

# *Stripes Forever*

**By Gretchen Legle**

A few years back, William Marvy was elected to the Barber Hall of Fame. Marvy was puzzled. He'd never clipped a lock in his life.

Marvy wrote to the Hall of Famers: "I'm highly honored, but I have to tell you a little secret. I'm not really a barber."

The Hall of Famers were not to be denied: "You, Mr. Marvy, have been instrumental in holding for this industry a trade symbol known to no other industry: the barber pole."

William Marvy went down as Barber of the Year for 1982, joining the likes of Vidal Sassoon in the enduring ranks of hair-care luminaries. Today, at age 75, the ruddy-faced, mustachioed Marvy still presides over the last barber pole factory in the United States, located in a converted auto-repair garage at St. Clair and Brimhall in St. Paul. In the back of the spic-and-span warehouse, 'Buck' Bucklin and Roy Beedy are making barber poles. The walls are lined with red-white-and-blue cylinders – some half made, some ready to be shipped out, some half as long as your arm, some longer. In the coffee room, where an occasional game of nickel-ante poker is played at lunchtime, Marvy packs his pipe, settles his substantial self into a chair, sets aside his half-moon spectacles, props his wingtips up on a chair. He's ready to talk about the good old days – the days before the Beatles made "crewcut" a nasty word, when a haircut was a haircut and a shave was a shave.



"It was nice," he says. "You could go to the best barber shop in town for 50 cents." Those were the days when a Jim Dandy sort had a regular date with his barber. He'd tell the barber to trim the back and the sides, then settle in for some pampering and a dose of the latest gossip. If he was a real gentleman, Jim Dandy would be back in the same barber chair at the same time the next week.

Then came the Beatles. "You know," says Marvy, "they drove a lot of barbers crazy. The old barber was accustomed to just plain haircutting." A lot of barbers didn't make it. There were 112,000 barber shops in the United States and Canada in 1967; there are only 40,000 today. "The fellas who were on their toes knew that the only way to stay in business was not to fight the customer," Marvy says. "Some of them began calling themselves 'hair stylists'. The man who used his noodle is still in business today."

Marvy's production of barber poles has dropped from some 5,000 each year to about 700. But the company is going strong, because William Marvy used his noodle. "The unisex shops pleaded with us to have a symbol for them," he says. Marvy designed a pole with the words "Hair Stylist" on one of the stripes. Dog groomers wanted to get into the act. Marvy designed a pole decorated with leaping pink poodles. An Atlantic City casino found some need for Marvy's handiwork; gambling visitors now see nine Marvy-crafted green-and-yellow barber poles. The company has entered the nostalgia trade. "Now that one," says Marvy, pointing his pipe stem at an ancient porcelain pole waiting in the workshop for repairs, "that one would normally have gone in the junk pile."

After an overhaul and a spit polish, it will be at home in the corner of somebody's den or rec room. Stacked ceiling-high in the warehouse are the "new toys" Marvy concocted as the barber-pole trade languished: bottles of "Mar-V-Cide" disinfectant, combs, brushes, scissors, specially designed glass comb and scissors containers, boxes and boxes of brushes and Afro clips. Wm. Marvy Company does most of its business these days in barber and beauty supplies that offer a good deal less romance than the barber pole.

The changes he's been forced to make, says Marvy, are what it takes to keep the barber pole alive. "I have a lot of respect for trying to earn an honest dollar, trying to make a living in an old-fashioned business. We just work hard and try to turn out the best product we can: plain, old-fashioned barber poles."

The barber pole is a professional trade symbol whose roots can be traced to the barber/surgeons of the 11th century – whose blood-stained rags, hung out on wash lines, turned round and round in the breeze. Whereas Marvy has propelled the barber pole into the 1980s with gusto, other trade symbols – the pawnbroker's three gold balls, the pharmacist's mortar and pestle, the tobacconist's wooden Indian, and the optometrist's mammoth eyeglasses – have all faded into history. Marvy is firm in his conviction that as long as the Wm. Marvy Company is on the job, the barber pole will not become a similar obscurity.

When Marvy entered the barber-pole business in 1950, there were five other barber-pole makers in the country: two in Chicago, one in St. Louis, one in Los Angeles, and one in Winston-Salem. Today, Marvy knows of only one competitor, located in Japan. After Marvy hit the 1950 barber-supply trade show in Chicago with the "six ways better" pole – a pole that The Wall Street Journal called the first real improvement in the barber pole in a quarter of a century – the competitors began dropping off, one by one. Marvy says that his introduction of a shatterproof lucite shell, non-rust stainless-steel castings, and a plastic inner cylinder were the greatest things to happen to the barber pole since the advent of electricity. He says that his company didn't really drive his competitors out of business: "I just diluted their business to a point where they lost their enthusiasm. We got all excited about the barber pole business, and they were just coasting along. They figured, 'Marvy is making such a big fuss about barber poles. Let him have it.'"

After six years in business, Marvy had turned out 5,100 red-white-and-blue-striped pieces of Americana. In 1967, the company churned out its 50,000<sup>th</sup> pole. In celebration, Marvy's staff ("my men," he calls them) created the gold-and-white-striped pole with gold-plated castings that hangs in his office.

"As modern as a jet plane. Draws customers like honey draws bees," says the Marvy Company sales brochures. No, that's not a hard sell, says Marvy. It's the truth. A jeweler, he says, can buy a \$2,000 neon sign with bells and flashing lights to advertise his wares. But the guy with a Marvy barber pole (top-of-the-line model: \$534; average life span: 30 years) tells his story quietly, quickly, and clearly: "It's a universal symbol with no words. A child knows it . . . Nothing tells the story of the barber like the spinning stripe." Marvy twirls his pipe stem in the air to illustrate.

Marvy estimates that half of the poles in the 40,000 surviving barber shops of North America are Marvy poles; close to half of the poles in St. Paul's 250 shops are Marvy poles. In 34 years, he has sold nearly 70,000 poles, which he has shipped to points as distant as Norway and as far afield as Rome – poles that his 36-year-old son, Bob, will be plenty busy servicing after William Marvy gets around to retiring. Until then, the company founder will be in the shop every day from nine o'clock to closing time, processing orders and making sure that everything is done to his satisfaction. "I've never had a 40-hour week in my life," he says. "I am not really a great sportsman, and I am not what you would call a drinking man . . . I think about work all the time, actually."

From what is only a red-white-and-blue blur no bigger than a straight pin on a picture post card of Main Street U.S.A., William Marvy can pick out a "Marvy 55" or a "Marvy 824." "It's as easy to spot," he says, "as one of your own children in a crowd."-Gretchen Legler is a free-lance writer who lives in St. Paul.