



SHAVING KIT ABOUT 1804

All articles except razors are from the collection of the Essex Institute, Salem, Mass.

Old Sheffield Razors

By HENRY T. LUMMUS

Illustrations from the author's collection

WHILE the title of this article seems to designate a narrow field, it is not so narrow as might appear. There were no American razors, as far as known, until about the middle of the nineteenth century, when some immigrants from Sheffield began to make cutlery in Massachusetts and Connecticut. French, Swiss, German and Swedish razors were uncommon in America before the Civil War. English razors marked *London* or *Liverpool* are sometimes found, but often were really made in Sheffield. Nine-tenths of the razors used in America before the Civil War were made in Sheffield, England, and bore the name or trade-mark of some Sheffield manufacturer.

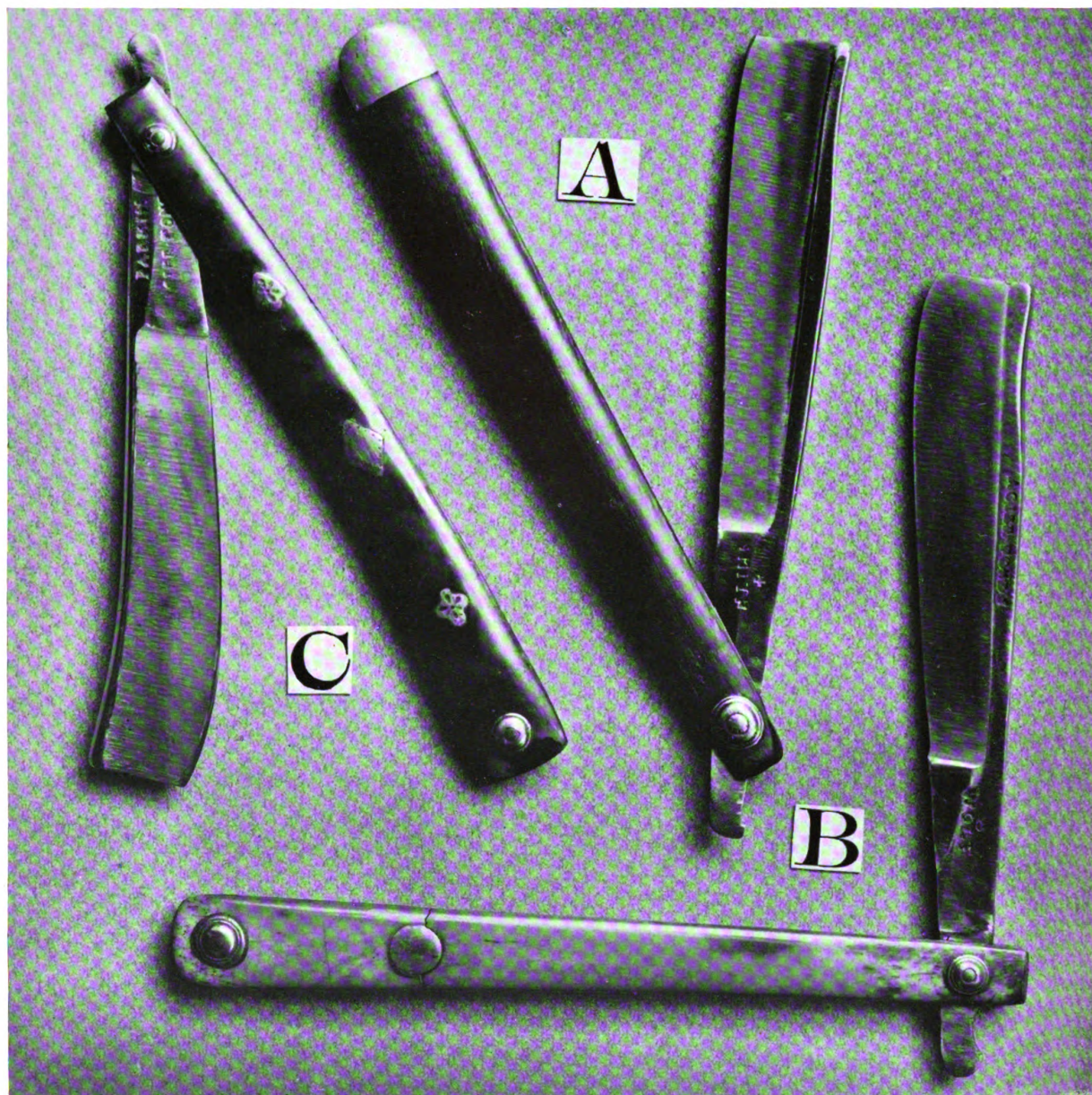
Seventeenth-century razors must exist in America, but it is difficult for me to ascribe to any razor which I have seen a date prior to our Revolutionary War. Possibly there was little change in style for many years before that. In fixing dates, family tradition is of little value; a museum recently marked a razor as having been carried through the Revolution, regardless of the fact that it bore the stamp of a Sheffield maker who was not born until 1800.

The Civil War marks the end of the collector's interest. By that time, the craze for "hollow-ground" razors had arisen, and the styles, and often the workmanship, had become inferior. Not long afterwards the old-style blade, wedge-shaped if looked at from the end, was abandoned in favor of the modern, thin-bladed concaved razor, usually of German manufacture, which reigned until, in still more recent days, the majority of young American men began to hoe their faces with "safety" razors—a process that bears the same relation to shaving as clam-digging bears to dry-fly fishing. No better shaving instrument than a good old wedge-shaped razor was ever made.

By analogy to other antiques, an old razor of good style, in proof condition, with the original polish unimpaired by grinding, excessive honing, or rust, and with a perfect original handle, is a prize. But such a condition rarely obtains, and usually the grinder must be employed to restore the blade by removing the rust and grinding out the long bevel caused by many years of honing. The collector is fortunate if no change of shape has resulted. The advice of barbers or grinders must not be relied upon in restoring a razor, for most of them are ignorant of periods of blades or handles, and, left to their own devices, are likely to return an old blade concaved, or, at the best, "half-concaved," and provided with a new celluloid handle.

After the blade has been restored, the handle should be cleaned inside and out with a small, stiff brush, soap and water, and thoroughly dried. If broken, the handle may sometimes be repaired by riveting. Often a good blade will be found minus a handle. In such case a handle of the same period, taken from some blade which has been concaved or worn out, may be attached, care being taken to match the rivets. Of course, such composite razors are not esteemed as highly as good original specimens.

Razors with inscriptions of historical or other interest on blade or handle, and those which show in blade and handle a high quality of workmanship, are preferred by collectors. The quality of the steel is of importance, for the true collector shaves with every razor in his collection. We are told that there is no way to discover the quality of the steel by the appearance of the blade. Yet in my ignorance of chemistry I cherish the belief—possibly the superstition—that opalescent discolorations, and black rust rather than red, are favorable signs in an old blade.



A. Date 1775. Maker, George Smith & Sons, Sheffield, 1770-1785. Trademark, cross and "Smith." Handle, black horn, metal end.
 B. Date 1780. Maker, John Shepherd, Sheffield, 1770-1795. Trademark, crown and "Wolf." Inscription, "Acier fondu." Handle, bone.
 C. Date 1790. Maker, Staniforth, Parkin & Co., Sheffield, 1785-1800. Trademark, "Parkin." Inscription, "Acier fondu." Handle, mottled horn.

Certain blades are almost invariably worthless, such as the late, cheap specimens etched with a full-length portrait of "Washington, Champion of Liberty," and those made by Frederick Reynolds. Razors which have become misshapen by wear or deep rust, or which have been mutilated by concaving, are worthless to the collector. Razors which bear no maker's name or trademark are not much esteemed. In expressing these opinions, I have regard for the judgment of the few collectors known to me; their number is too small to have created any wide opinion or any considerable values.

Old Sheffield razors may be arranged in three main periods: (1) Prior to 1800; (2) from 1800 to 1833; and (3) from 1833 to the American Civil War. These periods have been determined by comparing thousands of specimens of many makes with data gleaned from directories and histories of Sheffield, and, to a limited extent, from the stamps on the razors. The dates of razors and of the business careers of makers, given in this article, are only approximately correct; it must be left to some student in Sheffield, with access to original sources, to write the exact and scholarly history which the cutlery trade deserves.

Razors of a period prior to 1800 have no shoulder to separate the bottom of the tang from the blade, and to keep the thumb from being cut on the sharp edge; the edge and the bottom of the tang form an almost unbroken line. The end of the tang, which projects beyond the handle, is beaten out wide and thin, and is even shorter than in razors of the next later period.

In razors of the Revolutionary time, a slight hollow in the back of the blade, near the toe, may be seen. Toward the end of the century this hollow disappears and the razors become smaller. Many eighteenth-century razors are stamped "cast steel" or "acier fondu," which dates them later than 1772, as the commercial use of cast steel, which gave Sheffield cutlery its supremacy, did not begin until that date. Ox-horn handles—yellow, black, or mottled in imitation of tortoise-shell, often inlaid with metal stars or other ornaments—are commonly seen on 18th-century blades, although handles of tortoise-shell and bone—not ivory—occur.

About 1800, a shoulder, small at first, but later more pronounced, appeared between the bottom of the tang and the blade, and the blade thus assumed a shape more like that of a modern razor. The end of the tang, which projects beyond the handle, gradually became longer, thicker, and more massive, but retained its wide, beaten-out appearance until 1833. Collectors speak of razors prior to 1833 as "flat-tang razors."

Razors from 1800 to 1815 were invariably small, but some after 1815 were large. About 1810, and for some years afterwards, some of the razors had straight handles with square ends at the toe. Ox-horn handles remained the ordinary standard, but inlaying with metal, common in the preceding century, gradually went out of fashion. Ivory came into use for fine handles. All through this second period, and even later, horn handles were often pressed so as to show hunting scenes, artistic figures, or the features of popular heroes. English manufacturers permitted no loyal prejudices to interfere with the portrayal of American soldiers and sailors who had recently fought against England in the War of 1812.*

*The same lack of prejudice is observable in the Staffordshire and Liverpool potters who produced patriotically decorated wares for the American market after both the Revolution and the War of 1812.

About 1800, the use as trademarks of the geographical names, like the famous mark "Bengall" of the Cadman firm, and the meaningless words and combinations of letters and signs, common in the eighteenth century, went out of fashion, and the surname of the maker, with or without the initial of his Christian name, became the customary mark. For example, Thomas Warburton changed his mark from "Lisbon" to "Warburton." In 1814 Rhodes & Champion began to make razors with thin steel blades inserted in a thick back and tang of copper alloy, contending that such blades could be made more uniform in temper; but this style does not appear to have been highly successful.

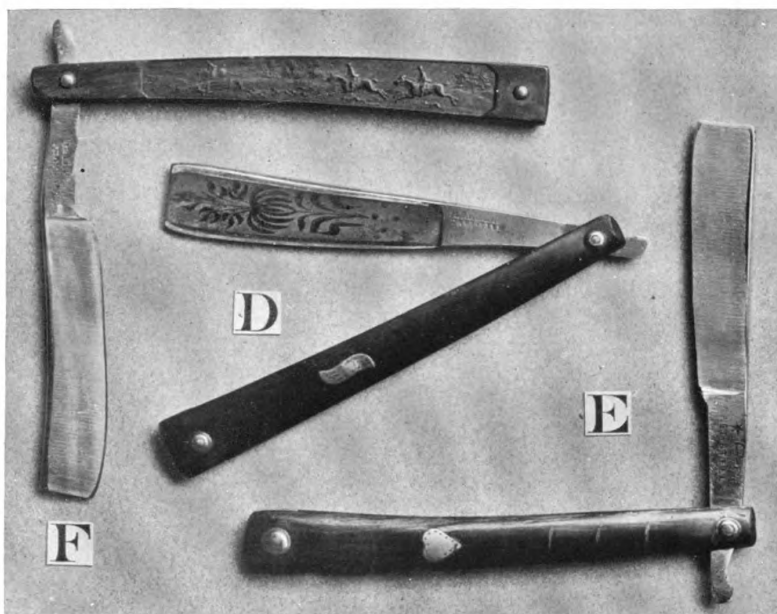
The sub-period between 1820 and 1833 is one of the most interesting to the collector. Although Ebenezer Rhodes, about 1821, wrote an article deploring the decay

of the art of razor making, the fact is that no finer or more beautiful razors were ever made than those dating between 1820 and 1833. In 1821, Joseph Rodgers and Sons secured an appointment as cutlers to His Majesty King George IV, an honor which encouraged them to greater efforts and stimulated their competitors. About that time arose the practices of scoring the top and bottom of the tang with file-cuts or flutings to keep the fingers from slipping, and of stamping the initial of the sovereign (GR, which became WR on the accession of William IV

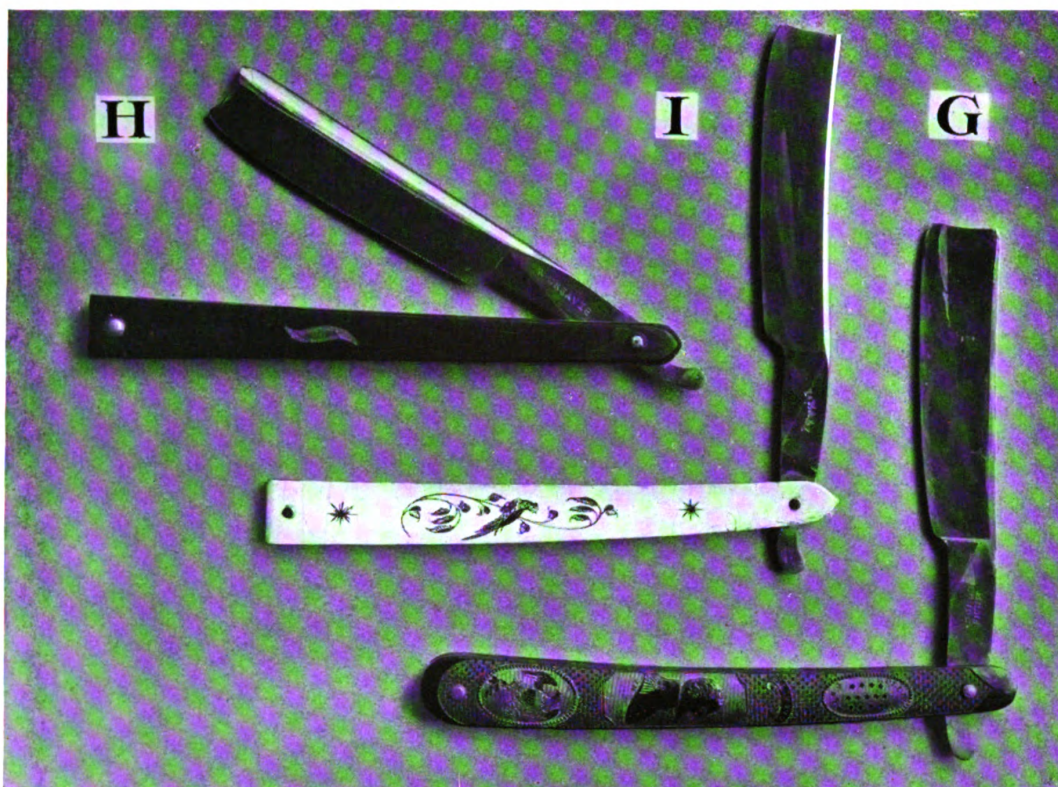
in 1830, and VR when the reign of Queen Victoria began in 1837).

In 1820 the great scientist, Michael Faraday, discovered a way to add about one-fifth of one per cent of silver to cast steel, which, he thought, improved its quality; but the existence of silver in all the razors marked "silver steel" may well be doubted. Many blades of the 1820-1833 period had mottoes or "cutlers' posies" stamped on them,—such as "Old English," "Try me one term," and "You lather well and I'll shave well." During this period began the manufacture of sets of seven blades, etched on the backs with the days of the week, all fitting into one tang and handle.

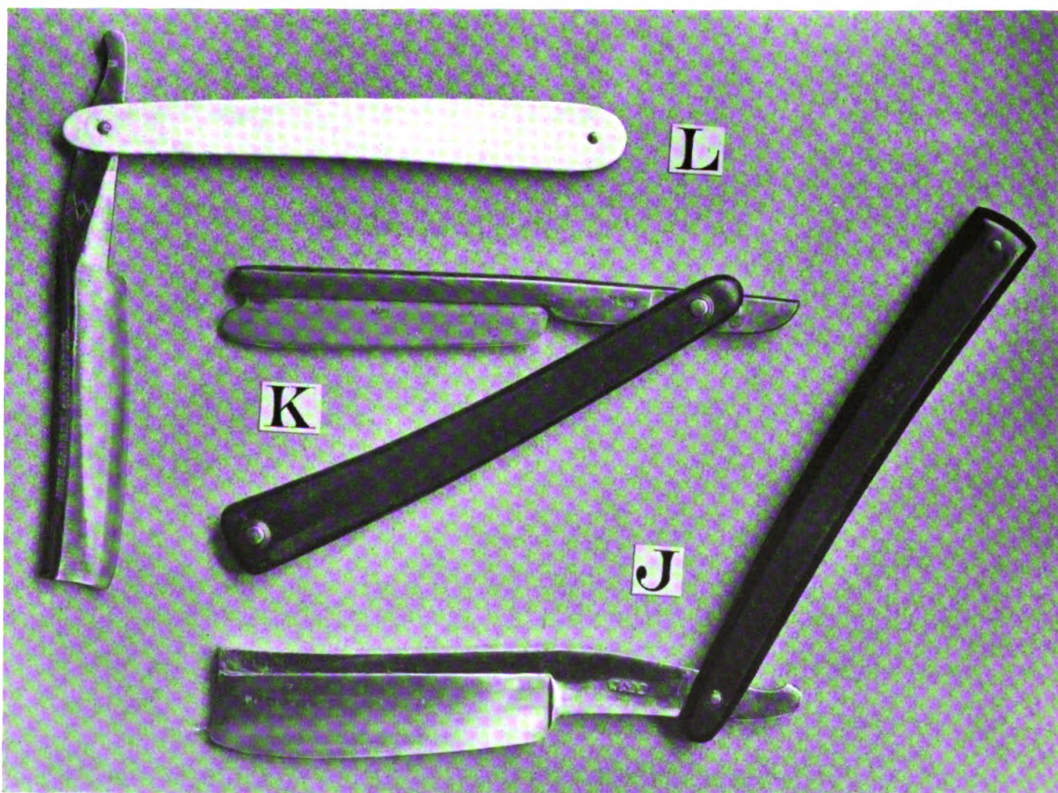
During the reign of William IV, probably about 1833, the third period began. Its distinguishing mark is the abandonment of the wide, beaten-out end of the tang. From



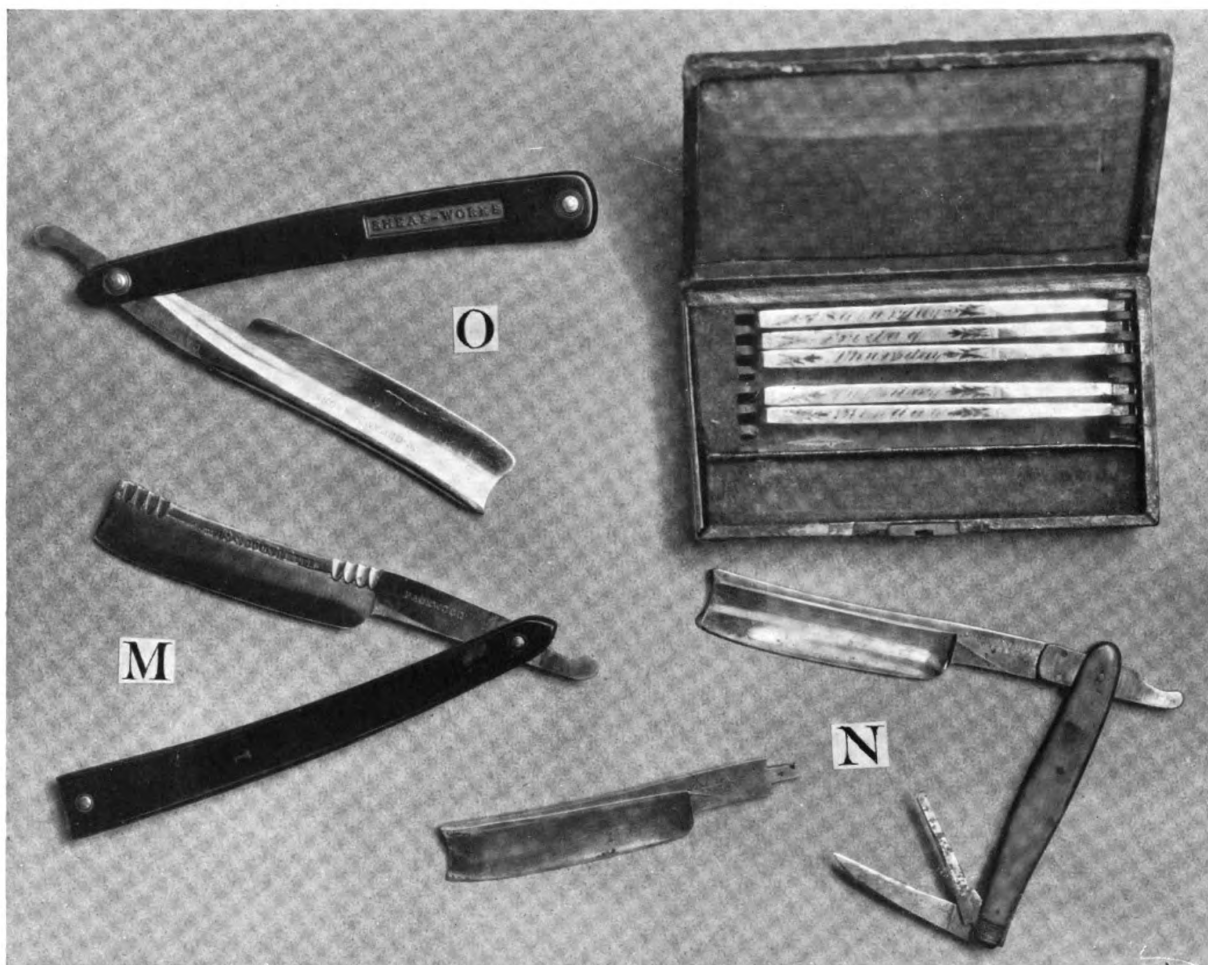
D. Date 1799. Maker, Clark & Hall, Sheffield, 1797-1823. Inscription, "Clark & Hall, cast steel." Handle, mottled horn. Blade etched with floral design.
E. Date 1801. Maker, Samuel Norris, Sheffield, 1795-1815. Trademark, star and "P." Inscription, "Cast steel." Handle, yellow horn.
F. Date 1810. Maker, William Greaves, Sheffield 1780-1816. Inscription, "W. Greaves, warranted." Handle, black horn, pressed to show fox hunt.



- H. *Date 1815.* Maker, William Greaves, supra. Inscription, "W. Greaves." Handle, tortoise shell.
 I. *Date 1815.* Maker, Jonathan Hall, Sheffield, 1795-1830. Inscription, "I. Hall." Handle, ivory.
 G. *Date 1815.* Maker, —Milns, London. Inscriptions, "Milns, London," "Superior." Handle, unknown material, pressed to show, on mark side, thirteen stars and "E pluribus unum," "Jackson" and portrait, and American eagle; on pile side, liberty cap and "Liberty," "Decatur" and portrait, and anchor.



- L. *Date 1828.* Maker, John Barber, Sheffield, 1810-1834. Trademark, square and compasses. Inscription, "John Barber, silver steel." Handle, ivory.
 K. *Date 1820.* Maker, Naylor & Sanderson, Sheffield, 1810-1830. Inscriptions, "N. & S.," and "Patent." Handle, black horn. Copper back and tang.
 J. *Date 1818.* Maker, Robert Wade, Sheffield, 1810-1818. Inscription, "Wade." Handle, black horn.



- M. *Date 1828.* Maker, unknown, Sheffield. Trademark, "Packwood." Inscription, "I am good, I can't be better, I tell you by letter." Handle, black horn.
- N. *Date 1830.* Maker, Jonathan Hunt, Sheffield, 1829-1837. Inscription, "Jonathan Hunt patent." Seven blades, etched on back with days of the week, fitting into one tang and knife handle, all in box.
- O. *Date 1830.* Maker, William Greaves & Sons, Sheffield, 1816-1850. Inscriptions, "W. Greaves & Sons," "Cast steel warranted." Handle, black horn, pressed to show "Sheaf Works."

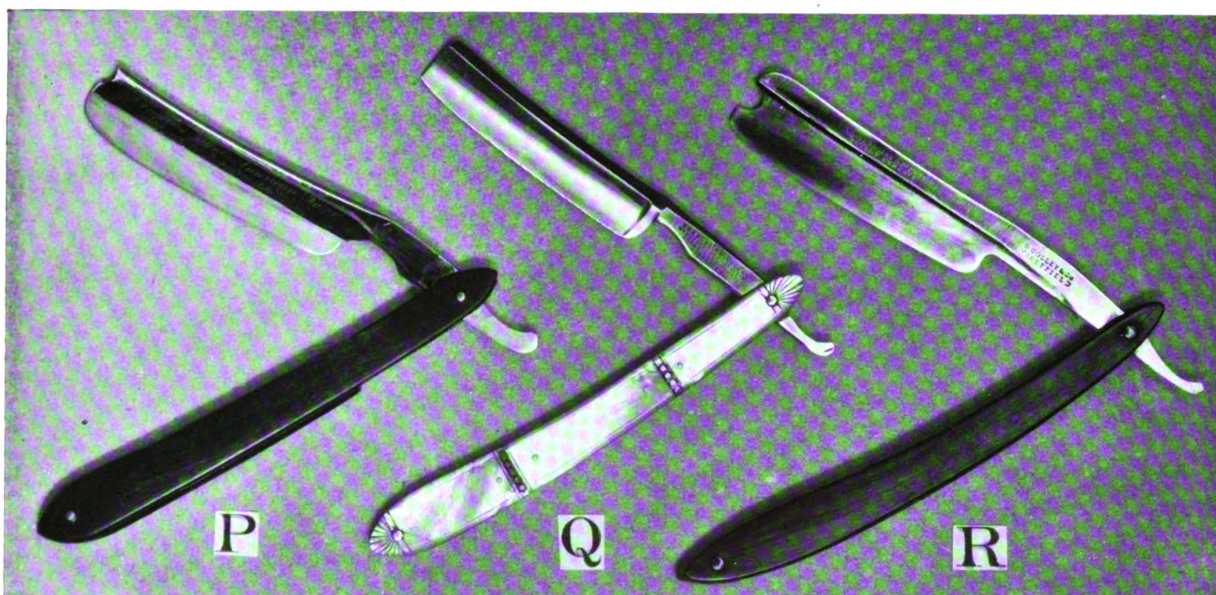
1833 to 1840 the end of the tang was very slender and not very long, the tang often had a scallop cut in the bottom, and the handle was sharply pointed. Later the handle lost its sharp point, and the end of the tang became longer and curved. In addition to materials previously used for handles, stag horn and mother-of-pearl were sometimes used. One interesting style of blade, common in the late thirties, had the heel wider than the toe, the back showing a corresponding variance in thickness so that the blade would lie flat on the hone.

The forties and early fifties show a great variety of razors. Among them may be noted the "straightbacks" with the toe wider than the heel, sometimes etched with pictures of ships or railroad trains; the large blades, an inch wide or even wider, variously stamped "Dutchman," "Magnum Bonum" or "For Barbers' Use"; and the blades with a double scallop in the back and the American eagle stamped on the side. Etching, used to some extent as early as 1800, now succeeded stamping for marking blades with "cutlers' posies." One razor in my collection bears the

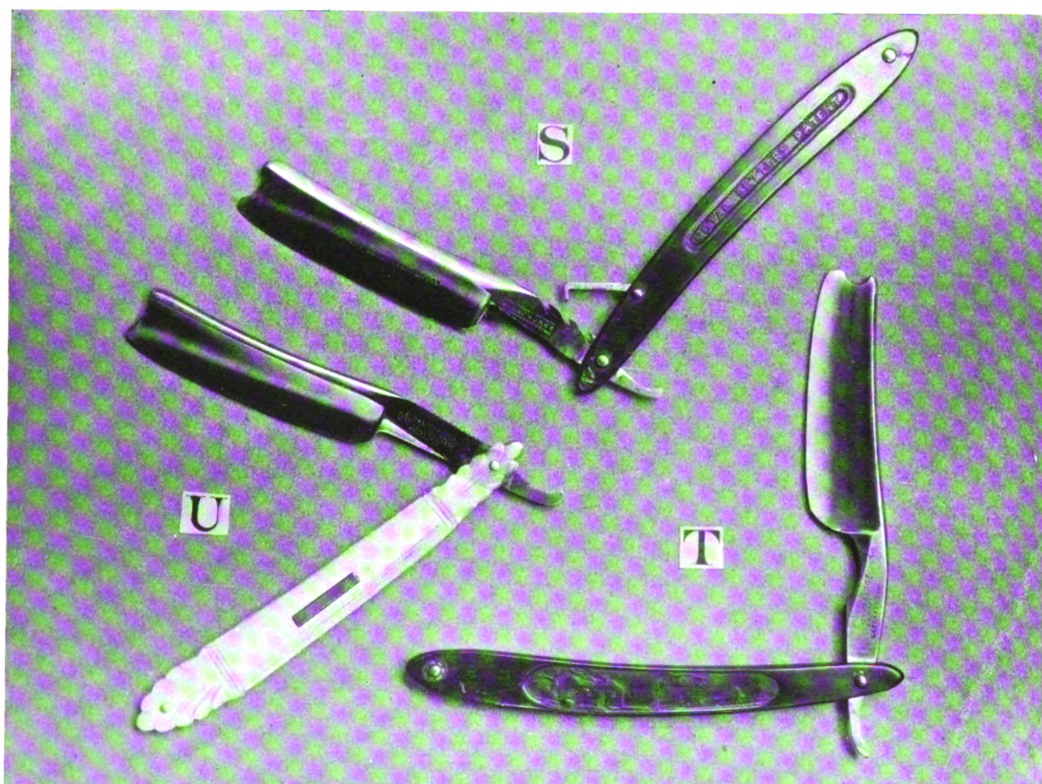
words, "I guess I shall do,"—apparently a Hallamshire essay at the Yankee vernacular. Sometimes the name of the retail customer was etched on the blade, especially when razors were made in sets. Some razors bear Masonic emblems.

To enumerate all the razor manufacturers of Sheffield, if it were possible, would require a book. Some firms in existence now have more than a century of successful business behind them; other firms lived but a few years. At any given time, from fifty to two hundred firms were engaged in making razors. Most of the workshops were small, with few workmen. Space permits the mention of only a few makers, not necessarily the best, whose product is commonly found in America.

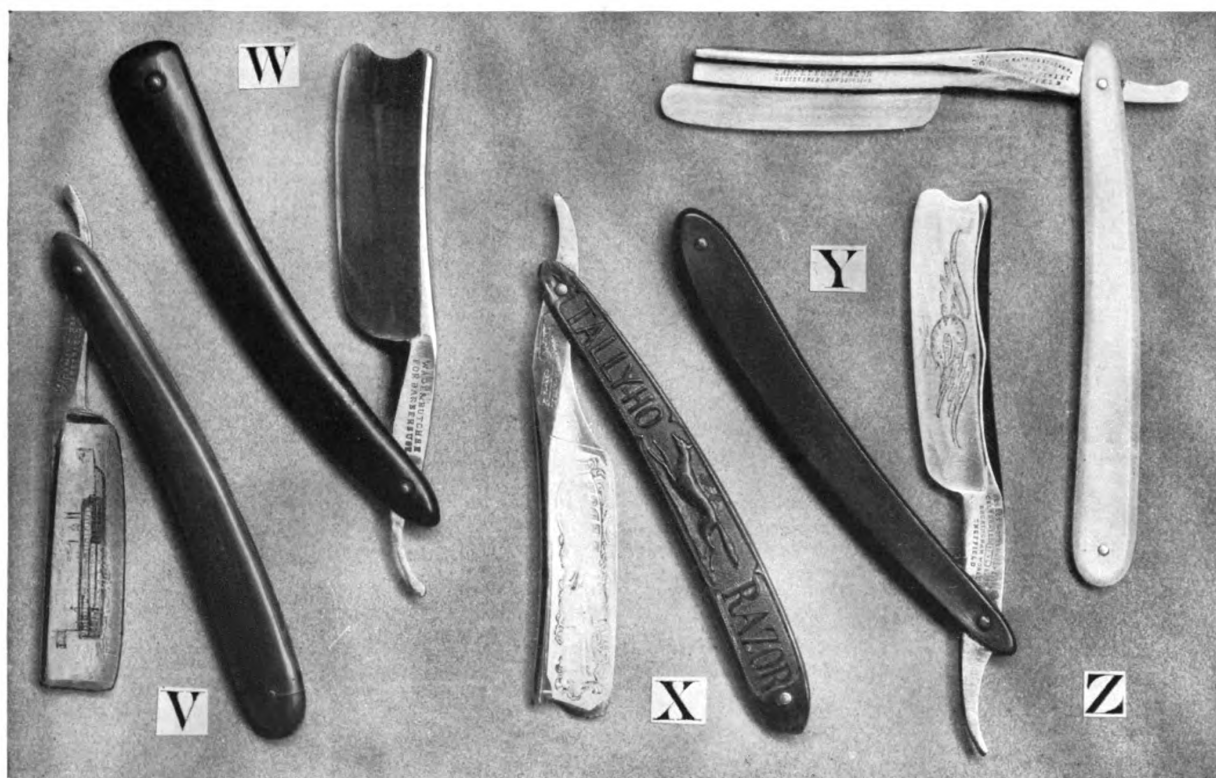
At the beginning of the nineteenth century, one of the firms whose name is frequently found was Clark & Hall (1797-1823). A little later, razors made by John Barber (1810-1834) were deservedly popular. In 1826 five firms were selected to make specimens of cutlery for presentation to the Duke of York,—Joseph Rodgers & Sons, James



- P. *Date 1830.* Maker, Charles Congreve, Sheffield, 1829-1843. Inscriptions, crown and "W. R. C. Congreve's patent American razor, made from Naylor & Co.'s celebrated steel," "C. Congreve's patent American razor tempered by thermometer." Handle, black horn. This razor was exported by Naylor & Co. to advertise their steel in America.
- Q. *Date 1835.* Maker, Charles Pickslay & Co., Sheffield, 1832-1843. Inscription, star and crescent, and "Charles Pickslay, manufacturer to the King, Royal York Works, Sheffield." Handle, mother-of-pearl.
- R. *Date 1835.* Maker, Colley & Co., Sheffield, 1834-1844. Inscriptions, "S," crossed pipes, and "Colley & Co., Sheffield," "Universally approved patent concave," "Silver combined with steel." Handle, black horn. This razor has no resemblance to a modern concave razor.



- S. *Date 1838.* Maker, William Greaves & Sons, supra. Inscriptions, fencing foils and "Sheaf Works," "W. Greaves & Sons patent protector." Handle, black horn, pressed to show, on mark side, "Royal letters patent," and, on pile side, "Granted 1799 improved 1836."
- T. *Date 1840.* Maker, Marshes & Shepherd, Sheffield, 1818-1850. Inscriptions, crown and "V. R. Marshes & Shepherd, Ponds Works, Sheffield." Handle, black horn, pressed to show, on mark side, log cabin, man ploughing, and, on a flag, "Harrison"; on pile side, "Warranted of first rate quality."
- U. *Date 1842.* Maker, James Johnson, Sheffield, 1818-1853. Inscription, "James Johnson's superior silver steel, Fitzwilliam Street, Sheffield." Handle, ivory.



- V. *Date 1845.* Maker, William & Samuel Butcher, Sheffield, 1830-? Inscriptions, "Manufactured by Wade & Butcher, Sheffield," picture of steamboat "Ohio." Handle, yellow horn.
- W. *Date 1845.* Maker, William & Samuel Butcher, supra. Inscription, "Wade & Butcher, for barbers use." Handle, black horn.
- X. *Date 1845.* Maker, Frederick Fenney, Sheffield, 1824-1852. Inscriptions, fox and "Tally-ho. F. Fenney, Sheffield, warranted," "Adamantine edge." Handle, black horn, pressed to show fox and "Tally-ho razor."
- Y. *Date 1847.* Maker, George Woostenholm & Son, Sheffield, 1823 to date. Inscriptions, "George Woostenholm & Son's celebrated I. XL razor, Rockingham Works, Sheffield," and American eagle with "American razor." Handle, black horn.
- Z. *Date 1855.* Maker, Joseph Mappin & Brothers, Sheffield, 1853-? Inscriptions, sun, and "Josh. Mappin & Brothers, No. 32 Norfolk Street, Sheffield," and "Lancet edge razor registered Jany. 22nd, 1848." Handle, ivory.

Crawshaw (the successor of Nowill & Kippax), Thomas Champion & Son (formerly of Rhodes & Champion), Thompson & Barber, and Sansom & Sons. The last four names are rarely found; my own collection lacks specimens of the last two makers, although they are known to have made razors.

Three of the greatest cutlery firms date from the very beginning of the nineteenth century, or before. Joseph Rodgers & Sons (1801 to date), successors to Maurice and Joseph Rodgers, are still one of the leading cutlery firms of the world. William Greaves & Sons (1816-1850), successors to William Greaves (1780-1816), built the Sheaf Works, the first large factory in Sheffield, in 1823-6, at a cost of thirty thousand pounds. Their large product was always of the highest quality. George Woostenholm & Son (1823 to date), successors to George Woostenholm (1797-1823), were a large concern with a great American trade.

Three other firms whose cutlery was in vogue in America began business about 1820. Joseph Elliot (1821-1854), succeeded by Joseph Elliot & Son, was one. The second was Frederick Fenney (1824-1852). The third was the firm of Wade & Butcher (1818-1827), successors to Robert Wade, and succeeded by Butcher, Brown & Butcher (1827-1830) and William & Samuel Butcher (from 1830).

The stamp has remained "Wade & Butcher" to this day. So great was the fame of this firm that many people speak of all old Sheffield razors as "Wade & Butchers."

It would be interesting to study the work of the cutlers who came to America from England about the middle of the last century. For a time some of them imported water from the Don and the Sheaf, under the delusion that cutlery could not be tempered properly with any other water. A. Burkinshaw, of Pepperell, Massachusetts, an immigrant cutler, showed where his heart was by adopting as his trademark the word "Exile," apparently descriptive of himself. A cutler in Southbridge, Massachusetts, on the other hand, adapted an English custom to the principles of American democracy by stamping his razors "Henry Harrington, cutler to the people."

Perhaps an article on razors ought to conclude with defence or apology. Comparisons are odorous, as Dogberry says, and in defending my hobby I will not decry another's. But if forced to it in self-defence, I could mention several objects of the collector's quest that cannot compare in beauty and utility with old Sheffield razors.

[I should appreciate hearing from other razor collectors, and other persons having fine specimens—H. T. L., 38 Exchange Street, Lynn, Mass.]