

# North Bridgton Man Among The Nation's Foremost Silversmiths

By FAUNCE PENDEXTER

Among the various arts and crafts practiced in these days, one which has become somewhat uncommon is that of the silversmith. The work of the silversmith combines both art and craftsmanship if his end product is to be regarded as worthy. Perhaps this is the reason why so relatively few individuals today follow in the American heritage established by the most silversmith of all—Paul Revere.

Of course Paul Revere is remembered best for his famous ride and his faithful service to the cause of the colonies during the Revolutionary War. But those who have seen examples of his work as a silversmith in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts and other museums know him as one of the finest American silversmiths of all time. It hardly takes a professional to recognize Revere's talent, for both his designs and his execution of silverware were flawless.

The coming of James B. Hamlin to Maine, a return to the State where his father had been born, has brought a foremost silversmith to the State. He has brought a home in North Bridgton, not far distant from the farm where he grew up as a boy, and plans to carry on his professional silversmith work from this location.

Why So Few?

Why are there so few silversmiths?

Possibly Mr. Hamlin gave the correct answer when the writer asked him this question. He commented that he believes the reason might be that it requires such a long time to learn.

He said with a smile "In fact I've been at it for 20 years and I'm still learning."

It is well to survey his background, however, before venturing an appraisal of his work or telling how he goes about it.

The Hamlin family was living at Thacker, West Virginia, when he was born. This was down in the famed country of the feuding Hatfields and McCoys. He said the latter rumblings of the most noted of all feuds were still being heard at this time. Indeed, it was one Dr. Hatfield, a son of notorious Devil Anse Hatfield, who brought James Hamlin into the world.

The Hamlins returned to North Bridgton when he was a little boy and he grew up on a farm there. The move was made in the year 1905. He attended grade school at North Bridgton and went on to graduate from Bridgton Academy.

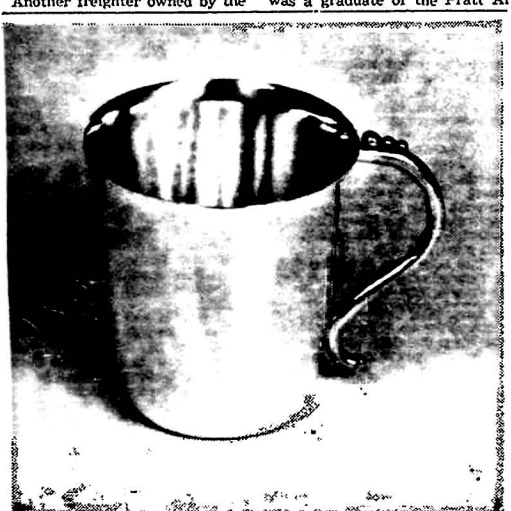
In the Navy

He served his country even as did Paul Revere, for he entered the Navy during World War I. Mr. Hamlin was on submarine patrol off the Atlantic coast, but he said he had no exciting incidents to relate, as no submarines were sighted.

Following his years in the Navy he entered Bates College. Finances rose up to plague him early in his junior year and he left college to earn some money as a bellhop. Later he returned, but once again had to leave in order to earn money and this was the last time. In all he completed 3 1/2 years at the college.

Apparently there was some sea-faring blood behind him, because he spent the summer after leaving Bates as a seaman aboard a freighter bound for South America. The vessel stopped at Buenos Aires, where it was supposed to pick up a cargo after delivering one destined for the great Argentine city.

Another freighter owned by the



**LOVELY BABY'S CUP**—Here is a handsomely designed cup from Mr. Hamlin's silversmith shop. The perfection of this cup is seen in its glowing sheen and also in its design. It takes patience and know how to create objects like this.

and the fact his mother lived in North Bridgton decided the Hamlins to move there.

He said the cost of materials involved makes it impossible to turn out the larger items in number. "I prefer to handle large pieces on order," he said. Smaller articles such as decorative ash trays, pickle forks and the like he makes in some quantity and hopes the coming summer will enable him to sell many articles right at the shop.

Incidentally the work of the silversmith extends beyond the use of silver only. He also works with copper, pewter, bronze and, in making certain items has to employ his knowledge of wood carving as well.

There are several types of silver work, or more accurately, metal work. Those he follows mostly include hand raising, forging and metal spinning.

The methods are quite different. In hand raising, for example, the silversmith starts with a flat sheet of metal and hammers it while on a T-shaped stake driven into a block of wood. After the metal has been raised to the desired shape a planishing hammer is used to take out the hand raising marks.

The planishing hammer in effect smooths out the marks and gives the metal a sort of sheen in the process. After planishing it is necessary to buff or polish the metal, sometimes utilizing several preparations to achieve the desired finish. Polishing is in itself a task requiring patience.

Sometimes instead of hand raising with a thin gauge of metal with the gauge kept constant, a heavier gauge is used and the metal stretched, with the gauge naturally diminishing the more the metal is stretched. This method was followed by Paul Revere.

Forging silver is different from hand raising. Here the metal is hammered on a flat metal block over a round stake. The hammer utilized and the way the metal is held determines the shape.

In the case of pewter, Mr. Hamlin pointed out, it is sometimes necessary to use molds to secure the desired shape.

Metal spinning might be termed the wholesale method for producing silver pieces. This is not hand work in the strict sense. A chuck or form is used to secure the shape wanted through the process of spinning. The chuck is attached to a woodworking type of machine that can be set at different speeds. As the chuck spins around a flat



**POLISHING AN ITEM**—Here the North Bridgton silversmith is seen at a job which requires considerable time. The buffing removes marks made during the spinning process. Several different compositions are used for polishing, depending upon the metal being handled.

same line reached there first, however, so his vessel was ordered to go in ballast through the Straits of Magellan to Tocopilla, Chile, where it was to put aboard a cargo of nitrate, which is known for its susceptibility to easy explosion.

Tricky Channel

Mr. Hamlin recalled the Straits of Magellan as a most forbidding place. The route followed was the so-called Smith's Channel. In order to take this short cut it was necessary to take aboard a pilot, as there were only a handful of men capable of navigating this tricky channel twisting its way beneath several thousand foot high land masses.

He recalled that in leaving Smith's Channel and making out into the Gulf of Penas a school of whales was sighted. He also remarked that Tocopilla was a remarkable place in that it had had no rain for 42 years at the time of his arrival.

The freighter made the return trip without incident and young Mr. Hamlin ventured into the less adventurous field of telephone work. He took a six months training course with the New York Telephone Co. and entered its traffic engineering division.

Then he made a move which he said was a definite mistake. Real estate was booming in the late 1920's and when he saw his roommate making money hand over fist he decided to go into the business of selling real estate. He hardly had gotten his feet under him at this new work when the depression struck. At this same time he married the former Willa B. Frazier of Tompkins, N. Y., then the librarian of the Brooklyn Children's Museum.

Mrs. Hamlin, he said, remained at the museum until its director retired. Then she entered the children's department of the Brooklyn Public Library, where she worked until two years ago.

Various Jobs

In telling of these first days of the depression, Mr. Hamlin said, "Times were really hard. I worked at about everything for several years. It so happened that back in 1926 or '27 I had a roommate who was a graduate of the Pratt Art

Institute. He had gotten me interested in sculpturing and I had done a bit, having entered the soap sculpture contest sponsored by Proctor & Gamble. I was sufficiently interested to study sculpturing at Cooper Union for two years, four nights a week."

Thus, it was only natural that during this period of various jobs he should decide to enroll in the Craft Students League sponsored by the Young Women's Christian Association upon finding out that men as well as women could take the courses offered.

He signed up for silversmithing and enameling, chiefly because of the caliber of the instructor, Lauritz C. Eichner, a Danish engineer and master craftsman.

Mr. Hamlin said that his sculpturing course at Cooper Union had included such allied fields as enameling, woodcarving, sketching, life drawing and ceramics. He had liked ceramics tremendously, but to him the work of a silversmith seemed to offer more of a challenge and to be more of a man's work.

He said he always had admired the work of the great silversmiths of the past. So he began studying with Eichner. His admiration for his teacher was unlimited. He said Eichner demanded that all the students give their best and was intolerant of slovenly work.

Fine Teacher

"But he was a wonderful teacher," he commented. "If you really would work you could learn tremendous amounts from him."

The North Bridgton man studied under Eichner for three years and then went to work for him at Eichner's silversmith studio in Bloomfield, N. J. Just how well this exacting teacher must have thought of him is illustrated by the fact there was only one other man working in the studio besides Hamlin.

The work at Eichner's proved fascinating. Mr. Hamlin said the projects which were undertaken varied greatly. He commented, "You never knew from one day to the next what you might be making and that is what I like, not to do the same thing over and over."

Among several of the projects the Eichner silversmiths were commissioned to do was one illustrating the evolution of lighting from the pine knot to gas fixtures for Westinghouse. Actually Eichner did more than silver work, for some of the projects called for working with other materials than metal, as did the Westinghouse job in which the pine knot started the depiction of lighting progress.

Time Recorders

The Elgin Watch Company had the Eichner organization portray the evolution of time recorders. This embraced showing how mankind told time from the earliest time time recorders up to the so-called Nuremberg egg, which was the immediate predecessor of the watch.

One of the most interesting tasks he was connected with, he went on, was working on models 1/5th in size of the original astronomical instruments designed by the great Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe. It was Tycho Brahe (1546-1601) who cast aside certain theories of Copernicus and established his own system of computation, elements of which are still used today.

The scale model instruments were exhibited during the World's Fair in New York and also were exhibited at the Franklin Institute in Philadelphia.

All in all, Mr. Hamlin regards his years with Eichner as most invaluable. He spent three years with his former instructor and probably would have been with him longer had it not been for the eruption of World War II.

The war prevented the use of metals for the type of work being done at Eichner's. So the Danish engineer went into the business of making the ordolites and gun sights. He wanted the North Bridgton man to stay with him, but Mr. Hamlin had a four-hour-a-day commuting problem. As long as the work was that of the silversmith and the craftsman the business of commuting did not overshadow the pleasure of the work. But when it came to making precision instruments in wholesale lots, he felt he might as well work nearer his own home.

Tire Gauge Company

Before he left Eichner's he had commenced a general engineering course at Pratt Institute. His next job was with A. Schrader & Son, makers of tire controls and



**PLANISHING IS IMPORTANT**—James B. Hamlin of North Bridgton has been a silversmith for some 20 years. Here he is pictured using a planishing hammer on one of his creations. The metal is held firmly against the T-stake and struck with the planishing hammer, which smooths out the finish from the hand raising process.

gauges. His department in engineering was involved with tool and gauge inspection, the principal task being that of checking to see that everything was made according to specifications.

He remained with this company for 11 years. In fact he only recently sent in his resignation, having been on leave for the past half year.

Mr. Hamlin not only worked for Schrader, but in 1944 he assumed the teaching duties in the silver department of the Craft Students League. He said that Eichner found himself too busy to continue teaching the course, and that he was asked to take over. He enjoyed teaching very much and continued as the head of the department until his removal to Maine.

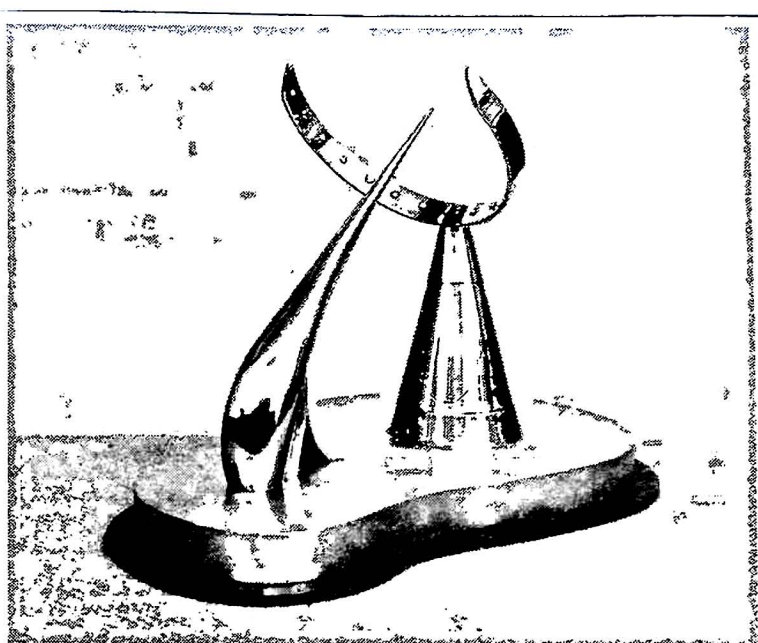
While in New York he became a member of the New York Society of Craftsmen. This was in 1939. He still is a member of that organization, and is a past president, having served in this capacity in 1947 and 1948. He has been associate editor, editor and now is a contributing editor to the organization's quarterly publication. The Society's 49th annual exhibition has just ended. It was held in the Barbizon Plaza Art Gallery, Barbizon Plaza Hotel, and several originally designed pieces by Mr. Hamlin were among the items to be seen there.

To Maine

The decision to come to Maine came about for several reasons. Mr. Hamlin felt it was time for him to establish his own shop,



**MODERNISTIC LAMP**—This lamp has a brass and bakelite base, with pewter on the sides of the brass upright. It was designed and made by Mr. Hamlin and was exhibited at the Barbizon-Plaza Art Gallery during the 48th annual show of the New York Society of Craftsmen in 1952.



**SOMETHING NEW IN SUN DIALS**—Here is another of the North Bridgton man's productions. This sun dial has a black bakelite and aluminum base; a pewter and brass gnomon; a brass and pewter cone, and silver figures on a brass time band.

piece of metal is pushed against it with a long bar furnishing a fulcrum.

End Result

When the spinning process is ended the silversmith has an ash tray or a candy dish or some other type of dish, according to the particular chuck used and the manner in which he has seen fit to shape the metal disc. As in hand raising the article has to be polished to remove all spinning marks. Sometimes too a spun item is planished.

It is important to note that Mr. Hamlin doesn't have a single planishing hammer, or only one hand raising hammer, or a single tool to do silver chasing. There are a great many types of tools in each category.

Asked if it didn't require considerable time to learn to use all these different tools, the North

Bridgton man declared this was of greatest importance. He said, "A silversmith must know his tools. If, for example, you select the wrong planishing hammer you can run the effect of the finished article. You have to choose the right tool and use the proper way all the way through, or you will not wind up with what you want."

In addition to silver work he also does enameling, a distinct art in itself.

His interest in silver work goes beyond commercialism. He spent countless hours designing and making a horseshoe crab pin. He did it because he found it a fascinating challenge to his talent.

As with the work of any fine craftsman, it must be seen to be fully appreciated.

So it is that Maine has added another fine craftsman to the many who reside in the state. James B. Hamlin of North Bridgton is among the foremost silversmiths in the United States today. He didn't venture any such opinion, for by nature he is modest, but the fact he was chosen to fashion replicas of Jacob Hurd salt cellars for the Metropolitan Museum of Fine Arts in New York City, and that he also has turned out other reproductions of rare art objects for the museum makes clear in what esteem he is held.

## Augusta Man

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and then burn up with fever. I've seen days in Java when it would be 120 in the shade. At Surabaya the ocean was filled with sharks who would swim right alongside the ship, waiting for us to dump off the refuse."

One of his first trips was on the Umbria, the Royal Mail Steamer, of the Cunard line. The Umbria, on which Roston, later captain of the Carpathia, was first officer, was the first vessel in the world to publish a daily news report.

"Must have been back in 1902 or '03," Bilpi Leonard. "We had two 'sparks' on the Umbria. They operated on the Morse Code, of course, but they would pick up world news from England until they were in mid-Atlantic, then pick it up from America. They would put out a printed booklet everyday for the passengers and it was quite a feature of the trip."

The prettiest port he thinks he was ever in was Buenos Aires although he admits that the harbor at Rio, crescent blue with the famed Sugar Loaf as a backdrop, is breathtaking.

"Following the sea is a wonderful life for a young fellow," Bilpi said. "I wouldn't trade it. Once we shipped back from the East with a cargo of monkeys and snakes. What happened? Nothing! We saw that? We didn't forget for a minute what we had on board."



**NOT AN INITIAL**—This handsome silver pin might pass for the letter "S," but the inspiration for it came about in rather humorous fashion. It so happened Mr. Hamlin noticed the unusual shape of a piece of coal slag that was in his plate. It served as the model for this pin.

motion, she turned again and we were safe. In all my years at sea, that was the outstanding scare I had, right down here in Portland harbor.

"It wasn't all gay at sea. There was the matter of food. In those days things were different. For the first three days we would have fresh bread and fresh vegetables. From then on we would have compressed vegetables and hard tack. The vegetables tasted like a mess of hay. We'd have potatoes with jackets, boiled, and salt pork. Once a week, for a treat, we'd have Plum Duff, sort of a hard cake pudding with a sauce. Daily we'd have lime juice and a lot of rum to prevent scurvy."

Settled in Maine

In 1913 Bill Leonard came to Maine to visit his brother and sister who had married and were making their home in this State. He liked Maine. He had always liked America from his very first visit to this country. So he decided to settle here.

He is married to an English girl and for years they have been well known as cooks in the Augusta area. Bill worked for years as cook with the State Highway Crew and for more than 20 years was at the YMCA in Augusta. He and his wife have worked at summer camps, including 10 summers at a big boys' camp on Lake Maranacook. On March 28th of this year Mr. and Mrs. Leonard catered for the Bates Manufacturing Company banquet at the Augusta YMCA.

Circulation Man

For the past five years Bill has been circulation man for the Sun Journal, covering Augusta, Hallowell, Gardiner, South Gardiner, Randolph, Farmingdale, Chelsea and West Gardiner. The boys who work under him swear by him. Bill Leonard just naturally likes youngsters and his quick wit keeps the boys on the jump.

"I know you," he'll tell a youngster applying for a job. "Your father was in the Swiss Navy with me. That right?" The dazzled youngster will look at him in awe. "Mean you don't study about the Swiss Navy in school?" Silvery-grin will cross the youngster's face. "Aw," he'll say. "I know now. There's no Swiss navy."

A small, wiry man, full of pep, Bill knows by name every lad who works for him. He also knows most of their worries, their ambitions and their plans. He listens to them, often gives them a helping hand.

"Nothing like kids," he says. "Can't help liking 'em. Can't help joining with 'em. I've got the best group in the world."

Everyone around Augusta returns Bill's friendliness. Everyone knows him. He likes Augusta because the people are so friendly, he claims, and because it's a good town to live in.

"But every chance I get," admits this scadog, "I head for the ocean. Nothing like a whiff of that good fresh salt air to make a fellow feel everything's all right with the world. Sea's in my blood I guess. That's why I like Maine. It's a good sea state."