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## *Recollections of a Pickett Industries Employee<sup>1</sup>*

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*Allan Boardman*

Pickett Industries is best known for making aluminum slide rules during the middle years of the twentieth century, although they also produced a number of other products during this period.

Below are some of my memories as an employee; as such, they do not represent a complete history, nor can there be absolute assurance of their accuracy. Memory does indeed play tricks.

During the three year period from the fall of 1956 to the fall of 1959, I worked for Pickett Industries in Alhambra, California. The company was housed in a cluster of quonset huts at 1109 Fremont, just across the street from the C. F. Braun Company. Pickett Industries was the manufacturing segment of Pickett and Eckel, Inc., originally a Chicago firm started by Ross Pickett, (and Arthur F. Eckel, whom I never met, nor do I know anything about). Some years before I joined them, Ross Pickett moved the company headquarters and his family to Alhambra. By 1957, he pretty much turned the company over to his son John, then in his thirties, I believe. John's right hand man was Milton Patrick who served as Vice President. Ross still came into the office quite regularly, but seemed to play no visible part in running the company.

In the 1950s, the main players in the slide rule business were K&E, Deitzgen, Post, and Pickett. Pickett, with sales of about 125,000 units annually, had about fifteen percent of the market at that time, but was the only manufacturer of all metal rules, all others being made of wood, plastic, or a combination of the two. The original Pickett rules, produced after, (and possibly during), WWII were made of magnesium, but the switch to aluminum came quickly when it became obvious that magnesium easily corrodes. Many early rules were replaced by the company free of charge.

The manufacturing process involved purchasing aluminum plates, about twelve inches square, from the mill. These plates were then accurately sized, drilled, painted, and coated on both sides with a photo-sensitive emulsion. Glass 'negatives' were prepared using a precision ruling engine, and the plates were exposed and developed, imparting a number of slide rule images. A highly durable clear coating was applied to protect the otherwise delicate rulings. All paint coats were baked in an oven. The finished plates were then slit to form the three parts of the rule's body, after which the tongue and groove details were broached and the outer edges machined. Additional details such as rounding the corners, (earlier models), and adding slots for the 'D' springs found under the end plates, were added. At this point, the body parts

were cleaned and sent to the assembly room where about fifteen workers riveted on the end plates, added the cursers, aligned the elements, inspected the finished rules, and packaged the final products.

The final inspection for quality control involved checking for line breaks which could have been introduced by a speck of dust in the photographic process, flaws in the paint, scratches or other defects. A single small but visible line break was cause for rejection. In addition, some production rules were taken off the line before or after packaging for an even more thorough inspection. Most of the rules in my small collection were these rules, part of the quality control process. The company was extremely careful not to ship rules with any kind of defect and was quick to replace any rule returned because of a fault. In quite a few cases, defective rules were replaced that were clearly damaged by the user, not the factory. I recall rules that were returned that were bent in half, rules that had been in a fire, etc. No matter, we sent out a brand new rule.

Some of the characters: John Pickett, president, was an extremely smart individual, but came off as a bit slick, a bit too clever. He was always on the lookout for some product that Pickett could make to add to the line. Many of these had nothing to do with slide rules, or even had any relationship to the engineering or scientific segment of the market. If it seemed useful, if the factory could make it, and if John could imagine a market, he was interested. He tried quite diligently to break into the hardware market. He was hard driving, but loved to play as well.

Milt Patrick, vice president, was even harder driving, harder working, and full of ideas. Milt was an engineer, coming from the aircraft industry. I met his brother, Loren, when I worked for a short time at North American Aviation, now Rockwell, in the early 1950s. Loren introduced me to Milt who offered me the job.

It was never clear what my job description really was, but it didn't seem to matter; after a stint at NAA, working in a smoke-filled, noisy engineering bull pen the size of a soccer field, the prospect of a small company environment seemed wonderful. As 'staff assistant', I spent a lot of time with John, Milt, and several others. I instituted improvements in the quality control processes, worked on design improvements, modernized packaging, helped put in place and monitor a program for improved manufacturing efficiency, developed new product ideas, gave class room demonstrations, worked trade shows, and so forth.

Ed Trautman, head of manufacturing, was a salty old character who knew everything there was to know about the operation. It was Ed who cut the master negatives,

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<sup>1</sup>The next article in this issue, beginning on page 10, has illustrations of many Pickett slide rules.

maintained the ruling engines, and ran the shop. He wasn't always the easiest person to get along with, but he really *was* the business.

'Cookie' was in charge of all the painting operations.

Duane and Fred ran the machine shop where prototypes were made and they also maintained the mills, punch presses, lathes, broaches, and other machine tools. They were old-time machinists who knew their trade.

In all, I would guess that there were about thirty or so people in the business, excluding the sales force. I have long since forgotten most of their names, but some of their faces are still in my memory.

In addition to the line of standard products, Pickett was well known for its special purpose rules. The manufacturing process leant itself to short run special rules. Once the master negative was prepared, the rest of the process was no different than for the standard line, and making the master was far less involved than it was with

engraved or stamped rules.

By 1959, the space business was beginning to take off, and this is what I had come to California to be part of, so I left Pickett and joined The Ramo-Wooldridge Corporation. I maintained contact with John, and even more so with Milt for years afterwards. Milt left Pickett a few years after I did and became the vice president for international sales with American Hospital Supply. I ran into Ed Trautman in the 1980s—still feisty. Milt died in the 1990s. I never learned John's fate. I think he moved the operation to Santa Barbara, and when the hand-held calculator business emerged, he closed down and moved his family farther north.

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Left: the Hart Adder of 1878, patent 199,289.

Right: the Hatfield Adder of 1854, patent 11,726.

Both of them are functional. The Hatfield is one of the earliest of the US small adders.