THE COUNCIL TOOL STORY

John Pickett Council was born in 1855 at Council Station in Bladen County, North Carolina, the third son and eighth child of fifteen children. Throughout his life, Mr. J.P. was energetic, inquisitive and creative. As a young man, he farmed, owned a general store and also produced naval stores. Dissatisfied with the tools available for naval stores production, Mr. Council, by nature a mechanic and innovator, began modifying current tools for harvesting naval stores, and then began adding others of his own design. Handcrafted on an anvil, these tools were made with sledge hammers and tongs. Some of these tools proved to work better than existing ones.

Realizing there was a good market for these handmade tools, Mr. Council made the decision to concentrate on tool making. The initial operation he built consisted of one forge in a log building located at Council Station by the railroad. Steel was heated in a coke-fired furnace, with hand-operated bellows for combustion air. After this building was destroyed by fire in the early 1890's, he built a larger structure which housed six forges and a small steam boiler to generate power for the bellows and grinding wheels, which were hand operated. Tools were hardened and tempered based on color.

Southeastern North Carolina was an active producer of naval stores, the name given to rosin and spirits of turpentine. Both were obtained by distilling the gum (sap) from the longleaf pine, then, as now, the most common tree in this part of the state. Gum was obtained by chipping an area on the tree called a *face*, and chipping was done weekly. The face was produced by removing the bark, followed by chipping to make the gum run into a metal cup at the bottom of the face. Cups were emptied into buckets weekly, buckets were poured into barrels and barrels were then taken to a distilling operation.

At that time, the naval stores market ran along the coast from southeastern North Carolina to Florida. Later, it crossed Florida to the Panhandle and moved as far west as east Texas, continuing to run within seventy-five miles of the coast. Naval stores were used in shipbuilding and in the manufacture of soap, paints and medicines.

The company prospered in those early years. Always a shrewd businessman, Mr. Council had his growing business incorporated in 1886. That year the Supreme Court of the United States ruled that businesses could be incorporated; therefore the Council Tool Company is in an assemblage of venerable organizations such as Johnson & Johnson, Ball Brothers Glass Manufacturing, Munsingwear, Valvoline, Bon Ami Company, and the Universal Corporation. Also it bears noting that because of this incorporation, Council Tool is as old as any existing business both in the state of North Carolina, and the United States.

During this era, there were few roads and no motor freight lines. Delivering tools meant shipping by rail: by Seaboard to Wilmington and by the Atlantic Coast Line from

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 a farm he cleared, and named it Pecan Lane. Most of those trees still stand, less those taken by hurricanes and the natural order. 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 forge and hammered into shape, ground, hardened, tempered and painted. Tools were packed twelve to a carton, in wooden boxes made on site.

At this point, the company had only a few employees. Kinchin Council, remembered for his wit, writing and exploration of many isolated regional 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, 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 of 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 turpentine 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 forge-welding. 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 items are still manufactured, the Council Tool work force has become proficient at machinery maintenance. Just now in 2022, a crucial machine, the B-1 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-eye 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 high-carbon 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 forge-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 Mr. J.P.'s 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 part of the management team at the business for forty years. His expertise was engineering and design. John's son Cameron has been employed since 2011 which marks the fourth generation.

Three third generation females have made an impact at Council Tool: Virginia Pickett Council, sixth child of John Monroe Council, Jr. worked at the business from 1995 until 2015 as Vice President of Sales and Administration. Marjorie Council Wright (Margo), third child of Jack joined the business in 2004. Margo worked as Director, Fire and Export Markets, retiring in 2016. Susan Alston Council, first child of Jack worked at the business in the early 2,000's.

In the 1930's, axe makers began to form one-piece axes from C1078 steel. Today, all axes are one-piece, the technique pioneered by Plumb Axe, in St. Louis (later, Philadelphia), probably about the 1930's. At the time, Plumb was much ridiculed, but persisted to see its process become the standard. Plumb drop-forged the axe in a 3000-pound Ceco hammer, trimmed it, and punched the eye with a 4" upsetter. By the late 1950's, Council Tool also made the one-piece axe.

Because initial sales shipped into the south and southeastern areas of the United States, only southern Kentucky and Baltimore Jersey pattern single-bit 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 in-house 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 and the fire swatter was designed to smother brush and pine straw fires. Both are still made in the original design. Also in this decade, ditch bank blades and weed cutters were offered. 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 to defense plants. In that same time period procurement personnel from the U.S. 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, and 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 shells and was employed in the Anzio Beach invasion of 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 Jack 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 meant 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, C-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 sledges, 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 of a 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 Tool. 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 Tool 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 yolks 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 brand names.

In 2011 in conjunction with the 125th anniversary, premium axes were added to our line. Products had always been made of good quality, usable 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 felling 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 finish 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. The USFS continues to request many wildland fire fighting tools, and their contracts are and have been very important for production for decades.

We are proud to serve the firefighting community and will continue to grow our fire tool offerings; in 2022 the fire tool line was branded Council Fire. Offerings include municipal and wildland fire tools and an ever expanding line of forcible entry tools including a halligan bar and forcible entry 6# flathead axe. Both of these tools, as well as others, have been designed with input and consultation from firefighters.

Tool handles, traditionally of hickory, were customarily purchased from vendors. The company invested in establishing a wood turning operation on site in the early 1980s. Production continued until 1998 when the need for more production forced discontinuation of that operational aspect. In 2019, out of necessity, handle manufacturing has resumed in-house. Initially, an offsite warehouse space was used, and then in 2021 the operation was moved to the site of the original handle operation from years past. Waccamaw Woodworks, AKA W3, now provides most handles for our plant. It is managed by Council Rix, son to Jack's daughter Nancy Council Rix.

This Council Tool history was updated in August of 2022. The ability of a company to remain in business for 136 years relies on so many factors, most of which it is hoped are reflected in this history: strong leadership, dedicated workers, quality products, honesty, dedication, perseverance, innovation, determination, good will, diversification, strong customer relationships, and the ability to do the same thing over and over again and do it well. An astonishing example of that repetition: approximately ten million axes have been shipped from Council Tool since the early 1940's and around eight million hammers since the mid 1960's. That represents an incredible number of blows from the B-1 hammer!

Our company has survived pestilence, depressions, fires, world wars, hurricanes, and cultural changes. In recent years we have been forced to endure the supply chain crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic. The capability of obtaining materials and supplies has been challenging to say the least. The inability to purchase needed materials and supplies, as well as wildly unpredictable delivery information, is something of a new frontier. Our customers, naturally, want a reliable delivery timetable, and mostly is has been undependable. This creates a frustrating, vicious cycle. It has forced hard decisions about the efficacy of producing certain products. Covid-19 triggered some business closures in certain states, and the fallout from these closings caused drastic changes in the workplace and within the labor force. It has been an unusual time for certain. Perhaps "crazy" is an appropriate term to use.

What has and will not change is our focus on producing high quality products which offer high value. We remain committed and proud to be Made in USA!