

THE STORY OF YOUR SILVER SPOON

WHY do we always buy table silver in sets of twelve? the answer to that comes from a little shop in London, where, in the year 1500, most of the silver made was designed for church use. The silversmith could think of no greater inspiration than the twelve apostles, so he made a spoon for each. After that it became the custom to make all sets in twelves.

What is a hallmark? That originated three hundred years ago in England, with the passing of a law that every silversmith must register his special mark with the assay hall. That became his "hallmark" and was put on every piece he made.

What is sterling? A chemist will tell you that sterling is 925 parts silver and seventy-five parts copper. The name, however, is traced to a German trader of eight hundred years ago, whose name was Esterling. He traded his goods in England for pure silver tokens, and these came to be called "sterling."

Why do we buy silver? Obviously because it is useful, durable and beautiful. But the Colo-

rial silversmiths who started the industry in New England three hundred years ago found customers coming to them for quite another reason. John Hull, the first recorded silversmith in Boston, was patronized by sea captains who were paid in pounds sterling for their cargoes of sugar. They asked him to melt down their sterling and convert it into bowls, vases, candlesticks or teapots, as a safer form in which they might keep their silver.

This led to an unexpected discovery. In 1652 John Hull went before the Council to report that an increasing amount of counterfeit money was circulating. In one bag of coins brought to him by a sea captain to be melted down and made into wrought silver, at least one out of every ten pieces was not silver but a worthless metal. "We need standard silver coins," John Hull argued, "that will mean the same in every town along the Coast."

As a result, John Hull was appointed master of a new mint. His first task was to design a coin that

would become standard. His pine-tree shilling became the accepted coin of pre-Revolutionary and Revolutionary days. One coin out of every twenty was given to Hull as compensation for his work. Hull himself became very sentimental about his coin. When his daughter was married, he made her dowry her exact weight, 150 pounds, in pine-tree shillings. Hull's hand-minted coins and wrought pieces were the most famous of Colonial silver work.

One hundred years later a young silversmith named Paul Revere hung out a sign on Clark's wharf in Boston stating that he would replace lost teeth with teeth of silver. There were too many silversmiths making teapots, Revere thought. Everybody had a household of them. So, although he had an excellent business engraving fine bowls and silver sets, he soon did a thriving dental business as well and his silver teeth adorned many a weather-beaten visage.

Paul Revere made famous etchings and famous engravings, as well as teeth. Aside from his famous midnight ride, however, his claim to immortality lies in the wealth of beautiful silverware he left in New England. He learned his art from his father and passed

it on to his son. The name of Revere was first among all American silversmiths.

Fifty years later, in 1831, a man name Jabez Gorham, a jeweler in Providence who acted as his own traveling salesman, was asked by a customer why he did not add silver spoons to his wares. Gorham took a silversmith into his shop and started the business which was to become the great house of Gorham, largest makers of sterling in America today.

As yet sterling was only for the well-to-do. Its cost was prohibitive for the average home. In Sheffield, England, in 1742, a man named Thomas Bolsover, a mechanic in metals, repairman and button-maker, was asked to repair a knife with a handle of silver and a blade of copper. It was broken clear through, and it would require a very hot flame to mend it, Bolsover decided. As he held it in the flame, he discovered that the copper and the silver had fused. The silver had completely covered the copper!

This, Bolsover realized, was an important discovery. By bringing copper and silver together he could make pieces as beautiful as silver and much less expensive, available for the average household. Soon

after that he founded the Sheffield Plate industry. His plate was so successful that the rich as well as the poor purchased it. Between 1750 and 1840 Sheffield Plate was the most popular silverware on the market. Genuine Sheffield Plate refers only to that type of ware made in Sheffield during those years.

In 1840 Sheffield was replaced when a young chemist named Wright discovered the process of putting silver on a base metal by electricity. This process was much easier than Sheffield plating, as well as faster and less expensive. Wright's discovery started the great plated-silver industry. Seven years later the five Rogers Brothers opened their factory in Hartford, and soon leading silversmiths throughout New England were working with plated ware as well as solid silver.

Silver played an important part in one of the most extraordinary

social experiments ever made in the United States. In 1848 John Humphrey Noyes, with a small group of followers, founded the Oneida Community in New York, an experiment in communal ownership, race-improvement and a religious and manufacturing community. Of their many successes in manufacturing and marketing, only one now remains, the making of plated silver. Today the Oneida Community is one of the largest manufacturers of plated silver in the country.

The silver industry is centralized almost entirely in New York and New England. It has become a forty-million-dollar industry and pays out more than eleven million dollars in wages each year. It supplies an average of fifty pieces of silver per family throughout the country. — *Adapted from the "Americans at Work" program, Columbia Broadcasting System.*

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"THE only bad mistake in a diagnosis that I can remember," said a doctor, "was when I prescribed for indigestion, and afterwards learned that my patient could easily have afforded appendicitis."—