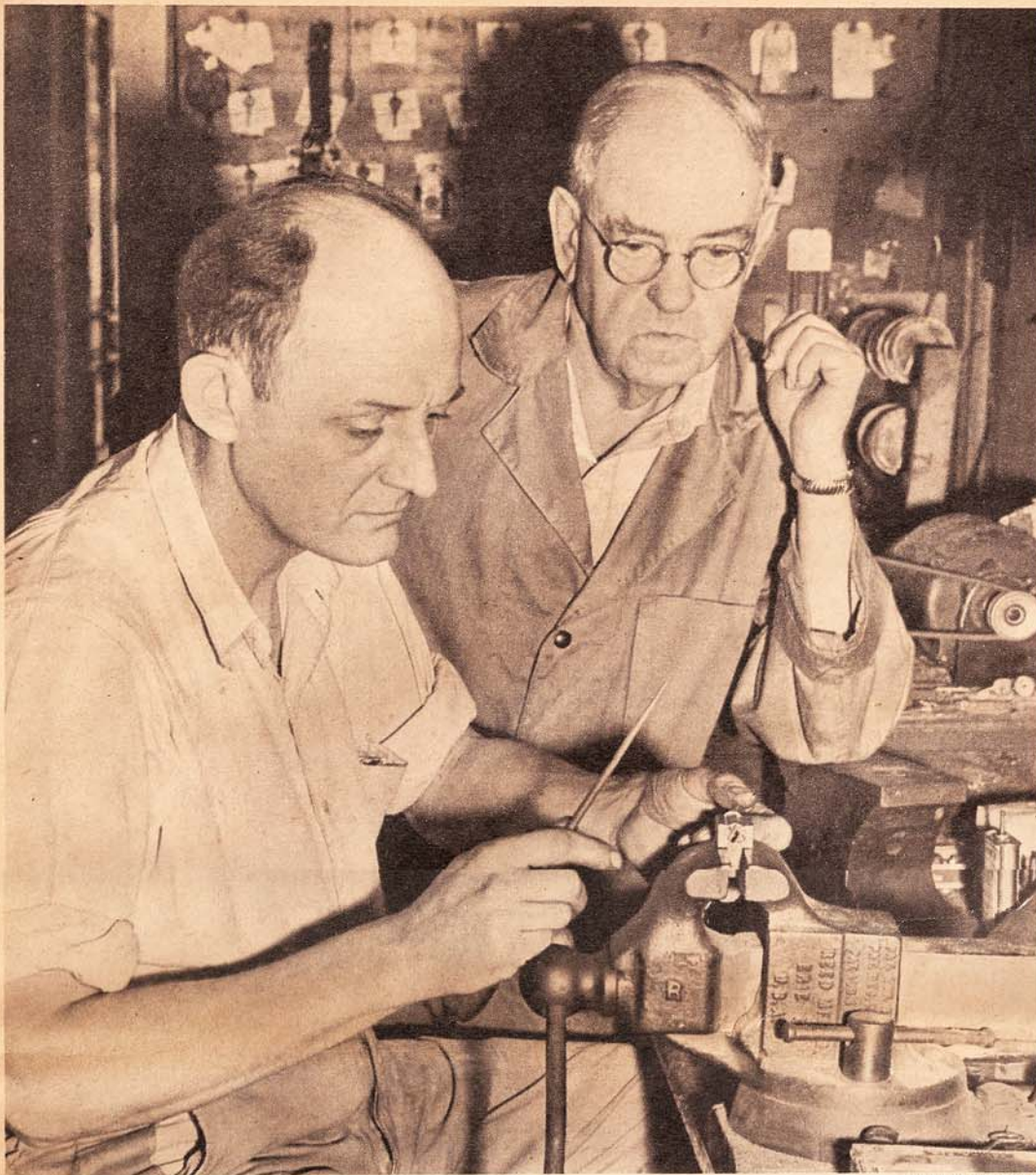
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Hosse, right, watches Foreman Ralph McIntosh tackle a key-making job

Photos by the author

Hoarder of Secrets

By John Lipscomb

Edward E. Hosse keeps to himself knowledge many a lawbreaker would relish

EVERY man's home, according to ancient English common law, is his own little kingdom and about 10,000 years ago the Chinese began figuring out cute ways of locking their little kingdoms against the forays of enemies. When the business of locksmithing actually reached the state of craftsmanship, which was about 3000 years ago, the locksmiths banded together and hoarded their secrets and have kept them hoarded to this day.

One of the better known hoarders of lock secrets in Nashville is a pleasant-faced man, of German descent, named Edward E. Hosse. Not long ago, Hosse, who is 65 years old and has never been engaged in any business except lock work (other than sideline repairs on small mechanical implements), was appointed a Master in the Registered Locksmiths' Guild of America, one of the highest honors that can be bestowed upon an operator in his craft.

The Magazine, hearing about the matter, visited Hosse in his comparatively small shop at the northeast cor-

ner of Fifth avenue and Deaderick street and found him perfectly willing to talk about any and everything except how to pick a lock.

Hosse has opened more homes, legitimately of course, in his lifetime than any burglar ever will accomplish in Nashville; he has "cracked" more safes successfully than most of the crooked safe crackers ever will enter, and today, at 65, he still can open almost any average lock—not counting safes—in five minutes or less.

He has some helpers who are almost equally skillful in the business of breaking and entering.

To be appointed a "Master" locksmith one must stack up ability and character, the latter being much more important. No bank wants to turn its vaults over to a man who might do a fine job of repair work and then burglarize the thing the next night, or give it to a henchman for a quick job of robbing. No house owner wants to take a chance on some crook obtaining a key to his little kingdom, and no

small businessman wants anybody who isn't thoroughly trusted to know the combination to his safe.

All of such people apparently trust Hosse, which is why he was appointed a "Master" of the Registered Locksmiths' Guild of America. There are fewer than 1000 such "Masters" in the United States.

MUCH of the important work that Hosse accepts now is delegated to his aides—Douglas Alley, chief assistant, and Ralph McIntosh, the shop foreman.

Both Alley and McIntosh have had some experiences, concerning the picking of locks, that were not exactly delightful, and Hosse has had even more.

"Most of our emergency work these days," Hosse told us, "is getting people back into their houses and into their automobiles. They lose the keys, or they break them, or maybe they just have the wrong key."

Drunks often break keys in the switches of their cars in their eagerness to get somewhere—a plight that

once caused Assistant Alley to hold a man's watch for payment; children get themselves locked in bathrooms, and small-town banks often mess up their vault locks and have to call Hosse. Actually, he told us, it usually is an insurance company that calls him on the bank jobs.

The bank jobs—often ranging well up into southern Kentucky as well as Tennessee and neighboring states—call for special equipment to solve the combination. Sometimes the messed-up safe or vault is due to an unsuccessful (and usually amateurish) attempt at cracking, which causes Hosse a considerable amount of trouble.

"I would guess," he told us, "that only about eight out of ten 'safe cracking' jobs by criminals are ever successful. They try all sorts of silly things, such as prying off the hinges on a safe door. That doesn't help a bit because the door is still locked and the hinges have nothing to do with the combination. Some crooks try to drill holes into the combination, which is silly because the metal in most safe doors cannot be drilled.

"One of the best jobs I've ever seen, so far as safe-cracking goes, was one that some fellows—they must have been professionals—pulled down in Clarksville a few years ago."

The cracksmen, Hosse told us, ignored the safe's combination and used an acetylene torch to bore a large hole through the top of the safe, pausing frequently to pour water into the opening so that the money inside would not be destroyed by the intense acetylene heat.

"That was smart," Hosse admitted, but he still has hearty contempt for safe crackers who have to "burn" their way into a vault or safe.

HOSSE'S contempt for such inexperienced operations is shared by Alley, who once was assigned to "crack" a safe at the Tennessee State penitentiary. An official at the prison had disappeared, accompanying himself with some funds that were not his personal property, and the Hosse firm was called to open the safe, since nobody but the missing official knew the combination.

"When I got there," Alley related, "the warden, or maybe it was somebody else in charge, told me that he had a man in the prison who could open the safe in a minute.

"I said, 'Well, why did you call me?' and then I got interested and told him to bring out the prisoner and we'd see what he could do. I had only \$10 in my pocket at the time but I told him I'd give the \$10 to the fellow if he could open the safe.

"They brought him out and I asked him how he planned to go about it. He said he would need a torch and would just cut around the lock."

Alley didn't lose his \$10. He worked a few minutes on the safe, lifted the tumblers, and had no need for an acetylene torch.

Alley, who owns a television set and often looks at it, told us that he is amused by the pictured efforts (usually successful on the screen) of criminals attempting to open safes and vaults by the old and fictional "Jimmy Valentine"—or touch—system.

"There's nothing to that sort of stuff," Hosse agreed. "Modern safes, in good condition, can't be opened by touch. All that stuff is just for the movies."

The locks on bank vaults are especially sensitive, as well they might be, and the smaller country-town banks often have trouble with them—usually through the negligence of some employee.

One time Hosse received a call from such a bank, to the effect that the vault door was jammed, the combination wouldn't work, and unless the bank obtained some money from its vault there wouldn't be much business done that day.

There was nothing at all wrong with the combination, Hosse discovered. The lock actually had been jammed by a

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Hoarder of Secrets

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tiny bit of paper. After he had analyzed the trouble and had set the combination correctly, sheer force was applied to the door and it swung open.

HOSSE went into business with his father, the late A. F. Hosse, 46 years ago and learned from his father most of the tricks of locksmithing that he practices today. The elder Hosse has been dead many years but the firm still is known as "Hosse and Hosse."

On an average of at least once every week the fire department, or the police department, or one of the few Nashville locksmiths gets a call to the effect that "Junior is locked in the bathroom and we're afraid he'll drown."

Hosse gets a proportionate share of such calls and although he always sends somebody out immediately, he usually finds that the fire department has arrived first.

"It's much simpler," he explained, "just to go in a window to the bathroom and unlock the door than it is to pick a lock."

The mere duplication of a key is a simple matter in Hosse's shop, and in most other key shops. Any key can be duplicated in a matter of minutes—sometimes a few seconds—but the actual picking of a lock sometimes can become complicated, not because the lock is hard to pick but because the locksmith isn't sure whether he should pick it or not.

There was one occasion when an MP, handcuffed to a surly prisoner who was supposed to be lodged in the Davidson county jail for the night, entered Hosse's shop and explained that he had lost the key to the handcuffs.

"If I don't get this thing unlocked," the MP wailed to Hosse, "I'll have to sleep in jail with this jerk tonight."

Hosse, though not exactly sure about the legal aspects of the case, decided to trust the MP and pick the lock on the handcuffs, which required only about five minutes. Both the prisoner and the military policeman went away happy and Hosse heard no more about the matter.

ALLEY, who in recent years has handled most of the emergency calls that Hosse receives, arose from his bed one night not so very long ago and answered an urgent call from a law enforcement officer who said he was engaged in investigating a murder in a downtown hotel.

"What had happened," Alley told us, "was that a man had registered in the hotel, slashed his wrist with a razor blade, and then tried to drown himself in the bathtub."

The hotel, realizing from the flowing water and the flowing blood coming from under the door that something was wrong, called the cops. The hotel couldn't find a key to fit the door.

"When I got there," Alley said, "they seemed to think that a murder had been committed."

A woman, whose reputation was questionable, was being held on the presumption that she had slain the fellow and locked the door from the outside. The woman was cleared when Alley proved to the satisfaction of the investigators that the man unquestionably had locked his door from the inside.

Hosse's problems with repairing locks and keys are as nothing compared with the trouble he encounters over the pronunciation of his name.

The firm of Hosse and Hosse has been familiar to Tennesseans for so many years that its name is synonymous with locksmithing. But when A. F. Hosse opened his business here shortly after the Civil war ended nobody ever pronounced his name correctly. They called him such things as "Mr. Horsey," "Mr. Hose," and half a dozen other mispronunciations of his German name.

"The correct pronunciation," Edward Hosse told us, "is 'Hosey.' But I really don't care what people call me. Most of them pronounce it 'HAWsey,' and that's all right with me."

"Not long ago," Hosse recalled, "a man telephoned me about a lock job and when I answered the phone I said 'Hosey speaking.' He called back a few days later and I happened to answer the phone again and that time I said 'HAWsey speaking.' This fellow was a little confused and wanted to know whether I knew my own name or not. I told him that on Sundays it was 'Hosey' and on week days it was 'HAWsey.'" ★★



Legitimate safe cracking is Douglas Alley's specialty