

American Scene

In Minnesota: Poles and Profits

By John Skow

The barber would unlock the door of his shop at 7 a.m. or so – early, because it was an important ceremony of his day to shave the important and self-important men of the town, whose gold-lettered mugs stood splendidly on the shelf above the mirror. Then he would hang up his straw hat and suit coat and raise his window shades. After that he would put on his barber coat, and, finally, he would step outside his shop with the key for winding up his spring-driven barber pole motor. When the twisted red, white and blue stripes began spiraling their way to infinity (a kid could watch those stripes coming down from the top of the pole and disappearing into the bottom of the pole for a good stretch of time without figuring out where they went), you knew the barber was open for business.



But those spring-wound models are old stuff, and William Marvy, who operates the last barber-pole factory in the U.S., is not impressed. When one of those clockwork barber poles comes into his shop in St. Paul for repairs, he sends it back electrified. Marvy, 70, has been in the business for 58 years, and he has been up to date every step of the way. This up-to-dateness is itself a kind of spring-wound relic: the breezy, bet-on-the-future confidence of a Midwestern traveling salesman from a half-century ago.

Marvy is a substantial, pink-faced man with a sandy mustache and a booming voice. He has three Dutch Masters cigars and a ballpoint pen in the breastpocket of his suit. But it isn't hard to change the ballpoint to a fountain pen, erase a few facial lines and see him as a 25 year-old self-employed salesman, striding into a two-chair barber shop in some one-horse Minnesota town. "Keep up with the times," he would say, unpacking samples of Tiger Root and Pinaud's Lilac Vegetal. "Look to the future. Have a cigar."

Then, with the routing purchases safely inked into his order book, he would make the big try. "Now, you're an intelligent man," he would admit to the proprietor, "and you might say dollars don't come easy, and why should I spend mine on one of these new, illuminated, revolving, high-visibility barber poles? And you'd be absolutely right; everyone knows where your shop is. But sometimes a reminder will make a man buy before he really needs to. For instance, you might be walking down the street without any idea of being thirsty, and suddenly you see a sign that says 'Blatz Beer'." The barber's pride of profession would take over, and he'd contract to replace his old pole – often a hand-striped water tank or section of stovepipe – with one of the up-to-date models. "You may not notice an increase in business the next day, or the day after that," Marvy would say, "but over the course of a year . . ."

Such logic worked often enough that Marvy began to think of manufacturing barber poles, not just selling them. In January 1950 he opened his own factory. At the time there were five other barber-pole makers in the country: two in Chicago, one in St. Louis, one in Los Angeles, and a small one in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Marvy and circumstances gradually put them out of business. A man who could have foreseen the long-hair rebellion of the mid-60's might not have put his money into barber poles then,

But by 1967 Marvy's factory, working two shifts a day of twelve to 15 men each, had turned out its 50,000th pole. That one is an elegant rig with gold-plated castings, which is still hanging on a wall of his office, many hundreds of years in time and perhaps more in abstraction from the display that first signified a barbershop: the bloody bandages of the old barber-surgeons, hung outside the doorway to dry, twisting and spiraling in the wind.

There were about 112,000 barbershops in the U.S. in 1967, says Marvy, and there are only about 90,000 now. A limited additional market exists on Navy ships and overseas (there is also a competitor overseas; the only other barberpole factory Marvy knows of in the world is in Japan). The popularity of poodle-grooming salons, though perhaps a sign of societal decay, has helped Marvy's sales; his poodle pole (wall-mounted, and too high to be of any practical interest to a dog) has a row of poodles on one of the stripes. Nor has unisex haircutting, which had badly cut into the business of old-fashioned barbershops, been a disaster for Marvy. The androgynous works *HAIR STYLIST* revolve with the stripes.

One problem is that most of Marvy's potential customers already have perfectly good Marvy poles. Production is down from 5,000 poles a year to something under 1,000. At \$335 for the highest-priced model. Does this mean that the William Marvy Co. is as shaky as the Chrysler Corp.? Certainly not. "We just had our first million-dollar year," says Marvy, marveling. Part of that million is inflation, but the barber-pole business seems more secure than most. The little factory could use anew deck of cards in the room where everyone plays rummy at lunchtime, but otherwise things are shipshape.

William Marvy leans on an antique barber chair, whose cracked leather he has replaced with Naugahyde ("a fine product"). It is one of the grand old cast-iron, nickel-plated thrones made by the Emil J. Paidar Co. of Chicago. Paidar also make barber poles and, until it went out of business in the early '70's, was one of Marvy's last competitors. Before meeting Marvy, a visitor imagines someone like the last buffalo hunter, a badlands bad man left over from the century before. Gloomily waiting for the great herds to come again. But Marvy sees himself as a man of modern commerce. Sounding imperial, he says, "We are barber-pole people. That's what we think about when we wake in the morning, and that's what we think about when we go home at night."

"Dad, here's your air schedule." What apparition is this? A young Marvy: same build, same face, same voice. Only the Dutch Masters are missing. It is Bob Marvy, the founder's 33 year-old son. As his father looks on approvingly, Bob says that he likes the business and expects to take it over some day. In the meantime, he will get a chance to practice. His father is off to attend a barber-supplies convention in Las Vegas.