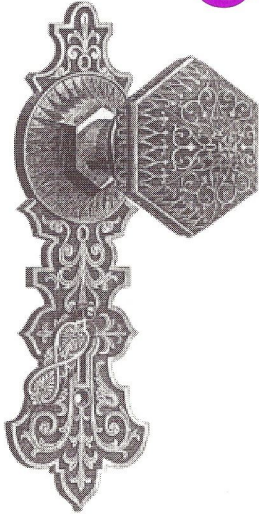


The Doorknob Collector

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THE AMERICAN HARDWARE COMPANY AND IT'S PREDECESSORS

By Maud Eastwood

Among the most prominent manufacturers of builder's hardware in this country were P & F. Corbin Co. and Russell & Erwin Manufacturing Company, both of New Britain, Connecticut, which eventually were combined into the American Hardware Company ("AHC"). In the period from 1870 to the 1890's they were the premier producers of builders hardware and enjoyed more attention from the press than their competitors.

Early History

The stature these companies achieved was a tribute to the men who led them, first as independent competitors and later as independent operation companies under the ownership of the American Hardware Corporation. This holding company was created in 1902 to acquire Corbin and R&E.

These were two different companies, competitors, located less than a mile apart and both producing high-end builders hardware. In many respects, their lines of builders' hardware were quite distinct, but sometimes they appeared virtually identical (see illustrations), perhaps because employees switched from one to the other. Their combination was engineered by Andrew J. Sloper, President of New Britain Bank, and a very important person in Connecticut. He had first gotten a job with the bank in 1866, at the age of 17, when Cornelius B. Erwin, a founder and President of R&E, was then President of the Bank. This started as long relationship with Mr. Erwin, as Sloper spent long evenings acting as his secretary until Erwin died in 1885. Of course, he knew everyone of any importance in the area, the Corbins included. Sloper became President of the Bank in 1895 and a Director of R&E three years later.



P. & F. Corbin 1874-75

Newsletter Deadline - Monday, February 28, 2006

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At the time of Cornelius Erwin's death in 1885, R&E was regarded by many as the top manufacturer of builders' hardware in the United States, and in good economic health, having a large earned surplus, a "special reserve gold fund of \$1,000,000" and warehouses and branches in London, Chicago, San Francisco and New York. It also had a hotel in New Britain for the convenience of those visiting the headquarters. But, as Sloper's son wrote,

"Thirteen years later, before A.J. became a Director, the prosperous condition of the company had undergone a startling change. The plant and equipment had become worn out and obsolete; the million dollar gold fund had been used up (mostly during the depression years of '93-95), and no new dividends were being earned or paid. The management was new and inept. Two younger concerns, P&F Corbin and Yale & Towne, had come up from behind with newer plants and machinery and more aggressive sales managers who had taken away many of R&E's best jobbing and retail customers". (Sloper, p. 299) The management of R&E had become complacent and self-satisfied. Many of them wore high hats to work and "high hatted the customers" (Id). Corbin management wore derbies and were on their toes. R&E's management was oblivious to the fact that Corbin, Yale & Towne, and Sargent & Co. had "crowded Russell & Erwin off the drivers' seat and headed the concern into the ditch." Sloper reached the conclusion that the current management of R&E had no clear idea how to recoup the company's fortunes. Within two years of becoming a Director, Sloper tried to find new management.

He first tried to hire away the manager of Corbin's screw factory at a substantial (for those days) increase in salary, but Corbin matched the offer. Sloper then managed to have R&E hire Henry Hart, who had impressed everyone in the New Britain business community, having 15 years of successful experience in the hardware trade.

In the fall of 1901, Sloper opened talks with Corbin looking towards a combination of the two companies. Corbin was in considerably better condition, and needed persuasion. In particular, Corbin's aggressive and influential sales manager thought that R&E was on the ropes and saw no reason to let up as long as R&E's inept management was in place. The hiring of Henry Hart immediately changed Corbin's response, and a few days after the announcement, Sloper received a call to come over to see Philip Corbin. Within hours, American Hardware Corporation was born, and 40 years of

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Russell & Erwin 1875

competition between the two companies ended.

Philip Corbin had been persuaded that a combination would remove bitter competition (a highly desirable end in those days which led to creation of holding companies or “trusts” in many industries), create a large company better able to stave off possible future takeovers, and end the practice of hiring each others’ key employees. Phillip Corbin became President of the holding company. The constituent parts continued, however, to operate individually under the mantle of AHC, each with its own designs and ideas and some distain for the other. In today’s parlance, each retained its own culture. In 1903 the screw-manufacturing facilities of P & F Corbin in New Britain and R&E’s screw facilities in New Britain and Dayton, Ohio were combined into a third division of AHC, the Corbin Screw Company.

A fourth division was created in 1903, the Corbin Motor Vehicle Corporation, was formed. Despite its name, the cars were manufactured in R&E’s factory.

Jarvis’s Reign

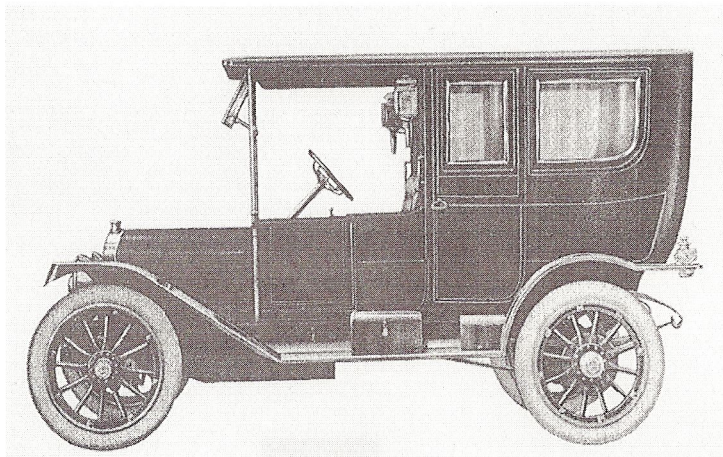
Phillip Corbin died in 1910, and was replaced by Charles Jarvis. He was not a “Corbin man”, but an outsider who had cultivated a friendship with Phillip Corbin. Prior to the creation of AHC, he became the second vice-president of P & F. Corbin Co. Old timers thought that he was a con man. News accounts at the time of his accession to the Presidency touted him as “a man of large interests, one of the best known hardware men in the country, and a genius in the handling of large financial affairs.”

The biography of Andrew Sloper devotes much space to Jarvis and his escapades. Sloper did not see Jarvis as Presidential material, and it seems that Jarvis was inclined to agree. In a letter to Charles Sager of Barrows Lock, dated November 25, 1910, Jarvis wrote that “when you come to rattle around like a hickory nut in a barrel and take up that leadership, it is an entirely different proposition – I question my ability very seriously.” Or maybe Jarvis was just being modest.

In 1911 Jarvis abandoned the holding company model and transformed AHC into an operating company, intending to consolidate Departments and eliminating redundant operations. This reorganization and shifting of office personnel from the various divisions had the predictable effect of upsetting everyone.

The Corbin Motor Vehicle

Jarvis was particularly enamored with the Motor Car project. In a letter to W. A. Hawley of the R & E Division, dated February 9, 1911, he stated that “The Motor Vehicle Corporation is the baby and will have to be nursed pretty carefully.” The Motor Vehicle Corporation suffered, however, from lack of experienced managers and raiding of its funds from other AHC divisions, as well as competition from numerous other companies. At one point, they contracted with an individual nobody knew anything about to build 400 cars within a year, giving him authority to purchase the required parts and materials, but the contract contained no penalties in the event the goal was not achieved. Of course, only a handful of cars were produced, and the axles and driving shafts purchased from suppliers frequently broke. Financial controls were minimal, at best. Howard Hart spent a year



1911 Corbin Model 40 Limousine

trying to straighten out the car company, but he gave up. Copies of letters from Jarvis to Sager indicate that funds were obtained from Barrows Lock yet kept secret. The company dawdled along until 1912 when it was liquidated, although a parts Department continued until the 1930s.

Jarvis's efforts at streamlining the organization seemed to bear little fruit. The first merger between the divisions came in the 1930s when the press offices were combined in the same building. No further efforts were undertaken until the 1950s. Small differences in machining, sizing, finishes, packaging, etc., continued. Corbin and Russwin (the successor to Russell & Erwin) were each too proud (or pig headed) to change or even exchange ideas.

The Middle Years

When Jarvis retired in May of 1913, AHC was commonly known as "the hardware trust" with six large factories in New Britain employing thousand of people. He was succeeded by Henry C. M. Thompson, who was brought in from the outside, but who had "an experienced hardware man" and the Western manager for P & F. Corbin some ten years previously. His program was decentralization of authority and giving plant managers more autonomy.

By 1925, AHC was the largest income tax payer in Connecticut, paying \$483,762. (An interesting sidelight: the largest individual income tax payer was the head of Simmons Spring Bed Company, who paid \$250,378). Presumably this refers to federal income tax, which had fairly modest rates.

Mid-Century

In 1950, AHC announced that it was closing the Corbin screw division, asserting that the industry capacity for producing wood and metal screws was double the demand, and that AHC had been selling its screws below the cost of manufacture "for many years".

In 1949 Evan Parker was put in charge of manufacturing, and the consolidation process began. In 1951 he was named President and consolidated all departments except Sales. His message was that the employees were working for AHC, not Corbin or Russwin. Profits for the whole Corporation in 1951 were only \$50,000, but it was enough to keep the Corporation above water.

In 1960 David Muirhead took over the Presidency and active management of AHC. He appointed Clarence G. Westman to head all order writing for P. & F. Corbin, Russwin and Corbin Cabinet Lock. These orders were delivered each morning to the manufacturing departments where the finished items were produced.

Clarence Westman

Two brothers, Clarence and Carl Westman of New Britain were veteran builder's hardware employees for most of their lives, Clarence with P & F. Corbin from the age 15, and Carl with Russwin. Clarence was a major contributor to this article by providing, from time to time, copies of company records from his cache of Corbin memorabilia, including news clippings and, most importantly, his recollections as an employee who knew Corbin inside and out.

Clarence collected many Corbin discards, which often found their way to his basement to be fashioned into toothpick, match or candle holders. Clarence recalled that when he was an office boy, vaults under the offices were being purged, and an old-timer advised him to save all he could even if he didn't then appreciate the contents, thus preserving invaluable links to Corbin history.

Clarence streamlined the order writing process at AHC, so that, for example, an order for 1600 items, which had required 4 days to process, now was completed in 4 hours.

He recalled that “after the war we were flooded with orders. Many of the old timers had left and the general superintendent had died. Many people we hired knew nothing about running a business and were trying to tell the ones that knew how to do things. Shipments were way down and deliveries were slow. We never had a scheduled date on any order. The ones that yelled the loudest got the shipments first even though we had older orders.”

The “importing” after the war of college educated business graduates who lacked any hardware knowledge or experience to conduct compulsory training classes was not favorably received by the hardened company employees, especially by the salesmen. One who was a Dale Carnegie graduate was particularly hard to take, but everyone was required to attend classes for over an hour a week. This was regarded as a waste of time.

As Clarence relates, “We had a Yale grad who came in after the War and thought he could run this as a stock company [producing to build up inventories rather than to meet demand] and he had thousands of front door handles made, but the customers’ orders for these items did not come anywhere near the amount we had. Later they were taken off the inventory and sent back to the foundry.” They also had handles bought from a company in Massachusetts. “They were black iron. They were around for about 10 years, and I don’t know what happened to them. He had the idea that everyone was going to build a small white house with these handles on the front door.”

Corporate Games and Battles

In the mid-1950s, B. S. F. Company, a holding company, emerged as the largest stockholder (30%) in AHC. B.S.F. was cited as an example of a form of corporate ownership popular at time, the “holding company pyramid”, in which the top holding company owns a big (although often minority) interest in other companies, which in turn may own partial ownership in other companies. In this way, a dollar of capital in the top company may control many dollars in assets of the lower companies.

In 1956, AHC shares were listed on the New York Stock Exchange. Evan Parker presented the President of the Exchange with a solid brass padlock imprinted with both the “Corbin” and “Russwin” trademarks. In 1961 AHC became a “Fortune 500” company

In 1962, control of B.S.F. changed when outsiders brought a substantial minority interest in it from banks that had lent money on its stock. The outsiders included Victor Muscat, a financier who would later get into considerable troubles together with Roy Cohn and who pled guilty to filing false reports with the SEC (but that is another story). The battle broke out with B.S.F. trying to take control of AHC, and AHC trying to dilute B.S.F.’s interest by acquiring another company for stock. AHC’s President, David Muirhead, was ready to fight. At the time, AHC employed some 2200 people in New Britain, and local interests clearly felt threatened

B.S.F. geared up for a proxy fight, which local newspaper suggested would be between a local management dedicated to keeping operations in New Britain and “outside holding interests”. On January 2, 1963, a Connecticut court refused B.S.F.’s request for access to AHC’s stockholders list and other records, concluding that AHC was being competently run and therefore permitting the proxy fight to go forward would not be in the best interests of AHC’s shareholders. (There is a distinctly home-cooked flavor to the opinion). Twenty days later B.S.F. agreed to sell its interest in AHC to Glen Alden Corporation. In 1964 Glen Alden and related holders sold their interests in AHC to Emhart Manufacturing Corporation (which

manufactured automatic bottling machinery and other packaging equipment), with Glen Alden clearing a profit of \$5.5 million. AHC was thereafter merged into Emhart and disappeared as an independent entity. David Muirhead became CEO of Emhart.

In 1970 Emhart moved its P. & F. Corbin, Russwin and the Corbin Cabinet Lock Co, divisions to a new plant in Berlin, Connecticut. The AHC collection of door trim samples and other historic objects were also moved to the Berlin plant, about which Muirhead stated, "These are our heritage and will be preserved." In fact, as Clarence Westman related, at this time all the dies and patterns were destroyed and the blueprints were microfilmed and destroyed.

Fortunately, the hardware samples of R&E, Corbin and Corbin Cabinet Co. enjoyed a different fate. Emhart donated them to the Connecticut Historical Commission, and in the late 1970s they were placed in the Lock Museum on a long-term (effectively, we hope, perpetual) loan. Corporate records of R&E, Corbin Cabinet Lock Co., Corbin Screw, P. & F. Corbin and AHC are in the University of Connecticut in Storrs, CN.

A further note on Emhart - it too disappeared. In 1989, in order to resist a \$2.4 billion takeover attempt by a New York investment group (which included the oil heir, Gordon P. Getty), Emhart merged with Black & Decker Corporation. Emhart's headquarters in Farmington, Connecticut, were closed in June 1989, and the merged company operated from Black & Decker's headquarters in Towson, Maryland.

Nothing is left of R&E, Corbin or AHC in New Britain.

More About The Slopers

Andrew's son, William T. Sloper, is also a part of history, having survived the Titanic's sinking, which he wrote about it in a final chapter of his biography of his father.

William took a three-month vacation in Egypt and Europe, and when he was about to return to New York, he ran into a family he had been on the ship to Egypt, the Fortune family from Winnipeg. When their daughter, Alice Fortune, implored him, William cancelled his passage back to New York on another ship and booked passage on the Titanic on which the Fortunes were traveling. One evening, while he was writing thank-you letters to people who had entertained him in London, Dorothy Gibson, a popular movie actress, asked Sloper if he would make the fourth in a bridge game. He did, and it was on a post-game promenade with Gibson that they felt the Titanic strike the iceberg. Lifeboat 7 was the first, or one of the first, lifeboats lowered, and the officer in charge was allowing men into lifeboats when there were no women around. Dorothy Gibson insisted that he join her in the lifeboat. When it was lowered, there were only 19 people in a boat designed for 66; many passengers watched the launching from above, trying to make up their minds.

Eventually they were picked up by the Carpathia and landed in New York. The Fortune family was not so decisive, and by the time they decided to leave, the officers were barring any men from taking the places remaining for women and children. The elderly Mr. Fortune and his son were left behind.

Rumors circulated about a number of the survivors, including William, that they had escaped by dressing like women. In William's case, a reporter from the Hearst newspapers was so annoyed that he couldn't get an interview that he invented the story. Andrew counseled his son not to sue Hearst, but to forget it. William recounts the stories of two other persons he knew who were also victims of such false rumors, one of whom killed himself and the other who was ostracized.

Andrew Sloper's 1887 house in New Britain, 27 Grove Hill Street, is now the headquarters of the Polish American Foundation of Connecticut, and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Both the Russell and Erwin estates were demolished many years ago.

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A NOTE FROM THE EDITOR

OK, enough with the serious history. All doorknobers will be interested in the article which appeared on the front page of the Real Estate Section of The New York Times on January 22, 2006 about Rhett Butler and Andrea Arden and their digs in Red Hook, Brooklyn - to wit the third floor of the factory which, on the first two floors, houses machining shops and finishing studios for his business, E. R. Butler & Co. Win Applegate and I were fortunate enough to visit the factory to photograph Rhett's collection for the supplement to Victorian Decorative Art, 2d Edition, and there is a lot of space there. So here is the idea for the Convention of 200?. We all pack up our sleeping bags and have the convention at Rhett's place. Not

much in the way of restaurants nearby, so a group is delegated to roast pigs and lambs outside. At night, we sit inside around campfires and tell ghost stories. And make s'mores, of course. Oh, the three Doberman pinschers are very friendly, and Andrea is a professional dog trainer. If you want to read the article, "Yin Moves In With Yang", go to www.nytimes.com; unfortunately it will cost \$2.50 after you register.

Private Member Information

In Memoriam

We have recently received news that **Helen Ryan** (202) passed away in December. She had contacted us about a year ago to let us know that "Health does not permit us [she and her husband Orval] to participate actively anymore, but we enjoy keeping in touch via newsletter." Our condolences go out to her loved ones.

2006 ADCA Convention – Buffalo, NY

As you plan your summer and early fall don't forget to put Buffalo, NY on your calendar for Sept 12-16th. There are many of our ADCA members who have not yet attended a convention. Why not give it a try this year. It's a chance to see Niagara Falls and meet new people who have the same interest as you – **DOORKNOBS**. Come and join in the fun and fellowship and view or buy some hardware that you never knew existed.

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