

A survivor with style: The barber pole king

Chicago Tribune – Thursday, June 25, 1981

By Charles Leroux

St. Pau, Minn. -- When Bill Marvy was 12, he left the delivery end of the newspaper business and began doing odd jobs for a barber supply company. Sometimes he'd spend all day mixing up lilac water; and by the end of that day, he'd be so used to the smell he couldn't understand why nobody would sit anywhere near him on the trolley car as he rode home.

Marvy has been in the barber supply business for 59 years now. He's 71, and, in at least one respect, he's still sitting all alone. He is the only remaining manufacturer of barber poles.

"In America?"

"Yes, and Canada, too."

"Really?"

"Yes, and Mexico and South America."

"You don't say."

"I do. Africa, too."

In fact, Marvy knows of only five other barber pole makers in the world, two in Japan and three in Europe. He pulled a chair up to his big old roll-top desk, sat, lit a cigar in anticipation of having his picture taken, and told his story the way he likes to tell it – from the beginning.

"THE SYMBOLISM OF the barber pole goes back to the barber / surgeon of the Middle Ages. In addition to cutting hair, he'd pull teeth, let blood, use leeches, lance boils. He'd hang his bandages out to dry, and they'd blow in the wind and twist around red and white together. The red and white stripes represent blood and the linen. Around the turn of the century, they started using red, white, and blue stripes – patriotic. Well, after the Middle ages, the barbers and surgeons split apart. Barbering was not thought of as such a high profession anymore, and the surgeons, well, you know what happened with them."

During the golden age of barbering in this country, through about the '40's, some men would come into the barber shop everyday for a shave before going to work. Each customer had his own initialed shaving mug on a shelf. The barber could look up to that shelf and measure his success.

Every city neighborhood, every small town square showed at least one red, white, and blue

striped pole. Some were wooden poles that had been turned on a lathe by local carpenters. Some were old water heaters or plumbing pipes appropriately painted. Some poles turned by wind power, others by spring winding or electricity. Manufactured poles were made by five companies then; two in Chicago, one in St. Louis, one in Los Angeles, and a small one in Winston Salem, North Carolina. They made poles of cast iron coated with porcelain. Those poles were heavy, prone to rust, difficult to repair. Bill Marvy had a better idea.

In 1950, MARVY started manufacturing his "Six Ways Better" poles and hauled a bunch of them to the barber supply business trade show in Chicago's Palmer House that year. They were made of non-rust aluminum and non-chip stainless steel with a non-rot plastic inner revolving cylinder and a nonbreakable clear plastic outer cylinder. At his booth in the show a mechanical arm holding a hammer struck blow after blow without effect on that outer cylinder. Barbers had been buying sheet metal hoods to lock over their poles to prevent vandalism. Suppliers liked what they saw at Marvy's booth, knew that their customers would be enthusiastic, too. Marvy's star began to rise as a polemaker. Other's makers, one by one, were eclipsed. For the last eight years, Marvy has stood alone.

Not all of that exclusivity is due to the Six Ways Better pole, however. Some of it can be credited to the Beatles.

"That long hair business in the mid '60's started a decline," Marvy said. "Thousands of barbers thought the world was going to end. They retired, they consolidated with other barbers, they went into something else altogether. There were 112,000 barber shops in America in 1950, only 91,794 by 1972, and in 1977 – that's the latest year I have Commerce Department figures for – there were just 68,639. That's right around the total number of poles we've made. The smart barbers, the ones who knew how to diversify, how to make \$10 from an occasional styling rather than \$3 from a frequent haircut, survived.

Diversity has kept Marvy in business. He makes and sells sterilizers, sells a huge line of Afro combs, stocks old-fashioned straight razors and strops, offers poles with the words "Hair Stylist" on the stripes and poles with a poodle motif (he recommends that these poles not be mounted so low as to attract the attention of the ultimate consumer). He does a big business in renovation and in selling parts for old barber poles, adapting to a problem he helped create, the problem being that old poles never die.

"They're made to last. When some barber goes out of business, he sells his pole and chairs. Some of them are used in new shops, but since more shops close than are opening, lots of them must be ending up in recreation rooms. They don't end up on junk piles. I bet you never saw a barber pole in the junk. Oh, maybe it happens, but not very often."

"We're at an all-time low in making poles now. In '67, we made 5,100. Now we turn out about a thousand a year. They sell for from \$199 to \$439. About a third of the new poles now go to non-barber decorative uses. We used to work two shifts a day, 12 to 15 men in a shift. In 1967, we made our 50,000th pole. I'll show it to you."

HE GOT UP FROM the desk and went into the showroom of the converted car repair shop that has been home to his company for 21 years. There, high on the wall, resplendent with gold

plated castings, was number 50,000.

"Think of any two numbers between 1 and 68,000," he said, "and I'll tell you where those two poles went."

"Really?"

"Do it."

"O.K.; 125 and 62,069."

"Come on back in the office."

He pulled out two ledger books, one yellowed with age, the other fairly new.

"No. 125 went to Shakopee, Minnesota, in March of 1950. Number 62,069 went to Burnsby, British Columbia, December 16, 1976."

"See," he said.

Chicago Tribune Press Service