

# *Home on the Wrought Iron Range*



## **Cookbooks, Clocks, and the End of an Era**

### *Part II*

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It was, however, the *Home Comfort Cook Book* that proved to be one of the Wrought Iron Range Company's biggest promotional coups. Filled with material helpful to almost anyone who was farming or keeping house, the opening pages addressed the business philosophy of the company, noting warranties, method of shipment, and an extensive list of the national competitions which had resulted in prizes for quality stoves. A letter to the prospective customer included a gentle, but obvious, knock on those competitors who produced "gaudy, makeshift and Pennywise" stoves.



Each model was pictured, and a complete parts list with descriptive drawings was included. If something broke, the part could be ordered from St. Louis and repairs made by the owner. The book included detailed operating instructions for the stoves, directions for laying a fire, curing the wrought iron, chimney construction and, of course, the full reports from Purdue University and the Indianapolis analytical chemist!

Having satisfied the purchaser with the Home Comfort Range's technical properties, the cookbook addressed the woman of the house with "One Thousand Modern Recipes and Valuable Formulae." The opening paragraph urged the housewife to keep her kitchen clean, well-lit, and ventilated, along with the admonition that "the entire household should lend their aid to the housewife in lightening her labor and brightening her three-times-daily task in the kitchen."

Hardly a culinary technique was neglected in the *Home Comfort Cook Book*. There was advice to young cooks — a complete section on cooking

terminology with paragraphs on roasting, broiling, baking, stewing, frying, braising, poaching, larding, en casserole, marinating, shirring, and scalloping.

Recipes covered everything from breads — there were 32 — to soups. Directions for roasting a six-pound piglet in a Home Comfort stove, preparing pickled pig's feet, Mexican tamales, leftover roast fowl, stewed pigeons, blackbird pie, snowbirds, and 95 kinds of cakes and icings were included. Home canning, a necessity for life, covered nine pages, 16 vegetables, and a wide assortment of fruits and pickles. A lengthy paragraph gave explicit instructions on avoiding contamination in the canning process, noting that sterilization was at least a three-day process.

“Helpful Home Comfort Hints” provided another section of advice to the woman — and man — of the house. For instance, “save all the grease not suited for cooking and turn it into soap by the use of lye.” Or, “Spinach may be the broom of the stomach but Sauerkraut is the vacuum-cleaner,” or “nib the range with a soft cloth moistened with a few drops of deodorized kerosene to keep it clean or use washing soda mixed with black- lead” For the ultimate household indignity, kerosene was noted as “the sovereign remedy for bedbugs.” It can be “literally poured on the mattress, springs and bed without injuring the most delicate carpet, and every bug will disappear.”

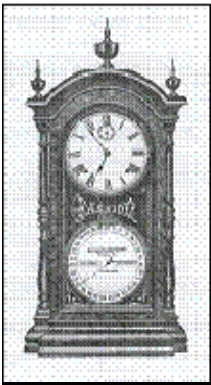
One section gave tables for calculating interest payments, measuring corn or grain in a bin, crib, or wagon; another established the capacity of a tank, a well, or a cistern. Builders could determine the number of bricks necessary to construct a wall; a farmer how many bushels of seed were required to sow an acre; a house painter the formula for waterproof paint.

However, in 1938 the Culvers commissioned a major revision under the direction of Irma Rombauer, the creator and author of the best-seller, *The Joy of Cooking*. She discarded the plethora of non-culinary items, which had made the cookbook such fun reading. It remained, however, a major part of the company sales arsenal throughout the 1950s.

But selling kitchen ranges was only a portion of the entrepreneurial mystique that surrounded the Wrought Iron Range Company. Well before the unfortunate break between the brothers, they began to seek a way to maximize the production of their sales force. With this objective, the Culver brothers began to produce a handsome line of mantle clocks.

For manufacturers of massive stoves, the adoption of a well crafted, wooden-cased clock was, perhaps, an odd business decision. But it was small, could be transported easily on the same wagon that carried the ranges, and was a good add-on for salesmen. Best of all, it required a fairly small capital outlay. What emerged from a small factory at 802 Washington Avenue in St. Louis was the Southern Calendar Fashion Clock.

Part of the enticement to the Culvers was the availability of the brass mechanisms from the Seth Thomas plant in Connecticut . They, in turn, manufactured cases of “The best kiln dried and most thoroughly seasoned white-wood, veneered with genuine curled Walnut.” Thereafter the works were added. Each clock was guaranteed to last for a hundred years and the sales force – and the Culvers – were delighted with its immediate success.



Prices ranged from \$ 11 to \$ 85, and salesmen were allowed to offer time payments at 10 percent interest. So confident were the Culvers of their product that promotional material promised \$1,000 to anyone who could purchase one for less money.

Having discovered the success of the *Home Comfort Cook Book*, H.H. decided the sale of a Fashion Clock should include *Fashion* magazine, filled with helpful hints for the housewife, including a Convenient Interest Table which helped solve the mystery and penalties of installment buying!

While the Fashion clocks proved to be popular – eight different models were produced between 1875 and 1889 – H.H. decided it was incompatible with kitchen ranges. In March of 1889, production ceased. Thereafter, the kitchen range was the sole product of the company.

Though the business center of the Wrought Iron Range Company was in St. Louis, Culver maintained a summer residence on the north shore of Lake Maxinkuckee. In 1883, the railroad was extended from Logansport , Ind. to South Bend , passing through the town of Marmont , a 15-minute boat ride from the station to the Culver cottage. The expanding rail network made travel easy from St. Louis and, in 1889 Culver initiated the first of two ill-fated financial enterprises.

With his entrepreneurial spirit sparked by the success of the Chautauqua movement at Lake Chautauqua , NY , he opened the Culver Park Assembly Grounds in 1889 with a fine three-story hotel and a 5,400-square-foot tabernacle. Railroad service to the local community brought hundreds of people to hear Reverends DeWitt Talmage and Sam Jones, and the “sweet singer,” Professor E.O. Excell.

Always profit oriented and unwilling to take losses, Culver closed the assembly grounds after two seasons. Despite good attendance, the bottom line was red and there was no promise of improvement. For a brief time, he operated a fairground for Union Township on the site, but closed it when it, too, failed to profit.

Left with an even greater investment than before the ill-fated Chautauqua, he decided to commit his dream of operating a school to the ultimate test. His formal education had been limited to two years of schooling yet, with the assistance of his wife, Emily Jane, he had come to revere the educational experience he had missed as a youth.

He adapted his Chautauqua hotel into a multi-purpose building containing a barrack, classrooms, and dining facilities. The tabernacle was converted to a gymnasium, a parade and athletic field was graded and lined, and an Episcopal priest was employed to serve as headmaster. On September 24, 1894, the Culver Military Academy opened with 45 students.

For the remaining three years of his life, Henry Harrison Culver was intimately involved in the operation of the institution, expending much of his personal fortune on new buildings, an electric generating plant, and the purchase of horses from the First City Cavalry of Cleveland to create the Academy’s famous Black Horse Troop. Community leaders in the village of Marmont were so impressed with the civic potential the Academy brought to the area that, on the first of April 1897, the town name was changed to Culver.

Henry Harrison’s death that October brought considerable trauma to family relationships. In a pragmatic move, he had taken great care to prevent damage to the company or anything that might diminish the success of his new military academy. His six children were required to waive their interests in the estate to their mother until 1902, when it was equally divided. Emily Jane Culver received the family home on Lake Maxinkuckee , one of seven

shares in the Academy and the earnings from property at 12th and Locust Streets in St. Louis . Not long thereafter she surrendered all rights to the Academy in return for an increased annuity.

Of Culver's six children, only two inherited their father's determination to foster the growth of the Wrought Iron Range Company and the fledgling military academy. Edwin, the second son, was gifted with a wonderful vision for fine arts, architecture, and landscaping design, and undertook responsibility for turning his father's dream of a school on Lake Maxinkuckee into a reality. In time, he built a handsome Swiss chalet on the edge of the campus that became a base from which he could supervise the development of the campus and entertain a never-ending stream of visitors.

Bertram, the third of Henry Harrison's sons, turned his attention to the operation of the Wrought Iron Range Company, building it into one of the country's premier producers of cook stoves. By the turn of the century, the factory at Washington and 19th streets covered 13 acres and was producing more than 100 stoves each day. The sales force had grown to more than 250 men and expanded operations to cover most of the United States , as well as parts of Canada and northern Mexico .

Determined to prevent their siblings from taking control of the new Academy or the company, Bertram and Edwin forced their oldest brother, Wallace, to give up his management position with the company in 1905 and acquired his shares four years later. They had been able to control corporate dividends since their father's death, and it became clear they would not rest until they were the sole shareholders.

Their efforts were challenged in 1910, when their only sister, Ida, sued claiming mismanagement of her inheritance and a failure to pay dividends. Her attorney, after a thorough investigation, advised her that the management policies were legal and the suit was dropped. Two years later, another brother, Harry, died and his shares passed to Bertram and Edwin. With this acquisition, control of the Wrought Iron Range Co. passed into their hands.

Post-Civil War expansion west of the Mississippi River brought the need for stoves that would satisfy the special needs of ranches, logging and mining operations, and railroad camps. Competition became intense as mail order businesses like Sears and Roebuck and Montgomery Ward expanded

their sales into the territories. The railroad, an ally to the Wrought Iron Range Co. during the 1870s and '80s, began to deliver competitors' stoves at train stops, villages and towns. Farmers and ranchers would come to town on Saturday, buy provisions, socialize, and haul a new stove home.

Aware of a need for a moderately priced line of stoves, Bertram and Edwin formed a second manufacturing company, the St. Louis Range Company, which produced a less expensive line of stoves under a variety of names including Never Break, Brothers Malleable Range, and the Panhonor Range. The Culvers also fought back with direct shipments and promotional brochures touting quality, price, and availability of their stoves.

One of the Wrought Iron Range's most innovative efforts to stay ahead of the competition was a self-contained coil water heater and reservoir that was introduced in 1906. Unfortunately, the company could not predict the quality of water or the kinds of fuel that would be used in the stove. Water with a high alkali content tended to plug the system; fuels, ranging from wood to coal and even buffalo chips, heated at different temperatures, bringing further complications. In short order, there were so many complaints that the water-back, flow-through heating system was discontinued in favor of a simple and effective contact reservoir attached to the side of the range.

The First World War brought major changes in the operation of the Wrought Iron Range Company. As military and naval demands increased, the company shifted away from civilian production. By 1917, the company was involved in producing large commercial-style ranges for mess halls, coffee urns, and cast-iron pans, Sibley and conical stoves for barracks and tents, and a variety of other war-related equipment. With the civilian market all but discontinued, the hundreds of horses and mules and the wagons they had pulled were sold. When the war ended, the Wrought Iron Range Company found itself in a new and more tenuous business world.

Following the 1918 Armistice, the Culvers and their management team began to plan for a post-war operation. By the third decade of the century, automobiles were replacing buggies, and trucks brought an end to horse-drawn wagons. A reorganized sales department concluded that the days of door-to-door operations were passing. Speed was becoming the by-word. No longer could a profit be made going by wagon from farm to farm, hauling three or four stoves, and hoping for a sale. There was a prescient

message in the post-war song “How you gonna keep them down on the farm after they’ve seen Paree?” Would the Wrought Iron Range get the message?

In rural areas where buggies could serve a sales force, they continued to be utilized. Elsewhere, the Wrought Iron Range Company provided automobiles. Since neither buggies nor cars were large enough to carry wrought-iron ranges, salesmen packed working scale models of the entire product line. They were small enough to be carried into the customer’s home and, since every part of the model worked, the buyer knew exactly how it functioned. Once the sale had been made, the order was sent to the St. Louis foundry and shipped directly to the customer.

Competition demanded more improvements and, in 1923, the company introduced its first enameled range. The product line, known under the trade name VERLUC, an anagram of the word Culver, allowed a variety of colors to be added as a new marketing tool. Though electric and gas ranges were beginning to have a competitive effect, the Culvers showed little outward concern over their impact on the production line.

The passing of the family matriarch Emily Jane Culver in 1923 ended any calming influence that she brought to her contentious children. During all of the Academy’s operation, no member of the family had drawn compensation, dividends, or interest. This created, for obvious reasons, dissention among the surviving siblings. Edwin and Bertram had an almost obsessive pride in the fulfillment of their father’s dream and were determined that its future be secure. They concluded that only a non-profit foundation could assure that such a policy would continue.

Family difficulties finally came to a head in 1928. Bertram and Edwin combined their resources, paying the remaining heirs \$2 million in cash to surrender all claims to the Wrought Iron Range Company and the Culver Military Academy . Almost immediately, they laid plans to create an educational foundation to assure the perpetuity of the school that bore their name.

Edwin, the gifted and creative force behind the design of the Academy campus, died suddenly in 1930, and this delayed the implementation of the formation of a foundation for two years. However, in 1932, Edwin’s widow and heirs joined with Bertram and his family in surrendering their holdings to The Culver Educational Foundation, a gift estimated at \$6 million.

The demise of the wrought iron cook stove was on the horizon. The Great Depression was the first blow, destroying the economy and with it the rural and small town markets. While survival was possible for the icon of the American kitchen for a few more years, its days were numbered.

Throughout most of the 1930s sales declined. Yet the Culvers were determined not to give in, and with the beginning of the 1938 model year a newly designed range with a patented Full-floating Top made its debut. War and time, however, were catching up with the wrought iron cook stove. Unlike the Spanish-American and First World wars, there was no demand to supply the military with stoves. War's face was changing, and so were the production lines at the Home Comfort plant on Natural Bridge Road .

When the nation was in danger, the Culvers stepped to the front to be counted. They stopped the manufacture of all Home Comfort ranges immediately after Pearl Harbor and began the design of special presses for forging bombs, undertaking the engineering and construction of all necessary tools and equipment at their own initiative and expense.



None of the Wrought Iron Range Company's old-time stove makers had ever produced a bomb, and a training program was set up to teach the necessary skills of forging, welding, and machining. While the Wrought Iron Range bombs were designated general purpose, they were not produced in a casual manner. Air Corps requirements for precision bombing required that bombs be made to precise specifications. The Wrought Iron Range Company did not falter.

But the successful conclusion of the war did not mean a return to prosperity. The time honored marketing methods so carefully honed for over six decades were falling victim to a new America . Rural electrification, a trademark of the New Deal, was taking power into the homes of American farmers, and natural gas lines were beginning to network the nation, bringing clean and inexpensive fuel. Better highways and a booming automobile industry made it easier for customers to go to the market than have the market come to them.



Perhaps as telling as any of these changes were attitudes about the woman's place in the American home. War had taken her into factories, the armed services, and the nation's work places. No longer would a well-lighted, ventilated, attractive, and clean kitchen be an adequate substitute in the post-war world.

There were more exciting things on the horizon. The coal or wood-fired cooking range and hours of kitchen drudgery were being replaced by electric stoves, frozen foods, canned goods, supermarkets, mini-marts, outdoor grills, and fast-food diners.

The company struggled through the 1950s, but the changing business climate proved an impossible adversary. As the decade drew to a close so, too, did Henry Harrison Culver's legacy. The last stove came off the line from the Wrought Iron Range's production line in 1959 and the plant and equipment was sold to the Universal Match Company of St. Louis.

A century after the formation of the Culver Military Academy, Home Comfort ranges occasionally reappear — a loft in a drafty Amish barn, a private collection in Wisconsin, a Cracker Barrel Restaurant in West Virginia, and even in a rural antique shop in Pagosa Springs, Colorado. Age and hard use have gutted fire boxes with rust, porcelain finishes are chipped and doors hang by broken hinges. Two have been restored to their glory days and returned to the Culver campus, representatives of a chapter in American life when, indeed, *HOME* was on *THE WROUGHT IRON RANGE*.