

# For barber poles, turn to the Marvys

*A family business in St. Paul keeps an age-old tradition alive*

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On a quiet residential corner in St. Paul, Bob Marvy operates the last barber-pole factory in North America. The William Marvy Company will turn out its 75,000<sup>th</sup> electrified swirl of Americana this autumn.

"We're on a mission to keep one of this country's last great symbols alive," said Marvy, 49, whose sons are the third generation to pursue the family obsession. "Without us, it would be gone."

Yellowed ledger books tell part of the story. Every Marvy barber pole is logged by hand and serial number. No. 125 went to Shakopee in 1950. No. 62,069 went to Burnaby, British Columbia on December 16, 1976. The White House barber shop has one. So do U.S. naval ships, Las Vegas casinos and Spike's Barber Shop on Superior Avenue in Tomah, Wisconsin. "Been there since 1959 and haven't had a problem," said Sheldon (Spike) Reavis, a Tomah barber for the last 36 years. "It's the only advertising I do."

From every continent, vacationing friends have brought back snapshots of the easy-to-spot, round-bottomed combination of stainless steel, clear glass and, of course, red, white and blue. Even the Smithsonian has one, somewhere, although it's currently lost in storage limbo.

But Marvy has one story the ledger books can't tell. It captures the power of the barber poles that roll out of the converted bakery building at St. Clair Avenue and Brimhall Street in St. Paul's Macalester-Groveland neighborhood. "We once sold a pole to a man from northern Minnesota," Marvy said. "He was a night fisherman. Plugged the pole in on his deck. Figured it would make it easy to find his way back to his cabin in the dark." A week later, the angler returned his pole and wanted his money back. "He said people were coming by boat and pickup truck and lining up to get their hair cut," Marvy said. "It's a universal symbol everyone can recognize instantly."

## **Twist of fate**

Historians trace the roots of the barber pole back to the Middle Ages, when 11th century barbers not only shaved and cut but also pulled teeth, used leeches to let blood and performed other boil-lancing surgeries. They'd hang their bloodstained bandages

outside to dry, twisting diagonally in the wind. U.S. patriotism accounted for the blue stripe several centuries later. And for the next couple hundred years, barber poles – ranging from hand-stripped stovepipe sections to painted wooden staffs – were just another trade symbol on Main Street, business symbols that increasingly have given way to neon signs and plastic marquees.

Pharmacists were known for their mortar and pestle. Pawn shops had those three gold balls. Tobacco shops, never the most politically correct places, featured wooden Indians out front.

But Bob Marvy and two of his three sons, Scott and Dan, won't let the barber pole slip into trade-symbol oblivion.

Fact is, barber pole sales -- eight models ranging from \$300 to \$800 each – make up only about twenty-five percent of the family business. More than half of the company's revenue comes from selling sanitizing supplies to beauty and barber supply companies. The balance of the business comes from selling grooming supplies to the nation's prisons, hospitals and country clubs.

### **Thanks, Ringo**

The Marvys credit the Beatles for their diversification. The long-hair rebellion of the '60s spelled doom for the crew-cut barber shops that punctuated every commercial strip in the country.

When Bob's father, William Marvy, devised his first rustproof, shatterproof pole in his basement on New Year's Day in 1950, 112,000 American barber shops were charging about a buck for weekly razor cuts and shaves. Half a century later, there are fewer than 30,000 barber shops left. So Marvy has changed with the times. Some poles spin the words "Hair Stylist" on their inner cylinders. They even manufacture poles with pink poodles for pet-grooming salons.

### **Nation's last barber-pole maker is keeping up with the times**

"We sold 5,100 poles in 1967," Marvy said. "That's 100 a week with more than a dozen men working night and day." The 50,000<sup>th</sup> pole, a commemorative gold-plated surprise from the workers to the boss, has hung high on a wall in the back of the shop since that record year of '67.

Within 25 years of that peak, though, Marvy barber-pole sales plummeted about 90 percent to the record low of 487 in 1991. But with 600 poles ordered this year, sales are expected to climb slightly for the fifth straight year. And Marvy has just updated the computer system, recently bought the neighboring building and remodeled it into state-of-the-art office space.

## **Cigar-burned shrine**

Amid all the plush, high-tech new stuff, William Marvy's old rolltop desk remains as a sort of shrine by the window. "We had it refinished but made sure to leave the cigar burns," said Dan Marvy, 21, who recalls Saturday visits to the office with his grandfather. The old desk is filled with photographs, including a black-and-white glossy from the 1950 barber-supply trade show at the Palmer House hotel in Chicago. That's where William Marvy introduced the pole the Wall Street Journal would herald as "the first real improvement in the barber pole in a quarter century."

Marvy's first pole, as he told anyone within earshot, was made of nonrust aluminum with non-chip stainless steel, a nonrust plastic inner cylinder and a non-breakable clear plastic outer cylinder. To prove it, his booth at the show featured a mechanical arm holding a hammer that struck blow after blow at the unfazed Marvy Model 55.

Never one to soft sell, Marvy's literature over the years boasted: "More pulling power than the Pied Piper . . . Draws customers like honey draws bees . . . Modern as an earth satellite, ruggedly built as a bank vault."

William Marvy was born on Smith Avenue in St. Paul in 1909. His father was a Russian carpenter afraid of heights and skyscrapers in New York. "He heard there were lower buildings out in a place called Minnesota, and we've been here ever since," Bob Marvy said.

Bob's father peddled lilac water, Tiger Root and other tonics and barber supplies from age 12. He dropped out of Mechanic Arts High School. When the Depression snuffed out the business he worked for, William Marvy began selling his own supplies in every hamlet and burg in Minnesota. He'd leave on Monday and come home Friday. By the late '40s, tired of the road, Marvy devised his own innovated barber pole. A masterpiece that ultimately would kill off his last competitors in Chicago and St. Louis.

By 1980, Newsweek magazine, CBS' Charles Kuralt and National Geographic all made treks to St. Clair Avenue to report on what Newsweek described as "someone like the last buffalo hunter, a badlands bad man left over from centuries before."

In fact, when William Marvy died four years ago, he was the only non-barber ever immortalized in the Barber Hall of Fame in Columbus, Ohio.

"My Dad's greatest wish was to keep the barber pole alive," Bob Marvy said. "And that's precisely what we'll continue doing."