

THE COUNCIL TOOL STORY

John Rickett Council was born in 1855 at Council Station in

Wilmington to Florence and further south. From Council, shipments crossed the Cape Fear River at Wilmington, the carriers ran parallel for a mile or so west of the bridge and each charged a fee to customers crossing that bridge. Mr. J.P. eventually learned that his freight was transferred before the bridge, though he was still charged transfer fees by both carriers. This was infuriating and he devised a way to end his reliance on Seaboard.

Lake Waccamaw lay along the Atlantic coast Line, about ten miles from Council. Mr. Council was an avid hunter and fisherman and therefore the "lake" (as the land and town are generally called) seemed a perfect place to live and work. He bought a considerable amount of land in the area sometime about 1902. Mr. J.P. then built a large house just off the water, laying a road from his house to the factory, which he located a few hundred feet south of the rail line. A few hundred yards north of the plant, he added a general store much like the original in Bladen County. The house was a gracious home for his family of eight children comprised of six boys in a row: Edison, Walter, Jim, Jess, Clyde, John and then girls Agnes and Mary. He planted pecan trees on each side of this narrow road, from the lake to the north edge of the area cleared, and named it Pecan Lane. Most of those trees still stand, less those taken by hurricanes and the natural rot. It is still a one lane road, and drivers know to pull over to make way for an oncoming vehicle.

Into the 1920's, manufacturing at Council Tool continued to be a blacksmith operation. Steel was shipped in by rail, a ton or so at a time, then hauled to the plant by horse and wagon (later by truck). It was cut into lengths, heated in a coke furnace and hammered into shape, ground, hardened, tempered and painted. Tools were packed twelve to a carton, wooden boxes made on site.

At this point, the company had only a few employees in Council, remembered for his wit, writing and exploration of many isolated original places, was responsible for manufacturing and Cecil Council worked as a supervisor in the manufacturing operation. Both were younger brothers of Mr. John Pickett.

Early on, the company built between fourteen and eighteen houses on East Oak and West Oak streets, which run near the plant and intersected by Pecan Lane. For many years, these were rent free to employees and later low rental charges were added. Still later, the houses were sold to employees, some whose family descendants occupy them today.

Tragedy struck when in July of 1913 the Council Tool factory burned to the ground, cause unknown. Fortunately some key pieces of heavy machinery did not burn, nor did the exterior walls which were made of brick. Also the office was housed elsewhere which was crucial in getting back to work. There were many already manufactured tools stored elsewhere, so thankfully shipping promptly resumed. The decision was quickly made to rebuild. At the time of the fire, the company was the largest manufacturer of hand tools in the United States.

Until the early 1920's, Council Tool produced only naval stores tools. In that decade, some power hammers, including Scranton Hammers, were installed, replacing the sledge and anvil. These were used for drawing, rough shaping and forging. Two 1000-

lb. Chambersburg Board drop hammers and a Bradley Beam hammer (a power hammer) were also introduced.

It is noteworthy that since none of these ~~one~~ are still manufactured, the Council Tool work force has become proficient at machinery maintenance. Just now in 2022, a crucial machine, the ~~B~~ hammer, was completed dismantled and totally rebuilt. This project included a brand new foundation and was quite an undertaking for team members.

In the 1920's the company began producing single bit axes and pioneered the ~~axe~~ double edged bush axe. In those days, axes were made from two pieces. The head, or poll, was C1035 steel (also 1025 or 1030), made in a Lewis press. This had a continuously running press on one side and clutch press on the other. The clutch, which had side jaws, was used for the axe eye. The bit was ~~a~~ in a special shape (C1085) made by crucible ~~steel~~. It was ~~hot~~ sheared to length and formed into a "U". This went over the bit end of the ~~head~~ and was ~~for~~ welded. Next, the axe was heated, an eye shaped mandrill was forced into the eye, and the axe was forged in a drop hammer, after which the mandrill was removed.

This time period also marked the death of company founder and first president, John Pickett Council on December 23, 1929, at age 74. He was succeeded by his son Clyde, a state senator with wide business and civic interests and who also ~~shared~~ his love of the land as well as fishing and hunting.

It is noteworthy that there have been five presidents, all Councils. In addition to the two aforementioned, John Pickett's son John Monroe Council was president from 1951 – 1962, his son John Monroe Council, Jr. (Jack) from 1962-1999, and Jack's son John Monroe Council III, 1999 to the present. Jack's brother Edward Land Council (Ned) was

Because initial sales shipped into the south and southeast areas of the United States only southern Kentucky and Baltimore Jersey pattern single axes in head weights of 3.5, 4 and 5 pounds were made, these being preferred styles in the region of sales.

In the 1930's, the company developed forestry items, including hand seedling planting tools for setting fledgling pines. Other tools designed back then were a forest fire fighting rake, still commonly referred to as the Council rake and a fire swatter. The rake was intended to establish a fire lane to stop a fire or start a backfire. The fire swatter was designed to smother brush and pine straw fires. Both are still in the original design. Also in this decade, ditch bank blades and weed cutters were developed. Power lawn motors have eliminated weed cutters and decreased the demand for ditch bank blades but the 640C remains one of the top ten items in the product line.

During World War II, much of production went to the military and defense plants. In that same time period procurement personnel from the Defense Department visited the company. They urgently needed a small spanner wrench and wanted us to work around the clock on dies and production. We did trucked the pieces to the Wilmington airport, where they were picked up by military plane and immediately flown to Europe. This particular part was used to set the explosive time on artillery and was employed in the Anzio Beach invasion in Italy. During the war, Council Tool also made many forgings for the Wilmington shipyard. After we billed the government for the work on the spanner wrench, completed on their accelerated schedule, they questioned our use of overtime.

Another war period story: a U.S. Navy PT supply boat captain from neighboring Whiteville, NC, was walking on the beach after the Battle of Guadalcanal, and saw a Council axe in the sand. When he returned home and told the story to Council, the fourth President, and Jack declared that was not possible because the company did not sell axes to the military yet. But Captain McNeill was certain of what he saw and knew that some soldiers would have taken their own tools into service.

After World War II, the prevalence of synthetics and the death of naval stores, and Council Tool phased out this product group about 1965. The company continued to broaden its lines to include nail pullers, various lining, digging and planting bars, Clamps and post hole diggers. The product line continues to evolve and current level of product demand required discontinuation of several products including bush hooks and bars. Currently the product line consists of a full axe offering of pickhead fire axes, single and double bit axes, various sizes of hammers and sledge, woodsplitting mauls and wedges, along with forcible entry tools.

In early 1969, a fire again destroyed the manufacturing facilities at Council Tool. Jack Council, the fourth president, had so many great affiliations in the hardware business that many of these friendly competitors called and offered to manufacture and ship for him, which they did. Also, Mr. Council worked to ensure that workers did not lose pay. Employees were put to work in clean up and reconstruction, which took a year, and they did not suffer loss of a paycheck.

Along these lines, it is noteworthy that there have never been any strikes or unions at the company. Each and every one of the five presidents has been skilled at creating and maintaining good morale and esprit de corps. For that reason, longevity in the work force has always been unusually strong. Employees have been loyal and dedicated to superior quality products; they have had high work ethics. We have always been proud of them.

Perhaps the most outstanding example is that wonderful worker named Willie Smith, whose tenure was over sixty years. Grace Wayne ("Miss Grace") who was secretary to four of the company's five presidents and ultimately became comptroller contributed approximately fifty five years of outstanding service. Dan Dudley was another dedicated worker who retired from the Forge shop after forty nine years of service. Other long time employees include Lovell Pierce, Lonnie Freeman, William Spears, James Bass Alexander Tomlin, Bobby Ward, Jimmy Watts, Ed King (who's grandson, Daniel Butler, is now VP of Operations), Albert Anders, Lacy Anders, Karen Henry, Robert Herring, Albert McCoy, Alec Antone, and Ernest Little. There have also been numerous father/son, husband/wife, and other family combinations at Council Forge. As of August 2022, there are currently thirteen team members with over twenty years of service and seven with over ten years of service.

For many decades, Council Forge has produced a wide range of custom forgings. Early items included farm implements for Cole, a Charlotte NC company, and Ferguson in Suffolk, Va. Beginning in the 1960's, a major client for custom work was Yale Lock and Key of Monroe, NC for whom arms, friction yokes and hold open brackets were made in such volume that the product often filled a two-ton truck for weekly deliveries. A specialty item forged for the Murray Ohio Company was bicycle cranks. At times, demand was so high that 20,000 bicycle crankshafts were shipped per week. Presently the operation produces several custom forgings including forcible entry tools and lifting hooks. We also provide many OEM finished good products for various industries, many of whom would be familiar company brands.

In 2011 in conjunction with the 25th anniversary, premium axes were added to our line. Products had always been made of good quality, usable wood, but we realized there is a market for superior quality axes and people are willing to pay for that excellence. The premium axes began with the Velvicut® line of American patterns including the 4# Dayton axe, the 2# Hudson Bay and the 2.25# Boys axe. The Woodcraft line was added in 2017 featuring European patterns with heat-treated polls. The year 2018 marked a major change on most axes to the very popular Sport Utility finish, unpainted and hung proud. The Flying Fox Woodsman's Hatchet was launched in 2019 as a throwing axe and won the World Axe Throwing League Championships in both 2019 and 2020.

The United States Forestry Service approached our company in 2020 with the request to make an updated version of the very popular Pulaski axe. Therefore the revised version of the Pulaski now has a longer fiberglass handle. USFS continues to request many wildland fire fighting tools, and their contracts are and have been very important for production for decades.

