

MAHANOEY CITY CHRONICLES

October 8, 1988

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HORNSBY SHOES CUSTOM MADE

TOM HORNSBY was a shoemaker in the real sense of the word. He personally made every pair of shoes that he sold in the little cobbler shop that he ran a century ago in the 400 block of West Pines street.

From that humble beginning, the youthful immigrant from England became the best known shoe merchant of his generation in Mahanoy City.

The Hornsby store began at Cleator Moor, England, where Tom was born in February 1868. In boyhood he began a shoemaking apprenticeship and learned to make clogs with thick wooden heels and soles that gave rise to a form of dance before turn of the century. Clog dancers, using the shoes to tap out a rhythm on the floor, were popular here in the coal region, where one of the most noted was P.J. "Giant" O'Neill of Boston Run Patch, who competed in contests all over the country and reigned as the state dancing champion in 1896.

TOM HORNSBY also made "clog hoppers" (later called clod-hoppers) which, because they were rugged and long-lasting, became standard footwear for young lads.

In the early 1880s, the Hornsby family (mother and four sons) sailed for America and found their way to Mahanoy City where they found housing on D street.

Soon young Tom was working at the Wheatley Shoe Shop located in the Hotel Mansion business complex. Later he opened his own cobbler shop at 402 W. Pine St. and remained there until 1886 when he moved to the middle of the same block. For six years he conducted a thriving trade and his store became well-known as "The Blue Front Cobbler Shop."

In 1892 he and his brother, John, formed a partnership and opened a business at 112 W. Center St. where Tom made the shoes and John waited on the customers.

The clientele grew rapidly and it soon became impossible for Tom to keep up with the demand with his custom made footwear, so the store added factory-made shoes to their line. They chose the well-known W. L. Douglas "Walk Over" brand, which became the bulk of their trade, but Tom still built his custom made shoes for particular customers who wanted to wear the Hornsby brand.

In 1907 Tom opened another store in Tamaqua and placed is son, John, in charge. In 1918 the size of the Mahanoy City store was doubled through the purchase of the adjoining Ford property. Shortly afterward, brother John decided to retire and moved to Philadelphia after selling his interest to Tom.

Today, the address as 112 W. Centre where Tom conducted his business is vacant, last having served as the residence of Mary O'Brien and her brother, Joe, now of 224 W. Mahanoy St.

The little cobbler shops where he began his trade on West Pine street also are long gone, as are the name of Hornsby and the fine craftsmanship that it represented.

Today's middle-aged generation can recall a time when Mahanoy City's business district had its share of stores specializing in shoes - names like Tregellas, Triangle, Endicott Johnson and Guzinsky's Factory Shoe Store. Folks then probably never thought there'd come a day when their town would have no such stores. How times change.

HAIR TONIC is another product that was once custom-made in Mahanoy City.

Norman A. Fisher, who resided in the 1300 block of East Mahanoy street, was the creator of "Fisher's Hair Tonic."

Norman was basically a barber, a trade he learned from his father, Ralph, who was one of the prominent tonsorial practitioners of his day. It was said that Ralph could give a customer a first class haircut and a shave in two minutes flat.

The father was born in Boston in 1863 and came to Mahanoy City several years later. He became a barber's apprentice as a boy and worked in the trade here, in Minersville and in Philadelphia until 1884, where he returned to Mahanoy City and opened a shop at 28 N. Main St. Later he moved to 48 N. Main St. and operated there until his death on Feb. 3, 1925.

Ralph Fisher was an institution in Mahanoy. He was one of those rare individuals, an ordinary citizen yet greatly admired and trusted by his fellow townspeople. For 27 years he served on borough council, which may be a record. He was known for his honesty, uprightness and forthrightness. They called him "War Horse Ike" because he never shied away from battle and his oft-professed belief was that "It's better for a town to be governed by good men than by good laws"

BOTH OF Ralph's boys became barbers. Earl had a shop in Delano and Norman had his in Mahanoy City.

Norman inherited not only his father's trade but also his forceful character. When he put his mind to something, nothing could turn him away. And he put his mind to Fisher's Hair Tonic.

At some point during the course of his barbering business on East Mahanoy street, Norman decided that he would not only remove hair with scissors and clippers, but would also reproduce hair with his own special concoction.

In March 1937, a Record-American staff member, either by chance or by design, strayed into Norman Fisher's barbershop and was introduced to the homemade hair tonic. The newsman reported:

"The other day we happened in at Norman Fisher's shop for a spring cleanup, so to speak - shave, haircut, massage - and he took time out to demonstrate the effectiveness of Fishers Hair Tonic. he displayed testimonials along with before and after photographs of the results attained.

"We can say that Mr. Fisher has a wonderful tonic and there no reason why he should not find a ready market. Of course, he is handicapped by way of money, but with good backing there is a mint in the business of this great hair restorer.

"This, together with the use of the X-arvac Hair Growing Machine and teh Fisher Tonic Rub, gives him a wonderful background for his work. A record kept by this aggressive barber shows that he has grown hair upon bald heads since the first of usage on Nov. 14, 1936, or 65 days of machine use.

"The Record-American is indeed pleased to tell the story of Norman Fisher and his wonderful tonic."

THE NEWSMAN may have been convinced about the efficacy of the Fisher method, but others weren't. Some meanie turned Normal in to the federal drug and cosmetic officials. Perhaps it was a jealous salesman for one of the name-brand hair tonics (Remember Jeris, Vitalis, Kreml, Fitch, Vaseline Creme?) who feared Fisher's Tonic might cut into their sales at the local barbershops.

So Norman was summoned before federal court in Washington to face the charges and he accepted the challenge. He proved to be a true sone of old Ralph, a veritable "War Horse Ike" in the face of the might federal government.

The story of what transpired in court found its way to Mahanoy City via Attorney John Noonan, a local boy who had a law practice in Philadelphia. John's brother, Attorney Tom Noonan of Mahanoy City, later passed it on to Puck Sullivan, the local raconteur, who provided the following account:

THE FEDERAL agents had taken samples of Fisher's Hair Tonic to be analyzed by chemists at the University of Pennsylvania laboratories. They reported that nothing in Fisher's Hair Tonic would induce hirsute growth where nature had removed it.

Given the opportunity to defend his product, Norman produced his testimonials and photographs of customers whose bald domes were covered with fuzz after using Fisher's Hair Tonic.

In summation, he told the judge: "Your honor, I don't care what the laboratory says; I don't care what these federal officials say; I don't care if they say it's horse--; I say my hair tonic will grow hair on a bald head!"

His honor was impressed. With a smile reminiscent of today's Judge Wapner on TV's People's Court, he declared:

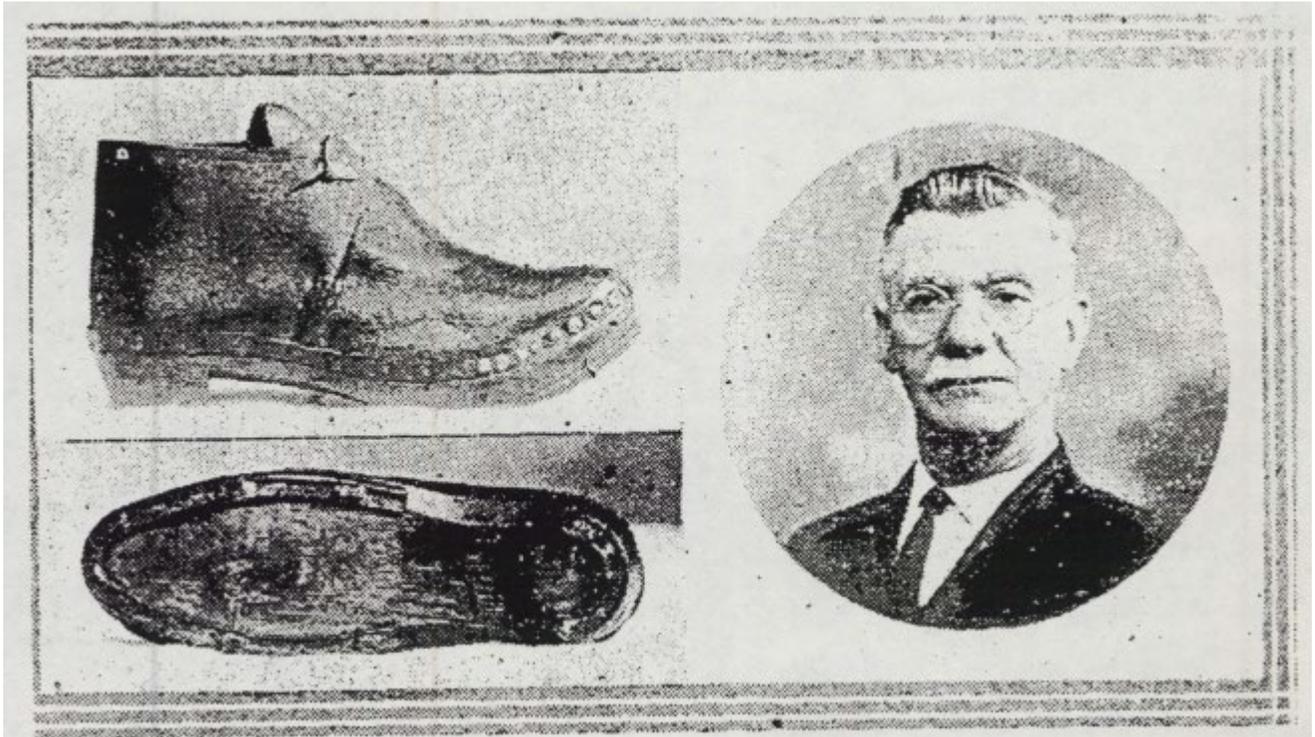
"Perhaps the government's evidence disputes Mr. Fisher's claims for his product, but he obviously believes in the restorative powers of hair tonic. So be it. Case dismissed."

THE TRIUMPHANT barber left the courtroom and went outside to catch a taxi to Union Station for the train ride back home. While Norman was discussing the outcome of the court case, the cabbie listened attentively, then took off his cap to reveal a bald head. Norman promptly sold him a bottle of Fisher's Hair Tonic.

Some time afterward, Puck recalls having been in Reimold's Cafe one evening when Norman came in. The bar talk turned to Fisher's Hair Tonic and some of the guys joshed him about it, but he reaffirmed his faith. He declared that if he had \$25,000 to pay for a full page ad in the New York Journal, he'd earn \$100,000 with ease.

For years thereafter, Norman was a familiar figure driving about Mahanoy City in his old var which advertised Fisher's Hair Tonic. He never was able to raise the financial backing that he was so sure would have been a springboard to fortune for himself and salvation for the world's baldies.

Norman is gone now and the formula for Fisher's Hair Tonic apparently went to the grave with him. Too bad, because the quest continues unabated for a solution to baldness. Frequently we read today where it's discovered that there really are curative powers to some of the old folk remedies that modern science tends to dismiss with disdain. Perhaps Fisher's Hair Tonic was among them. Perhaps Norman Fisher did stumble upon the magic formula longed for so ardently by baldies everywhere. We'll never know.



PIONEER COBBLER - Thomas Hornsby, above, was an immigrant shoemaker who turned out his own custom-made footwear in cobbler shops which he conducted in several Mahanoy City locations. He was only 12 years old when he made his first shoe (pictured), which was a dance clog with wooden soles and heels. At right is the little "Blue Front Cobbler Shop" that he conducted during the 1880s in the 400 block of West Pine street. Hornsby later moved to 112 West Centre street where he conducted the town's best known shoe business for half a century.

