

The History of Norton Pike

While the history of sharpening stones on this country dates only back to the landing of the Pilgrim Fathers in 1629, we have used this Biblical quotation with its warning of the penalty resulting from the use of dull tools, as an indication of the real antiquity of the sharpening stone.

Those early souls who landed at Plymouth were soon to discover that to house and feed themselves they would have to depend very largely on two implements : the ax and the scythe. Yet to their dismay, no grindstones or any form of sharpening stones had yet been included in the Mayflower's stores. Nothing short of a calamity!

Searching parties were soon organized to try to locate rock suitable for sharpening purposes. In the meantime, arrangements were made to import these vital necessities from England, where the material in use at the time was sandstone. For a number of years our early forbears had to depend on this imported variety. Later, excellent sandstone deposits were located in Nova Scotia, which relieved the famine to some extent. Yet at about the same time, one of the early settlers boasted in letters back to folks in England of the resources of the country in whetstones. But the rock discovered by him proved to have little abrasive value so that no useful development of the product was ever possible.

A little later, the growing need for sharpening stones led to the manufacture of Scythe Rifles. This was a flat stick of pine about 15" long and an inch or more in width, one end of which was fashioned into a handle. Over the balance of the wood and on both sides, a mixture of emery and drying oil was spread upon a coating of homemade glue. Making Scythe Rifles was a family industry, usually carried out in winter the men whittling the handles while the women completed the job.

Throughout the 18th century the increasing development in woodworking, with its greater demand for sharp tools, led to the importation of Scotch sharpening stones, to be followed by the Turkey stone, a product of Levant. After our Revolutionary War, many expert joiner and blacksmiths were entering this country from England and Scotland bringing these stones with them.

The rapidly growing population along the Atlantic Coast after the War was inspiring hardy pioneers to turn farther west filling up western New York, Ohio and Michigan with people primarily interested in agriculture. This, naturally, led to a further demand for grindstone and whetstone supplies.

In this case, excellent deposits of fine sandstone were located on the shores of Lake Huron and in different localities in Ohio and Indiana, the manufacture of grindstones and whetstones developed in many different places. In fact, it was once said that "every farm had a quarry". Possibly a slight exaggeration.

The great bulk of the sandstone in the states mentioned is quarried for building purposes, only the very fine grits being useful for sharpening purposes. Queer Creek, a brand long and favorably known as a benchstone material, is a sandstone. So is another old brand, Sir Pike English Round in the scythestone field.

Two hundred years were to elapse after the landing of the Pilgrims before an entirely satisfactory scythestone product was located in New England, in later years to carry the name Pike to every agricultural country in the world.

In the year 1821, Person Noyes, a pioneer who had settled in the foothills of the White Mountains in New Hampshire, near the present village of Pike, while chopping in the woods, happened to pick up a piece of stone which he tried on the edge of his ax. It gave such good results that the following spring he quarried a few pieces which were broken into rough scythestone shape and used by local farmers with great satisfaction. Thus, quite by accident, the finest deposit of Mica Schist in the entire world was discovered in a tiny mountain village of New Hampshire.

Geologically, Mica Schist consists of one layer after another of fine, sharp Silica crystals superimposed on each other and separated by microscopically thin layers of bonding material. Sharpening action simply removes a tiny layer of abrasive crystals and exposes immediately a fresh lot of cutting points. The use of water or other lubricant is not necessary.

The Mica Schist quarries produced high grade scythestones for well over a century. Famous brands, INDIA POND, WHITE MOUNTAIN, BLACK DIAMOND, and were turned out in great quantities very uniform in size and texture.

Now enters Isaac Pike, forerunner of many others interested in the sharpening stone business. Two or three years before Person Noyes had discovered the virtues of Mica Schist, Isaac Pike, a young man of 18 or 19 years of age, who is said to have come from some town in Massachusetts, appeared in Haverhill, New Hampshire. Apparently he was a wide-awake lad, avid for anything that showed a likely hood of profit. He is known to have been interested in timbering and in the floating of log rafts down the Connecticut River to saw mills anxious for such raw material. He sensed the possibilities in producing scythestones and these same lumber rafts gave him a natural means of spreading their sale and fame.

Whether he was a competitor of Person Noyes or worked with him in the quarrying and shaping of scythestones is not clear. At any rate, in 1823 a year to which those interested in the name PIKE date its origin in the sharpening stone industry, this Isaac Pike started to produce and sell scythestones from a quarry near Indian Pond. Later, probably between 1825 and 1830, he built a saw mill on the Oliverian River where water driven burrstones took over the back-breaking hand methods of grinding the rough slabs to useful shapes and sizes.

Whatever the relations of these first producers had been, a merger of interests took place in 1827 by the simple process of "widower Pike" marrying "widow Noyes" and continuing to make and sell more and more scythestones in Isaac Pike's own name.

Isaac Pike continued to operate this personal business until his death in 1860 and the age of 61. He, apparently, was a forceful and determined character who carried in this business with great success. At his death, his second son, Alonzo F. Pike, carried on the business in his own personal name until 1884. During Alonzo's tenure, a brother, considerably younger, Edwin Burbank Pike, appears in and out of the business at various times but there is no record of his having any financial interest in it. However, a history of the company shows that it was largely due to the soaring imagination, foresight and untiring energy of Edwin that this business in the heart of New Hampshire had its name carried so far afield. In 1889, a new company was duly incorporated The PIKE Manufacturing Company which took in the interests of the Cleveland Stone Company who had been operating quarries in somewhat the same neighborhood.

In 1891 Alonzo died, leaving his share in the new company to five daughters, no son having blessed his marriage. Shortly thereafter, the trustees of his estate, with the other interest, elected Edwin Burbank Pike General Manager. Alone in the management of

the business, Edwin was able to give free rein to his aggressive ideas of merchandising and selling and was one of the earliest far-traveling salesman visiting such difficult territory as the entire East, reaching to the Mississippi River, carrying down that river eventually as far as New Orleans, coming back through the southern states and finally making a complete sales journey through the country east of the Father of Waters. He took several more trips abroad and still more firmly established the name PIKE among European countries, at the same time arranging for sales agencies in the United States for various well-known European sharpening products.

It was during his reign that the next important step in the development of natural oilstone materials took place: the exploiting of ARKANSAS oilstones in 1891. This famous product is well known all over the world for its unique capacity of imparting the highest perfection to a cutting edge. No other oilstone, electric furnace or natural, can approach this wonderful creation of nature. Geologically, it is included in the Novaculites and the only known deposit suitable for sharpening stones is in the Ozark Mountains not far from Hot Springs, Arkansas.

Long before it was discovered and utilized by white men, its many admirable characteristics had been recognized by Indians who used it for arrow heads, points for spears, knives, axes and other stone implements. In prehistoric days in America, the fame of the Hot Springs from a medicinal standpoint had spread over the country. In consequence, India chiefs afflicted with rheumatism or other diseases journeyed, often from distant parts, to enjoy the healing waters. The area around the springs had been made neutral ground and frequently warring tribes camped there in peace. During these rest periods fragments of Novaculite rock would be gathered and taken back home to be chipped later in to various useful shapes. Remains of these ancient stone chipping workshops have been located many hundreds of miles from the source of the raw material.

This form of Novaculite is almost pure silica, analysis showing about 99.5%. It is selected into three commercial grades known as HARD ARKANSAS, SOFT ARKANSAS and WASHITA. Their sharpening qualities are attributed to the sharpness of the pointed crystals, hexagonal in shape and much harder than normal tool steel and, therefore capable of cutting away and sharpening the edges of such tools.

The cutting crystals in the HARD ARKANSAS are the finest and set closest together, giving the densest structure. The extreme fineness of texture and density give HARD ARKANSAS its virtue as the supreme sharpener of fine, delicate tools and instruments. The SOFT ARKANSAS, not quite so fine grained, and WASHITA, still coarser, are used for progressively less critical purposes.

In 1897, PIKE Manufacturing Company took over the sale of INDIA Oilstones manufactured by NORTON Company, and years later, those made of silicon carbide under the CRYSTOLON brand. These two stones composed of the electric furnace abrasives - aluminum oxide and silicon carbide respectively - are among the fastest cutting sharpening stones of all descriptions known. They are available in Bench Stones, Slip Stones, Scythestones - practically every form needed in modern industry and agriculture.

In 1902, the PIKE Manufacturing Company sold off several scattered mills and consolidated all fabrication at Littleton, New Hampshire. The town granted freedom from taxation for a certain period, the new plant had power rights with cheap power for at least ten months of the year, and Littleton was also convenient to the main office of the company, then located in Pike, New Hampshire.

On the death of Edwin Burbank in 1908, his son, E. Bertram Pike, well known to many because of his wide-flung interest in abrasives and other materials, succeeded him. Associated with the company since 1889, Herbert E. Smith in 1906 was elected Secretary, in 1908, Treasurer of the company, and in 1912, Mr. Smith became General Manager, having in the meantime acquired through NORTON Company, the former holdings of the Cleveland Stone Company which NORTON Company had purchased a short time previously.

In 1932, occurred the purchase by NORTON Company of the PIKE Manufacturing Company, with the resultant change in name to NORTON-PIKE Company. Almost immediately the headquarters was moved from Pike to Littleton, still in the shadow of the White Mountains which had given rise to this old concern back in 1832. The sales effort for the new corporation was invested in the BehrManning Corporation, another subsidiary of NORTON Company, since they were covering much the same hardware markets as PIKE had covered. This arrangement continued well into the 60's.

With the onset of W.W.II and a great influx of Government orders, the building facilities on Highland Avenue in Littleton were soon outgrown. But, by round-the-clock production shifts, NORTON PIKE was able to meet all Government and most civilian requirements for their products and was awarded the Army-Navy "E" Production Award on July 7, 1944 for excellence in meeting Government requirements.

Plans were made for a new manufacturing facility when war priorities allowed and in 1946 ground was broken on the south side of Highland Avenue for a new, one story brick and steel factory building which was completed and occupied in the next year. The former wooden structures on the north side of the street were razed and grounds landscaped after the move to the new building.

In 1948, Norton Company agreed that the new Littleton facility was in a position to manufacture the INDIA and CRYSTOLON products. Previously Littleton only performed the final finishing operations after these stones shipped up from Worcester.

Ironically, the advent of power mowing machines outmoded the hand scythe and demand for the natural scythestones decreased. In 1945 operations at the old PIKE quarries were suspended and material pulled during the last operations provided for the limited demand of mica schist scythestones until 1961 when sales efforts were discontinued. Thus the original scythestone product brought to market by Isaac Pike in 1823 had run its course, but not before seeing decades of high demand and worldwide distribution.

Today, the Sharpening Stone Division (Pike Division) of Norton Company still makes INDIA and CRYSTOLON products in a vast variety of shapes, sizes and grits. A line of products for the honing and dressing markets was moved to the Littleton facility in 1989. Products made in Littleton are sold in markets all over the world. Following Isaac Pike's lead from over a century ago, Norton still manufactures the highest quality sharpening stones in the world.