

T H E B A R B E R T R A D E

I N

S E A T T L E

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FOREWORD

The beginnings of the barber trade are probably lost in antiquity. The Prophet Ezekiel, while languishing in captivity in Babylon in the sixth century B. C., refers to it indirectly in a parable thus: "And thou, son of man, take thee a sharp knife, take thee a barber's razor, and cause it to pass upon thine head and upon thy beard...." (Ezekiel 5:1).

A popular one-volume edition of the Arabian Nights devotes more than one-fifth of its four hundred thirty pages to the tale of the extraordinary barber and his six brothers.

Beaumarchais' two plays, *The Barber of Seville*, and *The Marriage of Figaro*, in turn inspired Paisiello and Rossini each to compose an opera by the name of *The Barber of Seville*, and Mozart to compose another called *The Marriage of Figaro*.

Even though the days of the barber-surgeon are long since past, may we not safely say that the barber's place in history is secure?

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
SIZE OF INDUSTRY	1
EXTENT OF UNIONIZATION (Including Discussion of Wage Scales)	2
HOURS OF WORK	7
APPRENTICESHIPS AND LICENSING	8
LEGAL HOLIDAYS	9
PRESENT AREAS OF CONTROVERSY	10
SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS	13
FOOTNOTE REFERENCES	16
APPENDIX	18

THE BARBER TRADE IN SEATTLE

Size of Industry. The 1930 census gives some specific data on the barber trade in the state of Washington and for selected cities in the state. The following data were compiled from this source as bearing on the present study:

Barbers, Hairdressers, and Manicurists
in the State and in Selected Cities¹

	Seattle	Spokane	Tacoma	Bellingham	Everett
Male	1129	423	313	80	77
Female	920	305	243	60	56

From the foregoing figures, if we assume that the males represent substantially the total number of barbers for the respective cities we can make some significant calculations. (The corresponding figures for the state as a whole are: male, 3846; female 2281).

Using the figures as shown we arrive at the following per capita figures: for the state as a whole, 182 males 10 years of age or over per barber; for Seattle, 143; for Spokane, 118; for Tacoma, 146; for Bellingham, 165; for Everett, 174. Whatever conditions (competition, degree of unionization, etc.) may be responsible for the diversity in number of prospective customers in the cities mentioned, it seems a safe generalization on the basis of the figures shown that haircutting is more in demand in the cities of the

state than in the smaller centers and rural areas.

Another way of showing this is by comparing the total number of barbers in the five largest cities of the state with the total number in the state. This comparison brings out the fact that the five cities, with 41.5% of the population, have 52.5% of the total number of barbers in the state.

Extent of Unionization. In a recent study of the barber trade a classification was made of sixty-six selected cities to show roughly the extent of unionization.² The tabulation was set up on the following basis on not in this form:

- 7 cities with "almost all union shops."
- 10 cities with "large proportion of union shops."
- 16 cities with "almost half union shops."
- 28 cities with "moderate prop. of union shops."
- 5 cities with "small proportion of union shops."

In the first group were Butte, Mont.; Des Moines, Iowa; Omaha, Nebr.; Peoria, Ill.; Rochester, N.Y.; Toledo, Ohio; Springfield, Mass. Seattle came in the second group having a "large proportion of union shops." Other cities in this group were: Cincinnati, Ohio; Duluth, Minn.; Kansas City, Mo.; Madison, Wis.; Milwaukee, Wis.; Portland, Ore.; Rock Island, Ill.; and San Francisco, Calif.

According to information provided by the secretary of the local union in Seattle, the trade is about 76% organized, there being approximately 850

barbers in the city, including employer barbers. Of this number about 650 are members of the union. This represents about 85% of the barbers of the white race in Seattle. (Negroes and orientals are excluded from membership in the union under international rules, but they may organize under federal charter and affiliate directly with the American Federation of Labor).³

On the basis of the figures given above, there are approximately 115 barbers of the white race who are not members of the union, and an additional 65 barbers of the negro or yellow races who are not eligible for membership in the same union with the white barbers.

It will be noted that on page 1 above, the figure given for the barber population of Seattle was 1129 as compared with the figure of 850 given by the union secretary. This discrepancy may not be as serious as it looks. In the first place, the census figure is for 1930, whereas the union figure is for 1940. In the second place there is no real way of determining from the census figures just what proportion of the men in the trade were barbers, how many were hairdressers, and how many were manicurists.

At this point it would be well to indicate that this is one trade in which proprietors may themselves become members of the union, under certain conditions.

Proprietors who are not employers may become full fledged members, while "beneficiary members who become employers may continue on a non-active basis."⁴

It has already been noted that the barber trade is relatively well organized in Seattle. When compared with the national average of about one in five barbers belonging to unions,⁵ Seattle's three out of four compares very favorably from the union point of view.

Nothing has been said as yet about the size or number of barber shops in the community. On the national scene in 1935 there were 125,455 shops, with 130,358 proprietors and firm members, and 91,424 employees.⁶ It will be noted that this is an unusual if not a unique situation, in which the proprietors actually outnumber the employees in the ratio of 13 to 9.

When questioned on the total number of shops and on the number of one man shops in Seattle, the secretary of the local declined to furnish the answer.⁷ We may rely upon our own observation to tell us that Seattle is no great exception to the national average. It must be apparent to anyone who gives the matter a second thought that the small shops with one or two barbers far outnumber the "Crystal Palaces" with their six, eight, or ten, or more chairs.

The Barber Shop Owners' Association, Incorporated, is similar to other trade associations in that it is

an organization of employers to further the ends of the trade in general and the employers in particular. It differs to some extent from other employers' associations in the fact that it plays a more passive role in labor negotiations than is experienced in many other trades.

There appears to be little incentive for the employers as a group to fight the unions, either in general or on specific issues, inasmuch as the employers generally stand to benefit by better conditions with regard to product prices. So long as the employers feel that they are able to pass on the burden of increased labor costs they are not likely to seriously oppose the attempts of barbers' unions at raising wage scales.

It is evident from the foregoing argument that both employers and employees have a direct interest in the price schedule of barber services. According to Mr. Whitman⁸ the labor cost in a barber shop stands almost constant at 65% of gross income regardless of the size of the shop or total amount of income. Even if this statement is only approximately true it makes quite clear the interest of the employed barber in the price of his product to the public.

From 1933 until November, 1940 the wage scale for journeyman barbers in Seattle has been a minimum

guaranty of \$21.00 per full time week plus 60% of gross receipts in excess of \$32.00. Thus if a barber were to take in \$50.00 in a week, his salary for the week would be \$31.80.

Early this fall the barbers' union in Seattle presented a new scale of wages as their demand from the union shops of the city. This proposal called for a minimum guaranty of \$25.00 per week plus 60% of gross receipts in excess of \$38.00.

The actual process employed in negotiation of an agreement is about as follows: the union prepares what it believes to be a workable scale (or one which can be adjusted to a workable basis) and submits its demand in the form of a letter to the employers' association. The master barbers have the choice of accepting the proposal, rejecting it outright, or submitting a counter-proposal. If the union officers encounter any determined opposition they can ask for a strike vote from the membership to strengthen their hand.

The final outcome of the recent negotiations in Seattle was a compromise. Agreement was not reached, however, without a strike vote being taken late in October. As finally agreed upon, the scale stands at \$23.00 weekly guaranty plus 66% of gross income in excess of \$35.00.

It will be noted that the figures arrived at

in the final settlement are different from those in the original request, the base pay being raised by half the amount originally asked, while the percentage on the excess over the base was raised from 60 to 66. This latter provision was introduced as a means of benefiting the employee who was regularly earning more than the new minimum.

Hours of Work. Hours are still fairly long in the barber trade. The eight hour day, Monday through Friday, is by no means universal in this country. Many cities have nine and ten hour days with longer Saturdays. According to information on file with the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the hours of work per full time week in Seattle are fifty.⁹ I am informed that the schedule calls for fifty hours but that actually the men are working forty eight.¹⁰

In Seattle the work day is from 9 a.m. until 6 p.m. with one hour for lunch. Saturday is the same as other week days. In talking with barbers generally, one reaches the conclusion that they are resigned to the fact of a longer work week than that prevailing in most organized trades. They apparently feel that the gaps during the day when there are no customers around are a normal part of their business life and hence they are not as bad off as might at first seem. These rest periods do undoubtedly compensate to some

extent for the longer day which they are required to put in.

That this is not entirely the case though, should be definitely pointed out. As one barber put the case to me:

"Well figure it out for yourself. The hours are 9 until 6, with one hour for lunch. In a one-man shop like this (and there are lots) you leave home anywhere from a half to three-quarters of an hour before opening time. Then at noon, unless you bring your lunch, you put a sign on the door saying 'back at such-and-such a time,' and run out to the nearest place for a bite of lunch. You feel guilty if you take anywhere near a full hour for lunch, even though we all realize that it would be better for us if we did. A half hour is more nearly what we actually take than an hour for lunch. There is always that feeling that maybe someone is waiting for a haircut and you don' want to lose the business.

"In the evening there is the problem of the customer who arrives at five minutes to six. He comes in during business hours and naturally is entitled to service. Sometimes there will be two or three customers in the shop after closing time. They have to be served and by the time you are through and out of the shop it is after seven o'clock. Then you drive home and have a late dinner and its after eight o'clock. What kind of family life can a fellow have when its like that? I have two kids and I hardly get to see them except on Sundays. When I stop to think about all these things sometimes I wonder - but I've been at this too long to change now."ll

Apprenticeships and Licensing. The law in Washington prohibits the employment of apprentices. I am assured by Mr. Whitman of the local union that this condition is as they wish it. The union barbers feel

that the apprentice system is just a means of providing cut-rate competition. They much prefer the present system whereby men come into the trade by way of examination before the state barber board.¹²

There is no time limit set by law or union regulation as to the amount of experience required before a prospective barber will be allowed to practice his trade in the state. Ability to pass the examination is all that is required aside from the certification fee of \$5.00 and the annual renewal fee of \$1.00. These fees rank with the lowest in the United States, five other states having a \$5.00 examination fee. The highest examination fee is that collected by the state of Arizona, namely \$35.00, while Alabama has the highest renewal fee, the amount being \$7.50. No state has a renewal fee lower than \$1.00.

Washington law is silent on the subject of age limits, but a majority of states have a provision of 18 years (34 states), while several others have varying limits higher or lower than this.¹³

Legal Holidays. The holidays recognized in Washington are New Year; Washington's Birthday; Memorial Day; Fourth of July; Thanksgiving and Christmas. With the exception of Washington's Birthday most other states recognize these as legal holidays.¹⁴

The local contract came up for renewal this year in time for the local union to take advantage of the President's proclamation making Armistice Day a legal holiday, so that day was added to the list locally, at least for this year.¹⁵

Present Areas of Controversy. Without any question, the biggest bone of contention in the local trade is the cut-rate shop. The problem is a persistent one and not getting any better from the point of view of the union or of the owners' association. The University district in Seattle is the despair of the union secretary. The union claims only 15% organization in this district as compared with 85% (of the white barbers) for the city as a whole. This district is the worst in the state from an organizational point of view.

Four years ago the union spent over a thousand dollars supporting pickets in front of the non-union shops in the University district. The results were entirely unsatisfactory - negligible in fact. It might almost be said that they were harmful to the union cause from the reaction shown by students, who supply the bulk of the trade for the cut-rate shops. The picket line seems to be something of a challenge to the student and it delights him to walk right by the picket into the shop of the "unfair" barber.¹⁶

Another approach to the solution of the price problem has now been undertaken. In a suit¹⁷ filed with the county clerk on the 16th of July, 1940, the Barber Shop Owners' Association, Inc., acting through one of its members, undertook to require the prosecuting attorney of King County to enforce the Unfair Practices Act of 1939 as against the barber trade.¹⁸

In his reply, the prosecutor stated that he was uncertain as to whether the act was intended to cover the barber trade. Following receipt of this reply the association (plaintiff) on Oct. 14, 1940 applied to the Superior Court for a declaratory judgment holding the barber trade to be within the scope and coverage of the act in question.

In the meantime the cut-rate barbers were not idle. On Oct. 7, 1940, Nick Pryst, G. S. Gossman, and eight others filed an "answer and complaint on intervention," declaring their interest in the litigation and asking the court to permit them to come into the case as additional defendants. This request was granted within a few days and they are now listed below the prosecuting attorney as "additional defendants" in the case cited.

These additional defendants presented, in addition to their complaint, two documents shown as Exhibit A and Exhibit B in the file. Exhibit A

purports to be a copy of a letter from the prosecuting attorney to the barber trade (addressed to "Dear Friend"). In this letter, which is dated April 25th, 1940, it is pointed out that the Unfair Practices Act makes it:

"unlawful for any person to sell any article, service or output of a service trade at less than the cost thereof to such vendor. Section I states that the cost shall include all overhead expenses and the cost of doing business.

"The Act also provides that where an industry or trade has an established cost survey, said survey shall be deemed competent evidence to be used in proving the cost of the person complained against."

The letter further states that the trade is responsible for its own policing and that violations are to be reported to the prosecutor by the trade.

Exhibit B is said to be a copy of a letter sent out by the Barber Shop Owners' Association, Inc. This letter (also addressed to "Dear Friend") calls attention to the provision of the Act regarding sale of articles or services below cost. The letter further states that after a complete cost study of the trade it was found "that the minimum cost of rendering the service of cutting hair is the sum of \$.50." In addition, the letter is a notice to the trade that after May 1, 1940 the Association intends to notify the prosecuting attorney of any violations of the act.

All of the additional defendants are in the business of cutting hair at the rate of twenty five cents

per haircut. They claim that many of their customers are unable to pay more than twenty five cents for a haircut for themselves or for their children. They plead that enforcement of the Unfair Practices Act against them is a violation of their rights under the fifth and fourteenth amendments to the Federal Constitution, and of certain provisions of the state Constitution.¹⁹

No decision has been reached on this case as yet. It is now in Judge Calvin S. Hall's court (Department 8, Superior Court, King County, Washington), and is set for trial early in January, 1941.

Summary and Conclusions. We have seen that the barber trade is an important one judging by the number of persons engaged in earning a livelihood by this means. The trade is relatively well organized in Seattle, but there are problems yet in this connection, such as hours of work, apprenticeships, and price cutting by unorganized barbers.

It could probably be well argued that as a matter of public policy it would be better for the barbers to work a somewhat shorter week. Confinement is a very numbing process even when unaccompanied by heavy physical exertion. One might almost say, especially when not accompanied by a fair amount of physical exertion. People would somehow manage to get just as many haircuts

if the barber's day were shortened.

The apprenticeship problem does not seem to me to be too well handled. As indicated earlier in the paper, apprenticeships as such are illegal in Washington. This does not quite cover the problem. It takes several years (if one can believe the word of some of the better barbers - plus his own personal experience with some of the more inept members of the craft) for a barber to become a thoroughly skilled operator.

It appears fairly evident that the apprenticeship problem is closely related to the problem of price cutting. An attempt is made to meet the apprenticeship problem by means of the barber school requirements. There are two such schools in Seattle and at least two others in the state, one in Aberdeen and one in Spokane. The student pays from \$75.00 to \$150.00 for his course, apparently depending on what the traffic will bear, and is required to put in 2,000 hours, which is considered the equivalent of one year's working time.²⁰

After six months a student is permitted to attend what is called an advanced school where the public is charged 15¢ for haircuts and 10¢ for shaves. These are the schools which arouse the wrath of union barbers when the question of schools is discussed. They are looked upon by these men as legalized cut-rate shops.

Granted that all of the men who are cutting prices

in the barber trade have a right to try to earn a living, and granted further that the mere presence of a union shop card in a barber shop does not guarantee a good haircut, still it cannot be for the public good to have a large number of men earning a mere subsistence wage which at the same time tends to undermine whatever standards the trade attempts to set up.

It appears then, that the major problems confronting the barber trade are problems which its members have in common with other trades. Overcrowding of the trade develops, with consequent attempts on the part of the unions to restrict membership and entrance to the trade. Attempts at controlling the price through legal action is only another symptom of the same disease.

Grave questions of social policy appear as we probe these problems for an attempt at clearer understanding. If knowledge is power, then let us have a great deal more knowledge of our social problems in order that we may have the power to deal with them intelligently.

Footnote References

¹Fifteenth Census of the United States, 1930, Population Vol. IV., Table 4, p. 1700 and Table 5, p. 1702.

²Don Q. Crowther, "Working Conditions and Wages in Union Barber Shops, 1938," Monthly Labor Review, June, 1939, p. 1288.

³Mr. Charles Whitman, Secretary of Local #195, Journeymen Barbers' International Union of America, Arcade Bldg., Seattle. Interview Oct. 26, 1940.

⁴Handbook of American Trade Unions, 1936 ed., Bulletin #618. U. S. Dep't of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, p. 324.

⁵Don Q. Crowther, op. cit., p. 1287.

⁶Ibid., p. 1287.

⁷Charles Whitman, Supra, interview Dec. 3, 1940.

⁸Charles Whitman, interview Oct. 26, 1940.

⁹Don Q. Crowther, op. cit., p. 1291.

¹⁰Charles Whitman, interview Oct. 26, 1940.

¹¹Off-the-record interview with a personal acquaintance of long standing. This man is a high grade barber and well respected among his friends and clientele. It perhaps should be pointed out that he is not the proprietor even though he is the only one employed in the shop. The shop is owned by the establishment in which it is situated and the barber works on a straight commission which nets him considerably more than even the new union scale.

¹²Charles Whitman, interview Dec. 3, 1940.

¹³Don Q. Crowther, op. cit., p. 1296.

¹⁴Ibid., p. 1291.

¹⁵Jack Halbakken, proprietor, University Barber Shop, 4507 University Way, Seattle.

¹⁶The factual data in this and the preceding paragraph obtained from Mr. Charles Whitman.

¹⁷ Arthur Tweeten, plaintiff vs. B. Gray Warner as Prosecuting Attorney for King County. Case #321469. Except as otherwise indicated by appropriate reference, all facts bearing on this case are contained in the file on this case.

¹⁸ Ch. 221, Session Laws of 1939, (Rem. Rev. Statutes, Sections 5854-21 to 5854-36, Supp.).

¹⁹ The Unfair Practices Act has previously been declared constitutional by the State Supreme Court, 104 Washington Decisions, p. 202.

²⁰ Jack Halbakken, Supra.

WAGES AND HOURS SCHEDULE FOR THE BARBER TRADE IN FOUR
WASHINGTON CITIES - AND NATIONAL AVERAGES - 1938*

WAGES			
City	Guaranty per full time week	% of gross receipts in addition to guaranty	% of gross receipts
Seattle	\$21	60 over \$32	--
Spokane	\$18	-----	65
Tacoma	\$18	65 over \$26	--
Aberdeen	75% of gross up to \$35. If gross exceeds \$35 barber gets \$25 plus 60% of excess.		
National Avg.			
Range	\$10 - \$30	-----	60 - 75
Most Common	\$20 - \$25	-----	65 - 70

HOURS			
City	Mon. - Fri.	Saturday	Full Time Week
Seattle	8	10	50
Spokane	9	9	54
Tacoma	8	10	50
Aberdeen	8	8½	48½
Nat'l Av.	8 - 10	--	50 - 60

*Source: Don Q. Crowther, "Working Conditions and Wages in Union Barber Shops, 1938." Monthly Labor Review, June 1939, pp. 1291 and 1295.