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SIDELIGHTS ON THE HISTORY OF THE BAKEWELL, PEARS & COMPANY FROM THE LETTERS OF THOMAS AND SARAH PEARS¹

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THE MATERIAL for this article was gathered from the extensive notes of my father, the late Dr. Thomas C. Pears, Jr. It includes transcriptions of early newspaper accounts of the glass industry, a history of the early attempts to make flint glass, and the letters of Thomas and Sarah Pears together with editorial comments. His intention was to write a definitive history of the glass industry in Pittsburgh, but the more urgent calls upon his time as the historian of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., made it necessary to reserve that project for the day of leisure that never came.

Mr. B. C. Bakewell has described Bakewell, Pears & Company as "a Great Institution in its time, but now numbered among the things of a forgotten past." That "forgotten past" is being reconstructed because of the interest of collectors of early American glass and because of the importance of this company as the first successful flint glass manufacturer in this country. It succeeded because the founder, Benjamin Bakewell, together with his associates overcame the numerous obstacles which confronted them. Two of the most serious problems were those of obtaining workmen and of creating a market for the finished product. The letters of Thomas and Sarah Pears throw some light on these two subjects.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century Thomas Pears was a clerk in the employ of Benjamin Bakewell's New York importing firm. In 1806

¹ Presented at a meeting of the Historical of Western Pennsylvania on October 28, 1947. Mr. Pears is a great-grandson of a member of the Bakewell-Pears firm.—Ed.

he married Miss Sarah Palmer, the daughter of Bakewell's sister, Mrs. Sarah Palmer, who was the widow of the late Rev. John Palmer, Unitarian divine of Birmingham, England, and intimate friend and associate of the famous Dr. Joseph Priestly. The Embargo of 1807 caused the failure of the importing business, which in turn led Bakewell to seek out another means of livelihood. This he found in Pittsburgh when, together with a Mr. Kinder and Benjamin Page, he acquired the defunct flint glass business of Robinson and Ensell in 1808. Despite numerous difficulties, which included their own lack of technical knowledge, Benjamin Bakewell and his son, Thomas, achieved early success, for seven years later the company showed a profit of \$14,000 on \$32,000 worth of business. This fact was recalled by Thomas Clinton Pears (a grandson of Thomas Pears), who had seen the old ledger.

It was a constant struggle to secure and maintain an adequate supply of workmen, because, according to Deming Jarvis, some lacked the necessary skill, were opposed to the instruction of apprentices, and were determined to limit the quantity of production by hours of labor. Moreover, the more competent started in business for themselves.

The main source of skilled labor was, of course, Europe. To obtain labor from across the sea was a very hazardous undertaking, for many countries imposed stiff penalties on those convicted of the crime of engaging workmen to come to America. Thus the work had to be carried on in the greatest secrecy. Thomas Bakewell went to England in 1815 and succeeded in bringing back a number of workers. In the next year, 1816, and again in 1818, Thomas Pears made trips abroad for the same purpose, and his letters to his wife, Sarah, tell some of the difficulties attendant upon this undertaking.

In Liverpool, Thomas Pears learned that his wife's cousin, Benjamin Bakewell, had had a very narrow escape from the English authorities, and says that if the latter had remained there any longer he would have been arrested, for Pears writes: "I know of nothing that could subject him to a Secretary of State warrant but the endeavor to get workmen."

This discovery had a salutary effect upon Thomas Pears for he proceeded to Paris on August 10, 1816, where he looked up certain men to whom he had letters of introduction. He visited a window glass factory and expressed surprise that the process seemed so simple. After a visit to a bottle works he writes: "I know of only one difficulty in the way

of getting these men, and that is the demand being very brisk at present for wine bottles, for the armies destroyed so many that it creates an extra demand. It is the only article which I have heard of as wanting, for in England and here trade is generally very dull. The English are very much hated here . . . ”

He continues his search for workers and writes on September 1 that he has “now in prospect 3 blowers and 2 garçons or waiters, who I believe will come with me, and a cutter. The last if I cannot arrange with at Mr. B’s prices I shall leave. I am sure that if Mr. B. were here he might by giving them some rich work as well as common to do, have all the glass cutters in Paris. For the Blowers, etc. we have met twice and another meeting is appointed for tomorrow. . . . This class of men are not very respectable, and they have plenty of work as the demand for bottles is very great. It is on this account most difficult to arrange with them, and their manner of working makes it difficult to see them, as their masters will not let any person call them from their work . . . ”

Further on in this same letter there is an account of the terms of contract: “This man could make no bargain because he would not engage for long enough time or rather in any other way than as they make contracts here, say for 3, 6, and 9 years, with the option of being free from his engagement at the end of the 1st, 2d, or 3rd periods, if he chose, which would be in fact but an engagement for 3 years—and his other demands were 800 francs upon the signature of the engagement, 3000 francs per annum, expenses of voyage paid, the time to commence as soon as the contract was signed, and board and lodgings, and if he chose to return at the end of the first period his passage paid back. I offered him on contract of 7 years, to pay his passage, the time to commence with the contract, and 3000 francs per annum or one sou per bottle, and if it was his fault that he could not blow as many bottles as here I should be at liberty to pay him by the piece,—if it was mine he should be assured of his 3000 francs per annum and instead of his 800 advance, to pay him 500 francs as bounty at the expiration of the first year, and to board and lodge him or rather to allow him what would be necessary to board him as a workman of that description commonly lives. . . . If I can make this arrangement it will be better than to give 1½ cents per bottle, and if I were to offer that from what I have seen I believe they would demand all the other things the same.”

His last letter on this trip was written upon his arrival back in New York, on October 29, 1816, and in it he tells why he did not succeed in bringing any men. "You will probable be a little surprised by receiving a letter from me at this place, as I expect that like Bony I bring the news of my own defeat—the principal (reason) was want of cash, those whom I saw demanding so much pin money as to leave me nothing to pay their passages I have bro't a glass cutter and a case of glass for your uncle"

Although this mission produced no workmen, it laid the groundwork for a second and successful trip to France made by Thomas Pears in 1818. This time the trip was on his own account for, in company with the Messrs. Bakewell he had erected a black bottle factory, suggested, no doubt, by the factories he saw in France. This new factory was erected on Water Street across from the Bakewell glassworks.

He sailed from New York and arrived in France on June 17, 1818. The letters to his wife tell a fragmentary story, but they give some insight into the difficulties encountered. He succeeds in engaging a Mr. Farge, a *contre maitre* at 8000 francs per year, as well as other glass workers. He also secures a supply of special clay for the furnaces. The end of this trip is recounted in a letter dated September 4, 1818: ". . . I shall be ready to sail by the 20th and a Capn. of my acquaintance has promised to sail as soon as I arrive with my people. . . . I have left orders to ship the clay on board of the vessel." Incidentally, he notes that the vessels are guaranteed to make the passage in 15 to 25 days. A brief note written on October 18 says: ". . . . I have got here 4 Blowers, 4 Garcons, 2 Gammains, and a director, and their passports have all passed the Police."

As has already been mentioned, the venture of inducing workmen to come to America was considered very hazardous and the penalty, if discovered, quite severe. However there is no reference in the letters to the means employed to avoid detection. Recently I was permitted to see several letters from Thomas and Sarah Pears belonging to Miss Henrietta Graybill, a great-granddaughter of his sister, Ann Pears Murphy, one of which was written to Ann in Gettysburg by Thomas from Pittsburgh, on January 18, 1819. In it are references to the difficulties attendant upon the starting of the ill-fated black bottle works and also to the fact that he must have resorted to the use of disguise while in France securing the necessary workmen. The letter reads in part as follows: "I succeeded in getting

the men I went for but now I have got them I cannot tell you how I shall get on with them. All I know about the Business is that it ought to succeed & that if I do not get a Fortune I shall have the satisfaction of working hard to lose one. As to Business it is dull enough & Money more scarce and Duns more plenty [sic] than ever. By the aid however of a black face, a Sailor Jacket or smock frock & a french Cap they have some trouble to find one out—If I could find some disguise that would enable me to find the Money I've lost I should wear it with more pleasure than I should put on a Glass house dress." While the simile is used in a humorous manner, there can be little doubt but that he refers to a definite experience while abroad.

The "Black Bottle" venture ended in failure, probably in the same year in which it was started, 1819. Perhaps that was an inauspicious year to begin a new enterprise, for that year the Second United States Bank almost went bankrupt, causing a panic which was the first general financial crisis in the United States. Established businesses had grown abnormally during the embargo and had then been suddenly exposed to foreign competition.

Thomas Pears returned to the employ of the Bakewell company in 1820 and remained there through 1822 at least. These years were also years of great economic distress, when manufacture, trade, and industry were all but prostrated. During this period he spent a great part of his time traveling up and down the Ohio River as a salesman for the glass-works and collecting past due accounts. He not only stopped at places on the river but went by horseback to many inland cities and towns, most of them in Kentucky.

The problem of selling the product of the glass house was closely related to the various means of transportation. As many of the materials needed for the production of glass had to be transported from the east, the early Pittsburgh manufacturers had a vital interest in all plans that affected roads and transportation from the seaboard to the western country and since the market which was exploited by the Bakewell, Pears & Company up to the time of the Civil War was almost exclusively the west and south, they had an equal interest in everything pertaining to the improvement of the western highways and other modes of transportation. The main artery was, of course, the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, and this accounted for the interest taken in the revolutionary development of steam navigation.

In an article treating of James Bryce, who later became a successful glass manufacturer, we read of his early apprenticeship at Bakewell's, which began about the year 1822, when he was ten years old. On his own authority, writing in later years, Bryce says of that time: "The establishment with which he was connected was at that time the only one of the kind west of Boston, except one small concern at Wellsburg that did not run more than half the time. Messrs. Bakewell, Page and Bakewell were always in operation. As the trade was not always one of certainty in those days, and sometimes it would be difficult to find a market for their wares, a flat boat would be loaded with goods and run down the river, where its cargo would be traded at the various settlements for such articles as people had for sale, which would be brought back to Pittsburgh and disposed of. Sometimes the wagon that had brought merchandise from Baltimore would be loaded with glassware on their return trip; but little was sent this way, as the freight charges were such that there was little or no money in it. These works contained one furnace, and employed 8 blowers, its specialty being flint glass and tableware, etc." [My father observes in his notes that this last statement is in error as a second furnace was erected in 1814.]

The early glass salesman, if we are to take Bakewell's as an example, was usually one of the proprietors or someone closely related to the firm. Trading down the Ohio and Mississippi rivers, with the bordering states of Ohio, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama and neighboring states, they were familiar with all the various species of river boats of those days,—keel boats, flat boats, Kentucky Arks, etc.

The best way to obtain an idea of the trials which confronted the early glass salesmen is through the intimate glimpses which the following letters from the above-mentioned Thomas to Sarah Pears afford, from which I will introduce various self-explanatory extracts at this point. Space does not permit the inclusion of the complete letters which reveal a man of great warmth of personality and affection.

SHIPPINGPORT, January 5, 1820

I wrote you a few lines from Cincinnati which I hope you received. Until then I had not time to write from any of the places we stopped at; and then I was so busy in getting the goods shipped for this place that I could not write more.

The passage down the river to Cincinnati was more agreeable than I had expected. We had plenty of water, and arrived in 15 days from Pittsburgh. Some part of the time

the weather was excessively cold, but I did not suffer by it except one evening when I went in the skiff about 14 miles ahead of the boat to see if I could sell anything at Portsmouth. I came here in the steam-boat, and it was well I did on account of forwarding the goods to Nashville, as the weather is now so extremely cold that if they had been delayed I doubt they would not have reached Nashville this winter. The snow is now six inches deep and still snowing, and I expect this will stop all steam-boats from getting up for some time. I am glad of it, for I have been able to sell scarcely anything here; but as glass is not very plentiful, if they do not arrive I hope to sell most of what is here shortly.

I intended to have left here to-morrow, but I have been disappointed by a horse I had purchased on credit falling lame, and I have now another to seek, the purchase of which will probably take nearly all the money I intended to have sent to Pittsburgh. They are contrary to custom, scarce and dear. I hope to leave here the latest on Tuesday for Limestone, Lexington, etc., and to have better success in selling than I have had here.

CINCINNATI, May 7, 1820

I knew you would hear that I had arrived at Wheeling, and as Mr. Bakewell wrote from Limestone, I did not feel much inclination to write until I knew what would be my destination. That I expected, after I had seen Mr. B would be considerably altered from what I expected at Pittsburgh, and now I am no further certain of it than that I shall leave here on Tuesday by water for Louisville, or commence my land journey thro' Lexington, etc. I presume that I shall go as far as St. Louis before I return.

When I first saw your uncle, the arrangement he proposed, and which I thought the best that could be adopted was that he should go to Nashville by land, collecting what he could by the way, whilst I proceeded by water to the same place, collecting and selling all I could on the road. From thence I was to go to St. Louis and collect what I could on my return. Since I have been here, however, he seems to wish to return home; and whether I go from here to the Falls by water or land depends on getting a boat to take the glass from here to Nashville. We have been in treaty for one these two days, and yesterday I began to load what glass was here in my boat. As we could not agree, to-morrow may perhaps render useless the labor. Exertion is necessary, but uncertainty seems to be the order of the day.

People may talk as they please of this Land of Promise, but as yet I have seen no place better than Pittsburgh. This of all others is at present the worst. They have two complaints here which I have never before found united—very little money and that very bad.

Mr. Bakewell . . . seems pleased that I am here. He believes that I may do something in the selling line at Nashville and he has not been there . . . It's quite useless travelling over the ground where he has been. The glass which he sold last fall and this spring is yet indisposed of, and money is so scarce people will not buy more.

SMITHLAND, KY., May 31, 1820

I have been here two days and very much occupied, as we have had much trouble about getting my load taken to Nashville. I have, however, got all but twenty-five boxes on board two keel boats, @65/100 per 100 lbs. and shall leave here in about an hour. . . . Tell your uncle that I have sold very little and collected as little; and that I shall write if possible before arriving at Nashville where I hope to be in fourteen days at farthest. I am afraid when there I cannot do much, but I shall do all in my power.

EDDYVILLE, KY., June 2, 1820

That you might not think that I had entirely forgotten Pittsburgh I wrote you a few lines from Smithland, mouth of Cumberland, which place I left on the 31st and arrived here yesterday, having left the boat and footed it here, supposing it possible to sell some trifle. But like most of my expectations it has ended in nothing. I believe there is not 50 \$ of glass in the place, and they are not very likely for the town to want much,—for it is like Smithland, a miserable hole. But if they wanted ever so much they have not the money to buy. I have sold but very little since leaving Pittsburgh. There are two or three more small places between here and Nashville where I shall stop, but I fear to little purpose.

It was fortunate that I engaged my freight at Shawnee, as had I waited till I got to the Mouth I believe I should have had more to pay, besides being longer delayed. There were two steam boats unloading when I arrived. Another came the next day, and two more were aground a little below. The navigation of the Ohio is now very difficult on account of always being too low for steam boats. They have rung the knell of Pittsburgh.

My loading is on board two keel boats, except twenty-five boxes which are coming on another. One passed here last evening, and I expect the other every minute. Thomas Carr is on the first, and I go up in the other, except when I get out to walk on, that if I sell anything they may not be detained. Small chance as there is of selling anything, there is still smaller of getting at what one wants, unless it should be perchance on deck or in the bow; and they really are afraid to stop lest the water should get so low that they cannot cross the shoals. If I should ever make another trading voyage my boat shall be very differently arranged. I have too many goods of one kind for such an undertaking, and on leaving Pittsburgh as now one could not get such things as were wanted. I hope to be in Nashville in ten or twelve days and to hear from you.

You cannot conceive the disagreeableness of a keel boat. No room to eat, drink or sleep but on deck, and of all the men I've ever seen boatmen are the worst. To say the best of it—it is purgatory.

NASHVILLE, June 12th

I got here last evening, having left the boat two days after writing the above, and the Cumberland so much raised, the boat I was on talked of stopping two days. I sold at Dover 50 \$ worth of glass, and bought a horse with some sort of accoutrements for 115 \$ worth more. Doing pretty well for such a rowdy place as that is. The horse is cheap for this part of the world, and I expect will perform his journey well. He is six years old and tolerably handsome, and travels well and has no faults that I know of, except that I was told after I bought him that he sometimes plays the devil and throws folks. I am not afraid, however, of his throwing me.

I sold about 120 \$ at Clarksville, which I expect to be obliged to send from here—cash on delivery. This is a more Christian like looking town than any I have seen lately, and I hope to sell something, but as this is Sunday and my goods are not yet arrived, I have no time to try.

Please ask your uncle if they have received my letter from Clarksville enclosing 91 \$, and tell him he has forgotten the list of accounts he settled in Kentucky, etc. As soon as

I know what can be done here I shall go to sell and collect in Alabama, etc. Ramsey has had no letter concerning Bedford, and I believe that B is in a bad way. If I can get any custom funds I shall remit next post about 50 \$ I believe.

COLUMBIA, TENN., June 25, 1820

I am well and in better hopes of selling something than when I wrote you from Nashville. Tho' it will be no great profit, yet I expect to be able to pick up a little cash. In Franklin and this place I have sold 240 \$ worth—150 for cash and the remainder 60 days (and several in both places say they are going to want some).

I received 113 \$ at Franklin, but I can get no exchanges except for silver, or I should send it on—70 \$ more promised at Franklin and 400 more at Nashville. Please to tell your uncle that if it's possible to get any paper I shall remit as fast as I get it; but that the silver I shall leave here till I come back. It will take me some time longer to return to Nashville than I expected; for to sell takes talking and time, but I am as sparing of either as possible. At Franklin it was St. John's Day, and here it's Court; and there is no hurrying them in purchasing, for money's so scarce they part with it reluctantly.

I leave here in the morning and hope to get to Pulaski tomorrow, but the roads are bad on account of the rain. I had hoped to have sold my horse at Nashville and bartered for another; but the man would only give 125 \$, and of the two I was offered, one was old and the owner asked 100 \$ in glass. I did not like the horse and the other was in the country and I could not see him for several days—price 125. So I kept my own—at least till I get back to Nashville.

NASHVILLE, July 29, 1820

I have nothing to say but that I am still here and doing very little—raffling, from which I hope and believed to have sold a good deal of the fine glass, comes on so slowly that I am doubtful of getting off anything. I still sell a little, yet should not have been here so long but for some accounts here that I only settled yesterday. And now I cannot exchange my money but at an enormous premium. I shall leave here in a day or two and return in five or six days, and if in that time I cannot raffle anything away, shall leave the glass and start homeward. . . . I hope to hear from you at Russellville. I sent them word to write to me there some time ago, and then to Shawnee and Louisville; and I need not now say anything of any other place. I expect it will be a month or three weeks before I get to Louisville.

NASHVILLE, September 10, 1820

I stayed here last week because I thought I could get a little money. . . . I enclose half notes to the amount of one hundred and thirty-seven dollars, which you will give your uncle, and tell him I leave here this morning. I shall be at Louisville in about two weeks, perhaps it may be later, as I really do not know how long it will take me on the route I shall go, but of which I have already sent you word. . . . Tell Palmer [their son, John Palmer Pears] that I have been to Palmyra—that I have seen a town of the same name as that where the Coffin of Mahomet is said to hang in the air, and that I have visited another celebrated for the loves of Dido and Eneas and from where Marius made a pathetic appeal to the people of Rome.

NASHVILLE, April 18, 1821

You want to know what I am doing. It is but little. I sell some glass and collect some debts and send the money to Pittsburgh as fast as I get it. I hope to sell or barter an good deal at Huntsville where I am going as soon as I can get Ramsay's account settled. But I do not think it right to go before then. That will be done to-morrow I hope, and after my return I shall not be long before I leave for home. . . . I have been well since I have been here, except for four or five days when I had such pain in my back I could scarcely move. It took me as I was packing a box of glass. It is now well.

Thomas Pears was "on the road" for the glass works from 1820 to 1822. The following two years, 1823 and 1824, he seems to have worked as a bookkeeper for the Bakewell Company. In the spring of 1825 he removed with his family to New Harmony,² Indiana, to participate in Robert Owens' famous experiment in communism. His correspondence with Benjamin Bakewell and others on this subject gives an authoritative account of the venture, as he was elected secretary of the meetings which formulated the permanent constitution of New Harmony. He returned with his family to Pittsburgh in 1826 and it is believed that he re-entered Mr. Bakewell's employ.

In 1832 he died at the age of forty-six, as the result of pneumonia contracted by moving back into his house too soon after having been driven out by the great flood of that year. His wife also died from the same cause, within a week of his death. Thus neither one lived to see the fruition of their years of work in the interest of the glass works, for in 1835 their son, John Palmer Pears, was made manager of the glass house, a position he continued to fill as actual manager or as a member of the firm charged with the practical oversight of the business. He was a member of the "great triumvirate" whose lives spanned the history of the firm and whose abilities were responsible for the great success achieved. Benjamin Bakewell, founder; Thomas Bakewell, who so capably helped his father and then served as senior partner from the time of his father's death in 1844 to his own death in 1866; and finally, John Palmer Pears who became a member of the firm in 1842 and served as senior partner from 1866 to his own death in 1874. These three men were more than any others responsible for the preeminent place that Bakewell, Pears & Company held in Pittsburgh industry and among the glass manufacturers of the nation. At his death John P. Pears was president of the National Association of Glass Manufacturers and was named by them "the oldest person in this country engaged in the business."

² *New Harmony*, edited by Thomas C. Pears, Jr. (Indiana Historical Society, 1933)