

## [Mr. Gill no. 2]

Conn. [1938-9?] Mr. Gill No. 2

The busy chug-chug of the small gasoline engine serves notice this afternoon that Mr. Gill, last of the Northfield knifemakers, (his old helper excepted) is at work in his little factory. I find him sitting on a sawed off piano stool, a power driven grindstone between his knees, expertly turning the blade of a jackknife. He explains that he is "doing a few repairs," and will be free shortly. I watch him at work; the ease with which he moves from grindstone to grindstone to buffer, polishing, turning, sharpening with the skill born of years of practice is fascinating.

"Not much money in this," he says. "Put on a new blade, all I got in half a dollar." Two or three of the old knives on which he is working have been used for many years, and are treasured by their owners through long association, Mr. Gill believes. Finished with his task he lays them aside. "You want to see those medals I was telling you about," he says. "Wait 'ere a second and I'll bring them out."

While he is gone I examine a framed picture near the door of that famous case of 800 knives, still referred to with pride by older residents of the village, which was sent to the Centennial in Philadelphia, Mr. Gill returns to find me looking at the picture.

"One of them knives was three feet long," he says; "and another had twenty four blades; and still another was thin enough to go down a pipe stem. Old Sam Mason made it. He let his finger nail grow till it could just cover it. Just a curiosity."

"'Ere's the medals." Mr. Gill dumps them unceremoniously on a bench. "This one's gold." The inscription reads, 'New Hampshire Mechanic and Artist Association, First Exhibition, Concord, October 1868.'

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“‘Ere's the first one they got,” Mr. Gill holds out a tarnished silver medallion, inscribed: ‘Connecticut State Agricultural Society, Awarded John S. Barnes, Northfield, Best Pocket Cutlery, 1858’. A large copper medal in a leather case is Mr. Gill's 2 particular pride, First Award of the ‘republique Francaise,’ at the International Exposition of 1872. There is another award from the United States Centennial commission, 1876; and a silver medal for first place in the Columbian Exposition at Chicago. “That's the last of 'em,” says Mr. Gill. “I thought there was more than that around.”

“I haven't got around to writin' out that 'istory for you. Thought I might do it this mornin', but I 'ad these things to take care of.” The bell of the adjacent schoolhouse tolls recess and Mr. Gill goes to the window. “Look at them kids, would you,” he observes. “The school yard ain't big enough for them, they have to run all over the back lot. 'Ere comes old George Wright down the 'ill. 'E may be able to give you some information.” Mr. Wright' enters presently, an old gentleman garbed in somber black, with drooping gray mustache, cap, dark colored spectacles. Mr. Gill explains that I am interested in knife shop history and Mr. Wright recalls that I have been to see him several weeks ago.

“I just came in for my unbrell',” he explains. “Look's though we might have rain. “Funny thing about an umbrell. If it's goodlooking you can't keep it long, but if it's a disreputable looking piece of furniture like this'n you can always find it again. Nobody 'd carry this but me, probably.”

Mr. Gill: “Your dad was one of the old timers, George. You ought to remember something about the old shops. You're in the business longer than me.”

Mr. Wright: “Oh, I don't know. It was quite a business, in my dad's day. There were small shops all over the state. One up in Litchfield, in 1859; one in Southington, Hotchkissville, Campville at one time; one below the Wigwam reservoir one at Reynolds Bridge—all small places. And our shop in Northfield here. That was about as prosperous as any of them

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when it was owned by the old fellas. It paid a hundred per cent dividend one year they say.”

Mr. Gill: “They had a thirty thousand dollar sinking fund when the Catlins 3 took it over, and when they got through with it there was a forty thousand dollar chattel mortgage on it.”

Mr. Wright: “That's so. But still I think it was the Civil War that pulled the old timers through. They weren't business men, those old johnnies weren't. They wouldn't have lasted as long as they did, if it hadn't been for the Civil War. They made an army knife that sold very well. A spoon, fork and blade combination. But they didn't have much business ability. Every man had an equal vote in the affairs of the company, regardless of the amount of stock he held. That wasn't business-like.”

Mr. Gill: “Yes, I suppose if the Catlins hadn't taken over the place some of these other Yankees would. They were shrewder than the johnnies.”

Mr. Wright: “Well, they were, and they weren't. Some people outsmart themselves, don't they? I know I have had dealings with some like that. And afterwards, I've let them severely alone. Decided they were a little too smart for me.”

Mr. Gill: “You know, of course this doesn't want to go in the paper, but in the old days, you could get whiskey and cider right over the counter in the grocery stores. They never had any license. And the old johnnies were nearly all hard drinkers. That's how they come to lose their stock. They'd get drunk and want more liquor and didn't have any money, and they'd give the stock to Catlin in exchange.

Mr. Wright: “Well, they say Mason building this big house up here had something to do with it too. Mason was president, and some of the rest of them thought it was going to his head. He built the house, and his wife started wearing silk dresses and so forth, and the others thought perhaps he was getting a little too much out of it, so they traded off their stock. That's one story.”

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Mr. Gill: "They didn't make a great deal of money, to start with, anyway. And they had funny methods. I remember my father saying there was some that bought 4 stock without putting any money down. They worked for nothing until they paid for their shares."

Mr. Wright: "Rastus French. He was one of the old Yankee stock. Not very competent, not a very good worker. All he got was twenty five cents a day. I remember my father wondering how he lived on it. But he had a little farm, and a few cows, and he raised vegetables and so forth."

Mr. Gill: "Well, they worked piece work. It was up to them how much they made."

Mr. Wright: "Yes, it was nice. It wasn't like factory work today. The pace was slower. They used to argue and talk for hours on end, some times. And they had 'tobacco time' twice a day, at ten in the morning and four in the afternoon, they'd all go downstairs for a smoke. I remember coming in the factory when I was eight years old and my father would hoist me up on a bench and set me to flashing blades. And Mr. Foster, his boy Robert tended to the stock early in the morning and did the chores around the house and then went to school and after school he'd come down to the factory and his father would always have some little job for him to do. That was the way the trade was learned. In those days children were supposed to help, and a good thing it was too. Kept them out of mischief and I don't know's it did any of them any harm. My old Grandmother used to come to see us; she'd always say to us children: 'Come, come, make yourself useful, make yourself useful.'

Mr. Gill: "Yes, that's a fact."

Mr. Wright: There was Mr. Martin, always said , by George his boy Calvin was never goin' to work in the factory. And look at the way he turned out. The old man must have often wished he'd put him to work. You take these children today, most of them never do a lick of work till they're past eighteen. And then they don't want to do anything, do they?"

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Mr. Gill: "That's the truth."

Mr. Wright: "I remember one time—the queerest arguments they used to have.

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They got fightin, over which was right pronunciation—'eether, or eyether.' Finally old Uncle Sammy Mason got tired of it. He says, 'Eether, eyether—Neether, nyether, 't'ain't any of 'em roight, go back to work ye bloody fools.'

Mr. Gill: (enthusiastically) "Didn't they 'ave some great sayin's though? Average man couldn't understand 'em. I remember my father talkin' to one of the old Yankees 'ereabouts, 'e says to 'im, 'Now see if you can tell what ah say: Take potter out of ash nook and put it in coke oil.' Old Yankee couldn't get it. The potter was the poker. And the ash nook was the coal pit. And coke oil was the oil barrel."

Mr. Wright: "My father used to say, 'I'm ban aboon.' That meant, 'I'm going above.' But the best one I ever heard was the one about Uncle Sammy and the bellows boy. The youngster never came to work on time and the old man threatened to discharge him. The next day the boy came bright and early and the old man says: 'Ah see tha's come first at last; tha's always be'ind before.'

Mr. Gill: "They were a 'appy go lucky tribe. Just like gypsies. My father used to tell about a couple 'e knew up in Waldron. They were goin' to work one noon, and one says, 'What d'ye sye Jock, we go 'one 'ome ?' 'All roight,' says the other, and without another word they went back to the lodging house and packed up and started for the Old Country."

Mr. Wright: "Do you remember the time the fifteen came up here, the time of the strike? And when they found out what the situation was they scattered the next day. Not one of 'em stayed."

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Mr. Gill: "They could always get jobs. They'd go on a spree and perhaps never come back to work. I got a set of toos tools 'ere now belongs to a chap that left 'em 'ere and never came back after 'em. I sometimes think if they 'adn't been so independent the business would 'ave been better off. I 'eard my father say 'e's seen a blade forger brought in to work on a wheelbarrow and sobered up so the rest 6 of them could get started. They 'ad to wait for the blade / forgers, you know. Well, that kind of thing 'appened too often, and they began to cast around for some kind of machinery so's they wouldn't 'ave to depend on those chaps, and then your drop forges came in. Same with the grinders. They were always on strike. Pretty soon they got grindin' machines."

Mr. Wright: "They used to tell about Dr. Ferguson that ran the knife shop down in Reynolds Bridge for a while. One of these men from the grinders' union came to see him and asked for more money for the men. Ferguson said if the men couldn't come to him themselves, he'd shut the place up. And that's just what he did. It was kind of hard to get more money here too, sometimes. I know one time I was talking to one of the men from the Bridge and I found out he was getting two cents a dozen more than I was on the same knife. I told Mr. Catlin about it and he said, surely, I could have the same price. But he never gave me any more of those knives to do."

Mr. Gill: "They had a good many tricks like that."

Mr. Wright: "Well, I've got to be getting on to the store. Must be near about supper time. I've got my umbrell, anyway, in case it rains." He leaves.

Mr. Gill: "George is the only knifemaker left around 'ere, besides my self. There isn't any of the old bunch left. My mother's the last of them, that I can think of. Where'd' they go? They're dead, most of them. Some left the village. It's like I said, they were like gypsies. Come and go all the time. My father was over 'ere three times before 'e brought us over to stay. Some went out west with the Mormons, years ago. Some went from 'ere, did you

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know that? And there's a company out in Boulder, Colorado that was started by a boy who learned 'is trade right in Northfield, Faym Platts.

“They were a great bunch. Rough and ready. No table manners, most of them, and most of them drank more than was good for them, but they were artists. Why, 6 they used to do etching, years ago. Not one of them but what 'ad an 'obby. And the knives they made were knives, not cheap junk.

“After I go there'll be nobody bother with it, I s'pose. You can see I don't make anything on it. It's just a hobby with me. Well, I'll try to get out that 'istory for you one of these days.”