Home on the Wrought Iron Range

Part I

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The chapter on 19th century American entrepreneurship is filled with stories of poor men who grasped the brass ring, then proved that hard work and determination could produce fortune and, perhaps, fame. Long before it became popular to talk about "niche" production, creative individuals were seeking ways to tap an opportunity to make good on the "American Dream."

Some managed to discover ways to create giant corporate entities, amass huge fortunes, and become known for the kind of business acumen and power that could shake world economies. Others found a lesser, but no less significant place, within their city, state, or geographical region. It was this group of entrepreneurs who were to leave an indelible stamp on the economy, and not incidentally, local landscapes across the nation. They became partners in a variety of local ventures, organized men's clubs, built golf courses, sponsored cultural activities, and set standards of social mores which marked them as community leaders.

One of these men had his origins on a hard-scrabble farm in southern Ohio in 1840. Before he died in 1897, Henry Harrison Culver had become one of the leading residents of St. Louis and founder of the Wrought Iron Range Company, a major manufacturer of kitchen and industrial cooking ranges.

His products were marketed over much of the United States , and were frequent winners in fairs and expositions. Gold medals were earned at the World's Industrial and Cotton Centennial in New Orleans , the California Midwinter Exposition in San francesco , Chicago 's World's Colombian Exposition, and the coveted Grand Prize at the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in 1904.

Of Henry Harrison Culver's greatest qualities, none were more important to an aspiring businessman than an instinct for promotion and the value of good public relations. He was determined to make his Home Comfort stoves easy to market and his company recognized across the

nation.

He was born near London , Ohio , to John and Lydia Culver in 1840. The family patriarch was a staunch Whig and demonstrated his political leanings by naming the youngest of his six children after Whig candidate William Henry Harrison, then in the midst of his “Log Cabin and Hard Cider” campaign.

The family homestead fell on hard times in the early 1850s and, by the middle of the decade, young Henry Harrison Culver headed to Springfield , Illinois , where he joined his brothers, Wallace William and Lucius L., on the sales force of John McCreary, a general hardware merchant. He quickly became one of McCreary’s best employees.

McCreary’s operation spread over several states and his sales force was often on the road for weeks at a time. Each man was given a wagon, usually drawn by two mules, carrying several stoves. When a sale was made, the stove was off-loaded and made ready for use, with guidance provided by the salesman on its operation. At the next available telegraph station, a replacement stove was ordered and shipped to the nearest railroad station.

In 1864, Henry Harrison Culver, now 24 and a veteran of door-to-door, farm-to-farm selling, was working northern Indiana . While making his rounds along the north shore of Lake Maxinkuckee , he met a young schoolteacher named Emily Jane Hand at the nearby hamlet of Wolf Creek . After a short courtship, they were married and moved to Shawneetown , Ill.

Soon thereafter, young Culver broke with McCreary and joined in a partnership with Wallace and Lucius. Anxious to market a stove under their own name, they commissioned a foundry in Covington, Ky, to produce the Farmer Stove, which was marketed under the name Culver Brothers. Thus began an association that would continue through turbulent times and bitter family disputes and still produce some of

America ’s best known cook stoves.

In 1869, the Shawneetown base of operations was abandoned, as was the relationship with the Kentucky foundry. In 1870 the three brothers settled in St. Louis , incorporated under the name Wrought Iron Range Co., and began to manufacture an improved Farmer Stove and market a stove called the Iron Mountain range.

An economic downturn, culminating in the Panic of 1873, caused the Culvers to close their factory and shift their base of operations to Kansas City , Mo. for a brief fling in the hardware and furniture business. When the depression lessened, they returned to St. Louis and reopened their manufacturing plant at 9th and Christy streets. The business prospered and so did their entrepreneurial efforts. At last, they were in command of their own destiny.

The new factory included a first-floor showroom, which, over the years, was expanded to display a variety of their production items, including a line of ranges designed especially for ranches, lumber camps, and mess halls that served railroad building crews. They controlled the manufacture and sale of their own product line and marketed under the trade name Home Comfort.

Door-to-door sales remained the heart and soul of the Culver operation. As business grew, the demand for a much larger and more

efficient staff became a concern. Henry Harrison Culver turned his organizational talents to the creation of an almost military-like sales force. He divided the marketing area into territories and assigned district managers to supervise sales units composed of as many as 10 men.

They would gather at some village or town on a Sunday, taking up residence at a boarding house or hotel, and go over the next week's marching orders. Early on Monday morning, salesmen driving mule-drawn wagons loaded with three or four stoves, a collection of sadirons, frying pans, and portable hitching weights would begin what could be a six-day odyssey through the Midwest and the South. At the end of the week, they would reconvene to report on their sales. Orders for replacement stoves would be telegraphed to St. Louis and delivery taken at the next town.

Wallace, Lucius, and Henry Harrison were determined to promote a wholesome image for their salesmen. One of their advertising brochures noted that "the gentlemen associated with us in the sale of our stoves are men of undoubted veracity, sober habits, industrious, and in all things honorable." A standing company rule prohibited a salesman from entering a home or making a sale unless both the husband and wife were present.

Despite its successes, the company faced vexing problems that compromised the guarantee of quality. Cast iron stoves were difficult to ship and susceptible to breakage. This impacted heavily on the company's ability

to deliver a quality product. The brothers wanted a stove that was efficient, simple to operate, and very durable. Cast iron was not able to guarantee such a triumvirate of values.

The metallurgical breakthrough that opened the door to growth of the Home Comfort cook stove came when the foundry converted production to the use of wrought iron. Culver had been quick to realize its potential and geared his foundry to the new manufacturing techniques.

By 1881, the Home Comfort stove, with its wrought-iron top and body, was winning a greater share of the market, and a new factory was constructed at Washington Avenue and 19th Street . The Culver Brothers logo was replaced by the new corporate name, the Wrought Iron Range Company.

But success began to have an unforeseen effect on the previously close relationship between the brothers. Each owned one third of the shares in the Wrought Iron Range Company and with prosperity came internecine conflict. Early in the 1880s, Wallace and Lucius decided to place less emphasis on door-to-door, farm-to-farm sales and move to retail marketing in selected cities in the United States , Canada , and Mexico .

Henry Harrison was bitterly opposed to the plan. He argued that 90 percent of America was rural and salesmen should continue to go directly to the customer. A major split resulted and in 1883 Henry Harrison, fatigued

by years of travel and exhausted from arguments with his brothers, withdrew from formal operation in the company. Wallace and Lucius brought in a new partner, R.H. Stockton, who enjoyed a proven record as a retail specialist and fit the business model of the company.

Determined to regain his health, Henry Harrison purchased 90 acres of land on the northeast corner of Lake Maxinkuckee in the spring of 1883. By 1886 he owned more than 300 acres, had constructed a handsome home, The Homestead and become a true "gentleman farmer."

Meanwhile his brothers' business strategies had proven disastrous. Sales declined, workers were demoralized by the change in marketing strategy, customers were angry, and the new retail centers were unable to serve the customers adequately. The Wrought Iron Range Company was nearly bankrupt.

After appeals from Wallace and Lucius, Henry Harrison decided to re-enter the business. However, Lucius, the ringleader in the move to a retail operation, had forever incurred Henry Harrison's wrath and he and Stockton were forced out of the company. To add insult to injury, Lucius was required to leave the stove business "forever."

As H.H. devoted his efforts to rebuilding the reputation of his company, Lucius chose to ignore his agreement. He and Stockton opened the Majestic Manufacturing Company and began to produce and sell cook stoves at various retail locations in the Midwest . At first, Henry Harrison Culver fumed but took no action. When Lucius fared no better at retail sales of his new line of stoves, returned to door-to-door sales, farm-to-farm sales.

Henry Harrison was infuriated and sought an injunction ordering Lucius to honor his no-compete agreement. However, the courts ruled that the “forever” clause was not enforceable and dismissed the suit.

Open business warfare broke out in Indiana , Ohio , and Illinois , with each brother trying to destroy the other. Lucius finally capitulated and lost his assets in the Majestic Manufacturing Company. When the battle concluded all he had left were a few wagons and teams of horses and mules that the Wrought Iron Range purchased for $10,000. Once burned, Henry Harrison insisted that Lucius agreed to a new and this time legally binding agreement forbidding him from further involvement in the stove business.

Though he remained a major stockholder, Wallace was forced out of the daily operations of the company. Despite having persuaded Henry Harrison to resume management responsibilities, Wallace continued to harbor much bitterness, particularly when he was blocked from making company decisions. In a ploy to gain leverage, Wallace sought to place a cohort inside the company management to spy on its operations. Tipped off to the subterfuge, H.H. blocked the move and, again, sibling blood had been spilled.

Undaunted, Wallace approached two stockholders, both close associates of Henry Harrison, and offered them a handsome profit in return for their shares in the company. They not only refused to accept, but also made his proposal a matter of public record, further compounding the conflict.

Wallace refused to concede defeat and approached Henry Harrison’s children with similar proposals. Not entirely sanguine about their loyalty, H.H. called a family meeting and insisted he be given a first option on their stock. This effectively ended Wallace’s attempts and, henceforth, the company remained in Henry Harrison’s hands. After his death in 1897, his elder sons, Bertram and Edwin, operated the company, though they remained involved in an internecine battle with their siblings.

Despite the fine reputation of the Wrought Iron ranges, there was stiff competition from other stove manufacturers. Then, in 1885, Home Comfort metallurgists hit upon a malleable iron process that had far greater strength and durability than cast or ordinary wrought iron. When the next year’s Comfort line made its debut, the use of malleable iron marked a significant

advancement in building more durable cooking ranges and put the company a step ahead of the competition. With its new product line and a revitalized sales force of over 300 men, the Home Comfort stoves were considered among the finest in America .

It was not an idle sales pitch that the Wrought Iron Range Company's newest stove was the best money could buy. Albert W. Stahl, the director of laboratory testing at Purdue University , and J.N. Hurty, an analytical chemist in Indianapolis , had been commissioned to perform a series of experiments on the malleable iron process. Their reports extolling the values of the Wrought Iron Range's new tops, sides, and doors were prominently displayed in advertising and brochures.

Stahl and Hurty noted that cast iron stoves, when exposed to intense heat in the testing process, lost their sharp corners and edges within a minute. While such temperatures would never occur in the kitchen, the Wrought Iron Range publicity brochures reported that Culver's malleable iron was 12 times more resistant to the loss of corners and edges and would withstand the action of fire and heat longer.

The real advantage to the malleable stovetop was its resistance to shock, a point that salesmen were quick to demonstrate by striking the stove with a hammer and noting its failure to break. For the average user, however, cracking and warping of the stovetop and damage to the firebricks – a process brought about by simple oxidation – were the most vexing problems. Promotional literature paid scant attention to the company's inability to find a solution to that problem.

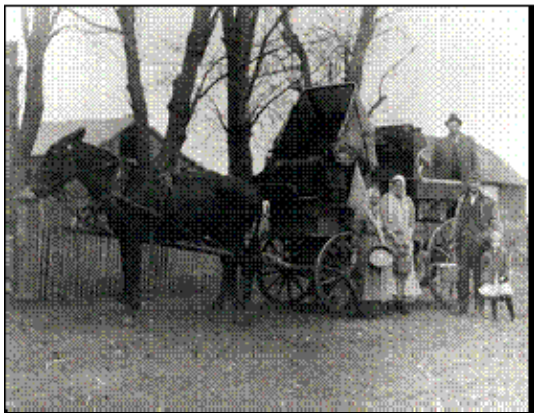
The sales techniques Culver learned from McCreary in the early 1860s were subject to constant refinements. A major difficulty that consumer-product manufacturers of the 19th century faced was financing. It was one thing to take a Home Comfort stove directly to the farmer's front door, but another to get cash on the barrelhead. H.H. Culver's agricultural background and his experience of more than two decades as a salesman gave him an insight into the problems facing agrarian America .

He knew that farmers often weren't able to come up with cash until their crops were harvested and had gone to market. The price of a Wrought Iron range, delivered off the back of a wagon, was between $35 and $60, an investment in the late 1800s of considerable magnitude. Culver was

determined to develop strategies that would be more effective in selling stoves under such circumstances.

Because of his faith in the American farmer — and the fact that a Home Comfort stove weighed over 400 pounds and wasn't likely to be stolen — he allowed his salesmen to take a customer's note, albeit at eight percent, and collect upon the sale of the crop. South Carolina tobacco farmers would have a different due date than those living in the Midwest . Wyoming ranchers or apple growers in Washington State would have a date that conformed to their particular crop.

Culver also was quick to realize that the waste material from his foundry in St. Louis could become an important marketing tool. When his salesmen went into the country, they carried a collection of useful items that they gave to customers. Frying pans and flatirons were popular gifts for the woman of the house. The farmer was often presented with portable iron weights that could be carried in a buggy or wagon and used when there was no other available way to hitch a horse. The cost was negligible and the gifts did much to establish good will.



For salesmen operating in parts of Indiana , Ohio , and Pennsylvania with large Amish populations, there was a religious issue that impacted on sales. The Amish faith forbade the use of mirrors or shiny items, and the nickel-plated door handles and hinges on some models of the Home Comfort stoves prevented sales.

Responding to its salesmen's concerns, the company replaced the offending items with iron accessories. In the interim, however, enterprising salesmen purchased black paint and refinished the nickel-plated handles and hinges. They admonished the Amish buyer not to rub the stoves too hard "or the finish would be ruined."

Some Amish customers would later complain that the stoves were all they hoped for, but the Wrought Iron Range Company should take greater care to ensure exterior quality. They noted that as they cleaned their stoves

in the ensuing months, shiny handles and hinges appeared. This must mean that something was wanting in the manufacturing process. However, since it was obviously an act of God, it would be all right to keep the stove.