

## Belknap Hardware History

William Burke Belknap founded this historic hardware company in 1840, along the banks of the Ohio River in Louisville, Kentucky. It started in a small shop that produced iron products, such as horse and mule shoes, nails, spikes and other forged items.

The first building was a three-story brick on the corner of Third and Main with three employees. When Belknap celebrated its 100th anniversary in 1940, it had grown to a complex of 37 buildings, covering 37 acres of floor space under one roof. It had underground passageways and covered bridges. Belknap Hardware and Manufacturing was among the nation's largest wholesale enterprises with nationally recognized quality brands

W.B. Belknap was an astute businessman. He was able to quickly discern the needs of his clients and community, focusing on what goods and services would best serve to make his business grow. He began his venture at a time when rivers were the transportation freeways and horsepower was real: mules and carts, horses and wagons. He built on this, providing quality, affordable tools, with brand names such as 'Belknap, King of the Bluegrass' and Thoroughbred, reflecting Kentucky's own pride in its unique topography and its love of fine horseflesh.

Some of Belknap trademarks are John Primble (1931), Cyclone (1952), Crusader (1935), Belmont, Old Kentucky Home, Pride of Kentucky and Pine Knot. Nap (1909) Blue Ribbon (1949). Spotless Town (1951) Homemaker (1958) Slumber Deep (1959) Speedmore (1962-83) Cap'N Nap (1964) Knap (1982)

Mr. Belknap's savvy business acumen was quite an asset. And he would need every asset he could muster, seeing as he favored the Union during the Civil War while living deep in Dixie. Being president of a bank in Louisville and married to the daughter of its former president would also prove to be another asset. This gave him the solid financial base necessary to support the health and growth of his business

Being another of that same breed of venture capitalists as E.C. Simmons and A. F. Shapleigh, he was the right man, in the right place, at the right time, with the right goods and services. He rode on the dual waves of an expanding frontier and the industrial revolution. His business philosophy was that whether his clients needed builder's hardware, house wares, mechanics or farming tools, or even pocket knives, Belknap would fill that order with quality merchandise, that came to be known as "goods of honor". Like these other men, he started small. His first catalog was a 3" x 5 1/2", 16 page pamphlet. Belknap's inventory in 1880 was a mere 100 items. In 1940, the company's catalog had grown into a 3000-page tome, containing over 75,000 items. Still going strong! This was quite an accomplishment seeing that the immediately preceding years had seen the disappearance of such giants of the industry as Simmons Hardware, bankrupt in 1939. The 1957 catalog provided 90,000 items. When it closed its doors in 1986, under bankruptcy, Belknap's inventory had reached more than 117,000 items, mostly Blue Grass tools.

The Company was W.B. Belknap from 1840-1860; W.B. Belknap and Co. from 1860-1880; W.B. Belknap and Co. Incorporated from 1880-1907 and Belknap Hardware and Manufacturing Company Inc. since 1907

Belknap while obviously a hardware and manufacturing leader is also remembered for its pocket knives. By the 1800's, pocket knives were some of its primary lines of merchandise. The company carried Russell I\*XL and LF & C, then introduced its own brands; Blue Grass, Pine Knot, Jas. W. Price and most noteworthy, the John Primble. This trademark was used as early as 1890, and probably before. It is also found on cutlery. Pine Knot knives were most likely made for Belknap by Robeson. The Primble knives (not those stamped Prussia or Germany) were manufactured under contract by Camillus, Boker, Schrade, Utica and Case

A business consortium in Maysville, Kentucky purchased the Primble India Steel Works trademark. This group also operates the Blue Grass Cutlery Corporation in Manchester, Ohio. In the late 1980's they released new knives bearing John Primble-India Steel Works with the date of manufacture. (Editor's note: The new cutlery company has continued the pocket knife traditions of the old. Blue Grass Cutlery made brand new pocket knives, etc. that includes the John Primble, Blue Grass and Winchester brands)

The Blue Grass trademark pocket knife was made for Belknap until the 1950's (with the Barlow pattern continuing on for a while). This trademark was purchased by S & T Hardware which issues a limited edition collector knife about every two years.

Belknap, like other major historic hardware houses, faced many challenges undergoing many changes over the course of more than a century of operation. However, it is said to have retained a "family" approach with its employees and their dependents, providing picnics, parties and doing all of its promotions from within the company. Belknap's' final demise was in 1986.

## OTHER ARTICLES

In 1993 there was movie made entitled "Demolition Man", starring Wesley Snipes and Sylvester Stallone. The movie company came to Louisville, Kentucky to implode a building for the movie. Many believe they blew up all of the Belknap buildings, but that is not true. What they blew up was only one or two large warehouse buildings. Some of the other warehouse buildings were torn down and turned into parking lots and other business buildings were built where Belknap warehouses once stood.

The Main Office and Showrooms Building is still there. It is a tall multi story building facing Main St., the rear of the building faces the Ohio River. Sometime after Belknap's closing in 1986, the building was bought by Humana Insurance Co. The Humana name is in large letters on the side of the building facing the Ohio River and can be seen while traveling through downtown Louisville on Interstate 64.

The Main St. side has Humana on it, but the Belknap Hardware & Mfg. Co is still etched in stone in large letters above the stone white columns over the large front doors.



Front entrance 111 E. Main St.



Two of 37 Warehouses.



Main Offices and Showrooms 1st and Main Streets.



Rear of Main Office Building facing the Ohio River. Now owned by Humana Insurance Co. This is the only old Belknap building still standing.



1950 Belknap Catalog - 3550 pages.



1955 Belknap Catalog - 4150 pages.



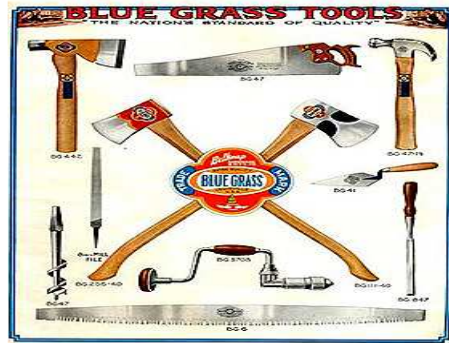
Main Office and Warehouses - 1955.



Color page of quality Bluegrass tools.



Color page from 1961 Catalog.



Color page from 1937 Catalog.



Belknap Bluegrass hammers from 1955 Catalog.



Bluegrass Hand Saws.



Label used on Belknap replacement wooden handles.



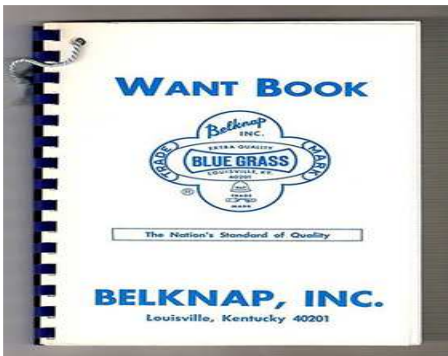
Bluegrass Nail Aprons.



This is an original Belknap Bluegrass Hardware Store Sticker for the front door of hardware stores. It is sticky on this side and was placed on the inside of the front door facing out. (I have this mounted between two pieces of Plexiglas with red tape around the edge as a binder.)



This is the reverse side of the Hardware Store Sticker. This is what the customer saw when leaving the store.



Dealer Want Book.



Want Books were given to Dealers to jot down items they needed. A Belknap customer Rep. would call on the customer once a week or every two

weeks and transcribe items in this want book to a Belknap order form. Later to be delivered by Belknap delivery truck.



Sheet of sticker price tags.

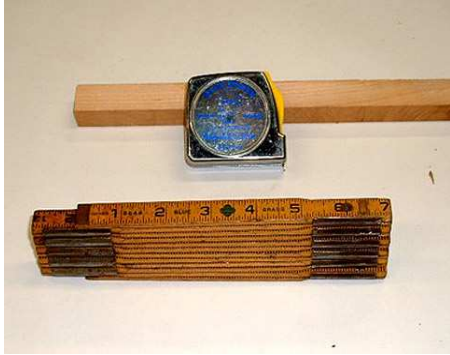


Paper bag, Price tag, and Hardware store pocket want card.

## Tool Samples



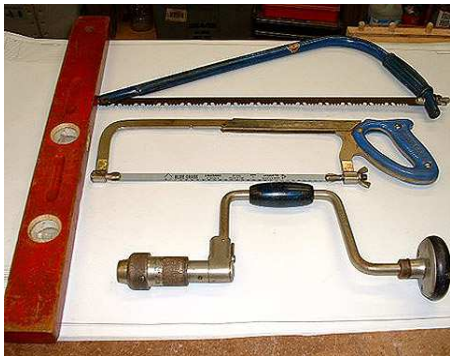
Bluegrass maple miter boxes. Box in the rear has a price of \$1.55 in black grease pencil written in the bottom of the box.



6 foot zig zag folding rule and 1/2"- 10 foot measuring tape.



John Primble pocket knife box, green saw nut box held a dozen two piece saw nuts marked 15 cents, brace bits, Set of Bluegrass drill bits, Bluegrass hatchet, Bluegrass circular saw blade, Bluegrass tin snips, 16oz. Pine Knot hammer, Bluegrass shoe rasp, Pine Knot 3/4 chisel, and a pair of Bluegrass blue plastic handled 3/8" chisels with Logos in white.



Bluegrass 24" Level, Bow Saw, Hacksaw with Bluegrass blade, and Bluegrass Brace.



From the top: Belknap Master Mechanic Saw No. 549, Belknap Handsaw with W. B. Belknap & Co. on medallion (1860-1880), Belknap Cyclone Handsaw.



Etches of above two saws.



Bluegrass Hammers: 13oz Belknap Bluegrass with original label from about 1935 Bluegrass stamped on handle, 7oz Belknap Bluegrass with original label Bluegrass stamped on handle, 13oz tubular with brown rubber handle marked Bluegrass on head, 13oz Belknap Bluegrass with original Belknap replacement handle.





Belknap Bluegrass 16oz Hammers.



From left: 20oz Bluegrass Hammer from about 1940, 20oz Bluegrass Hammer from about 1930, 28oz Bluegrass Hammer from about 1970.