

BARR BROS. OF EUGENE, OREGON by dennis ellingsen

(In 1985 this article appeared in Knife World Publications. I recently purchased a Barr Bros razor from eBay which turned my thoughts to the Barr Bros Company that lived once upon a time in Eugene, Oregon. Showing my new treasure around seemed to light the fires of curiosity. The razor was special, as not only did it list Barr and Eugene on the tang, but on the back it was stamped U of O Razor. Yep. The University of Oregon.)

Twenty five years ago I started a research project on the Barr Bros. Co. of Eugene, Oregon. Information was scanty at best so I patiently awaited more information so that I would have a feeling of completion about this study. If you think you were frustrated by the lack of historical documentation of larger cutlery firms, try looking into the smaller companies. These smaller companies were merely utilitarian ventures, and history was not on their minds. Those utilitarian motives, as you can guess, were to make a living (ie. put bread on the table) by being profitable and satisfy a demand for a product. Such specialized needs leave no time for concern for history; for concern was for the "now." They are history merely because they were there then.



Twenty five years ago, I was fortunate to acquire a Barr Bros hunting knife. This was my first introduction to this company, and I was sure I would have an easy search for the history since I live at the home base of Eugene, Oregon. Unfortunately this did nothing to make the historical search an easy chore. Old clippings and newspaper articles were minimal, and the path finally led to interviews with people that might have knowledge of any sort concerning a "Knife Company" in Eugene, Oregon. Interviews were few, and it was a task for the people to recollect back 60 to 70 years. For you see, Barr Bros. of Eugene was a cutlery company that started business in 1891 and lasted only until 1911.

The Barr brothers, Hugh and William, came to Eugene in 1891 from southern Oregon to establish a cutlery concern. It is suggested that the brothers came from Germany, however I could never document this. It can be assumed that they were low of funds as they show a series of partnerships that went to 1898. Their first partnership was with the

Cardwell Door Locking Device which seemed to be a short term venture. The next partnership with a Mr. Miller lasted longer, and the company name under this partnership was called Barr Bros. and Company. It was this period that dealt the heaviest with cutlery, in the form of kitchen knives, hunting knives, pocketknives and spring eye sack needles. It was the spring eye sack needle that will no doubt be that for which Barr Bros will be known. Even today we can find Barr Bros sack needles in certain places around this country. A majority of people are not familiar with sack needles so I will attempt to describe this device. The plain sacking needle is a needle that comes in various lengths of three to six inches and is used for the purpose of closing burlap sacks of feed, acorns, grain, or seeds. In the Eugene Oregon area, grass seeds were harvested and stored in burlap sacks which were sewn with a sack needle.

The sack needle is considered a cutlery item since its construction consists of a sharp point, cutting edges, and it requires tempering. The spring eye sack needle was an enhanced and improved version of the plain sacking needle. When we think of threading a needle, visions of one eye closed, tongue askew and steady as a rock as the proper procedures to get the job done. The spring eye sack needle eliminated this to a fast and efficient, bang and it's threaded. The construction of the eye called for a split along one edge so the thread could be placed at this split and be forced into the eye portion. Also the edge on the front part of the eye was sharpened to a cutting edge to break the thread. With this device, it was possible to thread and sew a grain sack in such a way that minimal effort and motion was needed. It was suggested that the Barr Bros. manufacture of this item was a full time job as the demand for these needles was high. At first the needles were made completely by hand, however it was reported that a trip hammer was eventually purchased to

increase production. I would like to think that the Barr Bros were the innovators of the spring eye sack needle, however I could find little evidence to support this. I have many Barr Bros sack needles of various lengths and sizes, and I'm certain that every sack sewer had a size that suited their needs.



Although the sacking needles commanded the major part of the Barr Bros business, other types of cutlery were made. I have several kitchen type knives in various styles that were made in Eugene, as well as two hunting knives that were constructed in the bowie style. Precious few cutlery items survive today that bear the Barr Bros Eugene stamp. In 1912 Barr Bros relocated in Oakland, California. Many Barr knives and razors were made with the Oakland stamping, however it is only the Eugene period about which I have become interested. None of the Barr needles give us any clues as to whether they were a product made in Eugene or in Oakland since the location stamp was not used.



The factory in Eugene that was owned under the name Barr Bros. was a wooden structure with two stories. Living quarters were upstairs. A drive line went down one side of the building to power the machinery. The people I interviewed spoke quite highly of the cutlery and the materials that were used by the company. One lady mentioned that she did not know the business, but she would never forget the noise of the trip hammer that could be heard from blocks away. Of equal memory was the oil soaked wood and equipment that was ever present. The Barr cutlery that I have is of excellent quality and is of durable and stout construction. The knives were made strictly for using and were made for local sales only. I have yet to locate a pocketknife with the Barr Eugene stamp, yet I am assured that such knives were made. This assurance came from old timers that I interviewed, but I have my doubts that such a recollection could be accurate some 70 years later. It can be argued that the Barr Bros did something with pocket knives, however was it the making of pocket knives, the repairing of pocket knives, or the selling of commercial pocket



knives that they are trying to recall. A specimen with the proper credentials will certainly provide a final answer.

In 1911, when the Barr brothers left for Oakland, the business was sold to Ed Goodchild who was an employee of the Barr concern. Ed Goodchild did not expand the business but did continue in the Barr fashion of cutlery manufacture. The company became known as the R & G Tool Company. Sack needles, kitchen knives and hunting knives can be found with the R & G stamp. Other marks were Goodchild Tool Co and also E.B. Goodchild Tool Co. This later stamp suggested that the earlier markings were done while in a partnership. Ed Goodchild was also known as a gun maker, and it was noted that he made many guns and did considerable work with wildcat cartridges of the time. Sometime in 1920, Ed Goodchild had a fatal hunting accident which led the business to be sold to an Adin Kimery. Sack needles and a slight few kitchen cutlery items were the only items manufactured after this date. A single picture of the final tear down of this building appeared in the local paper and after six hours of searching microfilm, I found the death of the building occurred on September 20, 1948.



Anyone knowing of a Barr Bros., Eugene, Oregon, pocketknife or for that matter any name that appears in this article, please contact the author.