

A Brief History of Handcuffs

When asked to write a brief history of handcuffs, I reluctantly agreed. Bound by my own phobia of being constrained, I hesitantly took on the mission of researching these claw-like metal fetters. What happened? I was offered the key to a whole new world of history, information and collectorship.

The interest in handcuffs is sprawling. And since they have been used, in some form for centuries, they have had a variety of names. Manacles, Nippers, Thumbcuffs (a thumb-sized version of handcuffs), Grips, Hooks, Claws, Dowlers, (also the name of the manufacturer) and Shackles are just a few of the other names of cuffs.

And styles...there is the Pistol Grip, The Policeman's Hook, the Argus Iron Claw, the Harvey Chain Grip and many, many more styles of this mechanism used primarily as restraints. What other uses than restraints, you wonder. Well, remember Houdini? His use of handcuffs was to escape from – not be restrained by - handcuffs, while he mesmerized crowds of spectators. And, in France in the 1950's, the single locking La Pegy handcuff was thought to be a fashion statement. Go figure!

But so much for fashion and style and such; let's get down to the real deal about handcuffs.

From convicts to captives to conjurers, handcuffs have been used to detain, constrain, and entertain since recorded history.

The poet Publius Vergilius Maro, known in English as Virgil, recounts the legend of the fitting of the first handcuffs on the mythical god Proteus. Possessing the gift of prophecy but not the gift of giving, Proteus selfishly kept his knowledge to himself. Aristaeus knew that the only thing that would compel Proteus to share his knowledge was to bind him and not let go. This binding or cuffing is the first recorded (though mythical) use of what we now call handcuffs.

But, there is more to the story of handcuffs. In the 4th century B.C., Carthaginians lugged chariots full of handcuffs with them in their anticipation of conquering the Greeks.

During the 15th and 16th centuries, the words *swivel manacle* and *shackbold* were used to describe handcuffs. The word eventually evolved from the Anglo-Saxon "handcop", meaning that which "cops" or "catches", to the version of the word we use today – handcuff.

The first handcuffs were actually made from strips of animal hide. Because the use of, and need for restraining other people developed before metals were discovered, rope made from reeds and vines was the updated method and material employed to confine other human beings and prevent escape.

As time progressed, so did human beings' ability to make stronger, reusable handcuffs. This ability to make stronger handcuffs was introduced, along with the invention of locks, in the Bronze Age. During the Iron Age, a more sophisticated workmanship was forged.

However, most handcuffs were 'one size fits all' and caused more pain for the bigger boned detainee and potential freedom for the small-wristed prisoner. They were simple metal rings that locked in place with no room for adjustment to the size of the captive's wrists.

Not until 1862 were there any major changes to handcuffs, when inventor W.V. Adams patented a design for handcuffs that had adjustable ratchets. In 1865, John Tower, who started one of the most successful American handcuff companies, used Adams' design to manufacture handcuffs up until WWII.

Now, there are literally hundreds of types of handcuffs. Some bought for collecting only, and some made to accommodate law enforcers in their need for swift and secure handling of disorderly crowds and individuals.

For the swift securing of the unruly, PlastiCuffs are often used. They are flexible restraints that resemble the plastic ties used to secure cable lines. With Universal Precautions the outlook of the day, PlastiCuffs help prevent the spread of disease, as they are disposable. They are also cheaper than the traditional metal restraints used by law enforcement, as well as easier to carry.

So, the handcuff has evolved from myth to leather to twine - all flexible, to the hard metal mechanism most popular throughout recent history. Coming full circle, handcuffs are now once again flexible and disposable, all the while preserving the original uses - to constrain, detain and even entertain.

References -

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