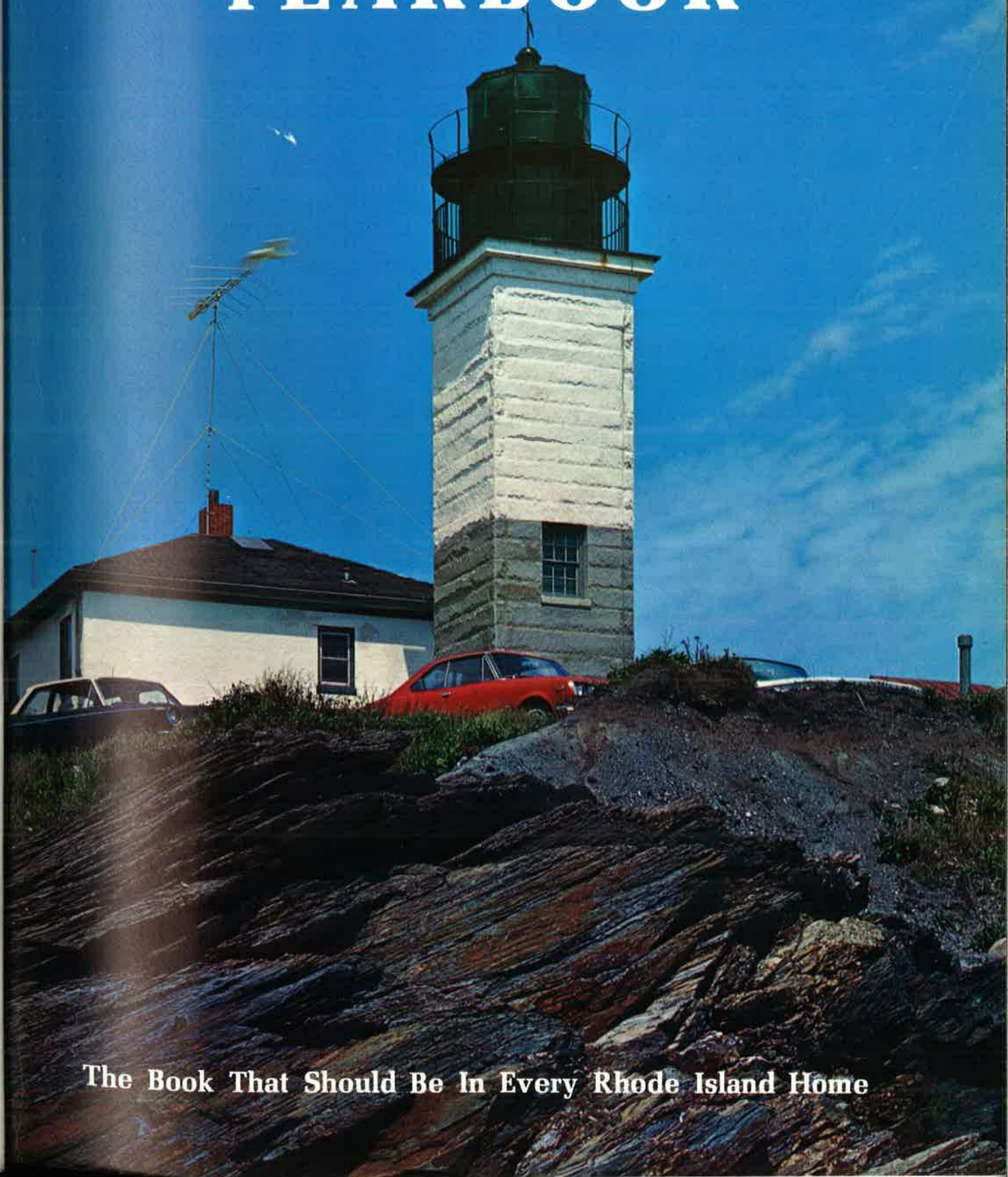


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RHODE ISLAND YEARBOOK



The Book That Should Be In Every Rhode Island Home

History of the Rhode Island Jewelry and Silverware Industry

BY GEORGE R. FRANKOVICH

EARLY history of Rhode Island indicates that, as a result of the 1685 banishment from Europe, a number of Huguenots emigrated to New England. Some of these settled in Warwick and Newport, Rhode Island, and in Boston, Massachusetts. Several were experienced journeymen in pewter and silver. Paul Revere's forebears were part of this saga. While wooden eating utensils were the mode of the day, pewter pieces, as goblets, bowls, and tankards, were highly prized, and many of these early silversmiths from abroad worked in pewter, a metal consisting mostly of tin with some copper and antimony added.

By 1750, although New York, Boston, and Philadelphia were the pewter centers of the colonies, many prized pewter items were made in Providence, in Kingston, and in Newport. Gresham Jones was one of the outstanding pewter craftsmen of Rhode Island, as were William Billings, Samuel Hamlin, Richard Lee and, later, William Calder. Newport had Daniel Meldil as its principal craftsman. Most of these worked with both pewter and silver. A Samuel Casey in 1750, of Kingston, Rhode Island, was even more versatile. He is said to have mingled honest silversmithing with counterfeiting. He was tried for this offense, convicted, and sentenced to be hanged. On the eve of the execution, however, he was freed by some local colonists, made his escape, and was never heard from thereafter.

In these early colonial times, there was little time or money for items of pure adornment. The early colonists were severe in their attire and their living habits. In spite of this, the men clung tenaciously to the habit of wearing great silver buckles on their belts and on their shoes.

The women contented themselves with simple wedding rings and brooches.

In 1788 a Seril Dodge set up a shop two doors north of the Baptist Meeting House on North Main Street making shoe buckles of silver. The real founding of the jewelry industry, however, in Rhode Island was left to his brother, Nehemiah Dodge, who may well be considered the pioneer of the manufacturing jewelry and silverware industry of this state.

After learning his trade from a jeweler in Norwich, Connecticut, he opened a shop on North Main Street in 1794 and announced himself as a "goldsmith and jeweler, clock and watchmaker." It was not unusual at this time for a "jeweler" to also engage himself in the art of gun and locksmithing. Most jewelry at that time was made in 18 karat gold but Dodge, through a bit of alchemy he developed, learned to turn out an acceptable product of gold jewelry of less than 18 karats and was able to undersell all competition. He made gold necklaces, knobs, and twists, gold rings and miniature cases. His products, because of price, sold readily for a period of time — until a number of manufacturers in Attleboro found out about his process and began to compete with him.

In 1805 four others, John C. Jenks, Ezekiel Burr, and Pitman and Dorrance, were recorded as manufacturing jewelry in the city of Providence. These four shops then operated with thirty workers. Their products were mainly breast pins, ear drops, watch keys, and similar articles. By 1810 Providence jewelry manufacturers employed 100 workers and turned out \$100,000 of product.

In 1813 Jabez Gorham, after serving a seven-year

MADE BY THE VARIOUS PARTNERSHIPS THAT PRECEDED THE INCORPORATION OF GORHAM MANUFACTURING COMPANY — IN 1865

to 1837 Gorham and Webster

1841 to 1850 J. Gorham and Son

1857 to 1865 Gorham and Company

1837 to 1841 Gorham, Webster and Pierce

1850 to 1857 Gorham and Thurber



Silverware produced by "Gorham" from 1831 thru 1865



Jabez Gorham
Founder of the Gorham company

apprenticeship with Dodge, started his company with four others, manufacturing jewelry at the corner of North Main and Steeple Streets. In 1831 a silversmith from Boston, Henry L. Webster, joined the company with Mr. Gorham. They began the manufacture of silver spoons. One of the innovations of the Gorham Company was an arrangement of shafting and beveled gears that assisted in doing some of the former manual labor. The power for this device was furnished by a horse, which was driven around in a circle in the same fashion as in grinding apples in the old-fashioned cider mills. The horse furnished sufficient power to run the rolls and the polishing machines. The "hands" of the Gorham Company were anxious to get all the work done that they could while the horse was available, for Mr. Gorham or members of his household might desire to go riding at almost any time. The machines would then have to be turned by manpower or the factory would have to shut down.

By 1850 John Gorham, the son of the founder, introduced another "first" in the industry — power by steam engine. He incorporated the company in 1865 as Gorham Manufacturing Company and began building a plant at the present location in 1890.

The period until 1857 was generally a prosperous one for the jewelry and silverware business. Men who had completed their apprenticeship and had good artistic taste were able to set themselves up in their own business. A partnership was often formed; one man would manage the shop doing much of the work by himself while his partner would sell the goods, keep the books, and do the shipping. New York was a popular market and the "outside" man would make a trip there two or three times a year by horseback or packet boat. Some even ventured as far as Philadelphia, Washington, D. C., and New Orleans to sell the highly competitive lower karat jewelry of Rhode Island.

No mechanical industry paid as high wages as did jewelry during this period. Five dollars a day for a skilled workman was not unusual and some, who worked by piecework, made as much as \$10.00. Jewelry workers

were, as a rule, free with their money and, therefore, quite popular in the community.

In 1846, Thomas Lowe, a native of Birmingham, England, came to Providence bringing with him a new method of making rolled plate by "sweating" a thin sheet of gold on base metal and then rolling the ingot into thin sheets. This was a much more simple and economical method than the crude soldering methods that were then in use for making bi-metal materials. It produced another revolution in the business and again permitted the introduction of even less expensive jewelry.

The Civil War caused a number of failures in the industry. The number of firms in Providence declined from 86 to 52 by 1864. Some, however, had large stocks of gold on hand when the war began and reaped a good harvest because of this inventory. Others turned to making belt buckles, brass buttons, and medals and badges for the Army.

After the war, the industry prospered until the panic of 1873. It rebounded from this panic rather quickly, however, and by 1875 there were 133 shops in Providence employing 2667 workers. Wages at that time were still considered rather good for most industry in the area. Males under fifteen years of age were earning 73¢ a day and over fifteen \$2.63. Females under fifteen years of age were earning 56¢ a day and \$1.13 a day if they were over fifteen. While these wages did not compare with those of skilled craftsmen, they were considered substantially better than those in the other industries of the area.

Some of the plants that are still in existence in 1970, that were formed during this period, include George H. Fuller, formed in 1858, P. A. Linton Company — 1857, Irons and Russell — 1861, B. A. Ballou and Company — 1868, Clark and Coombs — 1872.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the phasing out of the jewelry craftsman had begun. The advent of simple powered machinery encouraged the development of production specialties. While there were many shops making finished jewelry and silverware in the area, there were also recorded in the 1899 Census, manufacturers of jewelry findings (unfinished parts of jewelry), refiners, and job shops specializing in electroplating, enameling, engraving, chasing, die sinking and lapidary work. Toolmakers, die cutters and machine operators began replacing the all around jeweler. The early beginnings of true mass production of jewelry was well underway.

By 1905, Gorham alone had 1978 employees and, in addition to their silverware business, was prominent in the casting of bronze statues of Civil War heroes for various parks in the country, as well as for making heirloom silver pieces for exhibitions that were held in various parts of the world.

Continued

Inroads by imported jewelry from various parts of Europe were again being felt by the Providence manufacturers. It was at this time that they formed the New England Manufacturing Jewelers and Silversmiths Association, whose first purpose was to minimize this foreign competition.

In 1910 another "first" in jewelry making was born in Providence. The George F. Berkander Company, still in existence, started the manufacture of various items of celluloid jewelry. George Berkander was formerly a worker in the Gorham Company plant. He conceived the idea of using celluloid for practically every variety of jewelry, buttons, and articles of feminine adornment.

B. A. Ballou Company introduced a different series of, until then unheard of, innovations just before the turn of the century. It was probably the first manufacturing jeweler to grant a half-day holiday on Saturday, and to reduce the work week to 48 hours. It provided a large recreation room where its employees were served free coffee during the noon hour. Following the lunch, the young people would dance until it was time to resume work. Once a month they had an entertainment and dance and provided their own performers. Rest periods were provided in the middle of the morning and afternoon, and there was a rest room in charge of a trained nurse who attended emergency cases. Clinics were held at stated periods. The corporation maintained life insurance at its own expense for the benefit of industrial employees and provided a pension system. B. A.

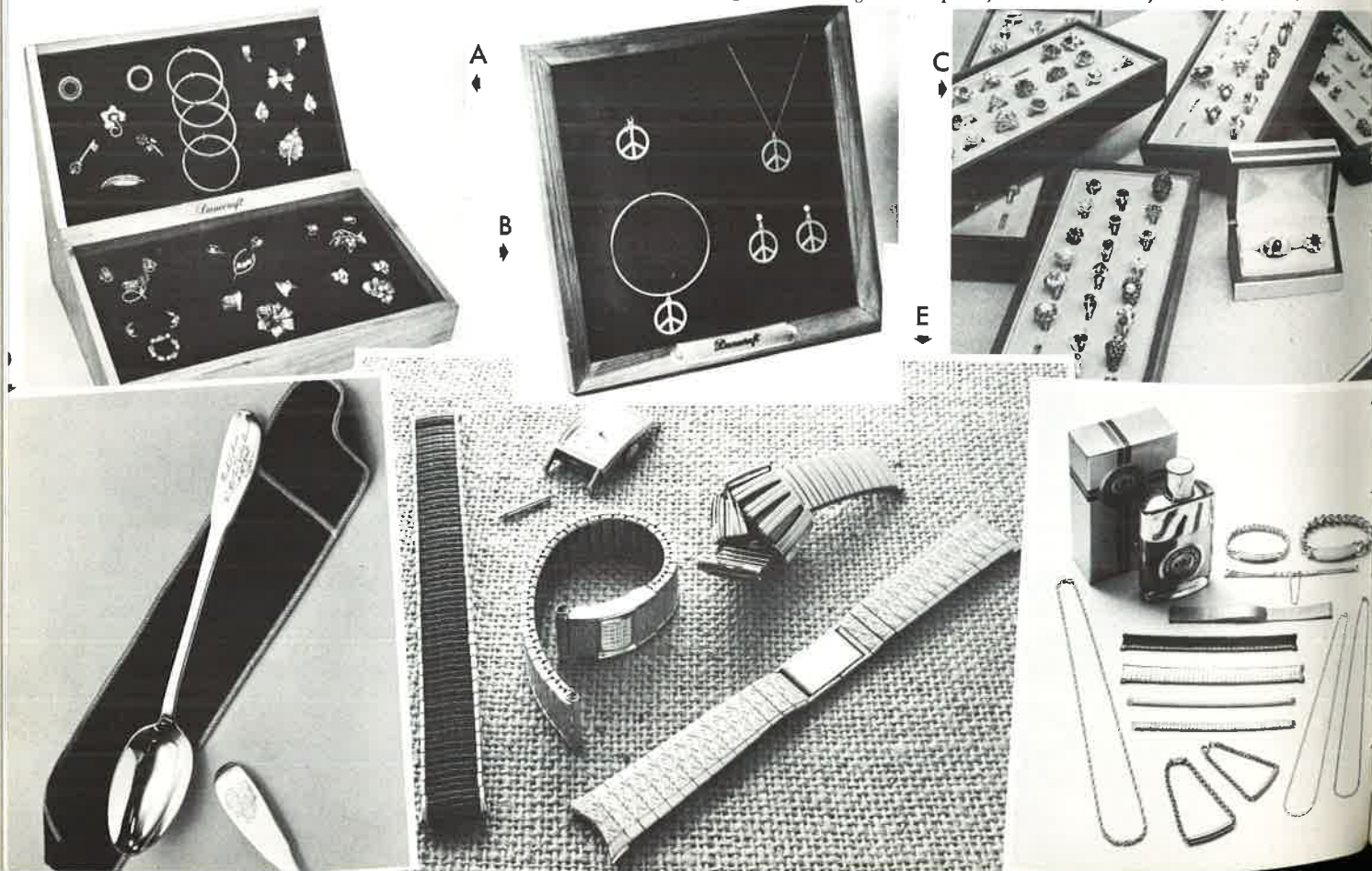
Ballou, too, was one of the first in Rhode Island to go into the export of jewelry which it started in 1913.

Because of the nature of its product, the jewelry industry has always had a difficult time during periods of national emergency. During World War I, it was plagued by shortages of materials and supplies and its products were subjected to a retail excise tax. Because of the World War I economic boom and the flexibility within the industry that permitted it to change to precious metals in lieu of the baser materials used prior to the war that were now in a strategic category, the industry weathered World War I. This was in spite of the fact that few manufacturers produced any war products except military insignia, medals, and buckles.

The trench warfare of World War I brought in a new jewelry product — the wristwatch. As metals and materials became available after the "Great War," the Rhode Island and Massachusetts industries developed metal watch attachments to replace the leather straps that held these watches to the wrist; and thus a new branch of the industry developed in New England.

The depression in the early thirties severely affected jewelry and silverware; mass layoffs occurred; marginal firms floundered. It was only in the least expensive price brackets that manufacturers could find a market for their product. Despite their background of individual initiative, high competitiveness and business laissez faire, surviving manufacturers rallied around the National Recovery Act in the hope of a return to normalcy. The

A - Costume Jewelry, B - Peace Symbols, C - Karat gold rings, D - Sterling silver spoon, E - Watch bands, F - Accessories.



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C



B



E

A - Setting diamonds by hand, B - Working on Karat gold ring,
C - Designing new item, D - Handcrafting new design, E - "Drop hammers" produce new design in quantity.

New England Manufacturing Jewelers and Silversmiths Association became the national Code Authority for the low, and medium priced jewelry industry. During its several years of life, the NRA served as a rallying point for the economically devastated industry.

The road back, to regain the stature and size the industry had before the depression, was difficult, but by 1939 it had generally been achieved, although many new names and many new faces were now in the industry.

Even before the United States entered World War II, the jewelry industry was selected amongst several other consumer industries for a special excise tax of 10% in the retail sale of its products. In 1941 metal restrictions, which extended to even small quantities of copper needed to alloy gold, posed the biggest threat. Many manufacturers attempted to obtain war work and "do their share." Except for the manufacturer of insignia and buckles, and rather simple parts, the jewelry industry at that stage of the war was not prepared for the requirements of precision wartime production. A combination of retail excise taxes, which were increased to 20% in 1942, severe OPA price and wage controls, and a virtual drying up of traditional base materials of copper, lead, tin, and nickel, nearly resulted in the closing of large segments of the industry.

Through The New England Manufacturing Jewelers & Silversmiths Association, the industry was finally able to buy quantities of silver from the Government which it had been acquiring since the twenties to subsidize the

silver miners of the country. These large quantities of silver were rationed to the manufacturing jewelry industry for the manufacture of jewelry and silverware. As the war progressed, the jewelry and silverware manufacturers were slowly but surely acquiring additional production and precision expertise. By the end of the war, 70% of the total industry's production was devoted to some form of war production. They became adept at small radar and radio parts, proximity fuses for mortars and artillery shells, and small precision assemblies of all types. Many of the precision techniques learned during this period stood the industry in good stead to meet the postwar requirements for diversification and later the somewhat less severe but, nonetheless, dislocating effects of the Korean War.

The surge of new companies just before the outbreak of World War II, the start of many new units during the war years in spite of the difficulties involved, the new manufacturing units started immediately after the cessation of hostilities, led the industry to double its size between the years of 1939 and 1947. The industry in Rhode Island followed suit. Some of the firms that started during this period, such as Anson Incorporated, have in a short span of two decades become one of the jewelry industry's largest firms. Costume jewelry, however, had a real surge and by 1947, Rhode Island was producing over 40% of all the costume jewelry produced in the country. It then employed 44% of those working in every segment of the jewelry industry. Although there were

only 17 silverware and plated ware manufacturers in Rhode Island at that time, they employed about 2200 people and had about 10% of the total silverware market.

The problems created by the Korean War were somewhat different from those of World War II. Strategic metals were curtailed but not as severely; war production was more limited and was on a highly competitive basis. Many jewelry plants could not meet competition from non-jewelry manufacturers for the more complicated precision requirements of more sophisticated weaponry. The answer of several large producers in Rhode Island was to set up completely separate engineering forces and production facilities. By this arrangement, they were successful in making high precision instruments such as rate of climb indicators for jet aircraft, and close tolerance proximity fuses for rockets and shells.

The '50s and early '60s saw a number of new and interesting developments in the industry. The traditional concept of selling through wholesalers was re-examined by many whose customers included a number whose meager capital prevented them from maintaining inventory; whose sales efforts were sporadic; and who relied unduly on the manufacturer to sell and ship products to the retail customer. It was during this period that a number of manufacturers, formerly dealing with wholesalers, turned to "direct" selling to the retailer.

Several of the larger manufacturers, during this period, for the first time in history, decided to advertise their products direct to the consumer. National advertising of jewelry arrived. Speidel Corporation was one of the pioneers in using television, as it spread from New York across the country, in merchandising the now famous Speidel watchbands.

Consumer newspaper, magazine, and radio advertising was adopted by several other companies with varying degrees of success.

It was an era of experimentation in production techniques as well; more sophisticated machinery was being purchased; mass production goals were raised by many companies. The need for more highly trained technicians became apparent. Classes were started for the entire New England area in jewelry toolmaking, electroplating, and sample making.

As domestic business became more competitive, and the arch foreign competitors of the pre-war American industry, Japan, Germany and Czechoslovakia, rebuilt from the devastation of World War II, foreign competition increased the pressure on the Rhode Island jewelry and silverware industry. Traditional channels to obtain relief before the Tariff Commission and the Committee for Reciprocity Information were attempted as they had been before World War II with some success. It became evident, however, that there was a new national view of

international trade. The mood of the world was toward freer trade.

The answer of the industry was twofold; manufacturers traveled to foreign jewelry manufacturing centers to have part of their production made by cheaper foreign labor. Others entered some of the great European fairs and each year several Rhode Islanders are prominent exhibitors at the Hanover, Germany fair showing Rhode Island jewelry and silverware products to the world market.

As the Rhode Island jewelry manufacturing industry concentrated during this post war period on costume jewelry with its inherent high fashion-fad factor, planning production, stocking inventory, and providing steady work to the employees became more and more difficult. A mistake in judging a fad's impact could easily be the ruination of a small, poorly capitalized firm. Some, therefore, sought a greater reliance on other products of a non-jewelry nature so that they could provide a steadier year-round employment base and could be less dependent on the whims of fad in fashion. Today jewelers in the area are making many types of electronic parts, shelves for supermarkets, automobile decorations, and one manufacturer, formerly closely allied to the jewelry industry, located in nearby Attleboro, Massachusetts is one of the principal suppliers of nuclear atomic fuel for submarines.

By 1922 Rhode Island became the most prominent single state in the United States in the manufacture of jewelry. It had about a third of the total market at that time. Although its ups and downs have been many, and the nature of the industry has swung toward the costume jewelry, rather than precious jewelry, it has retained and, in fact, somewhat increased its share of the national jewelry market. The various suppliers to the Rhode Island industry that are clustered around the finished goods manufacturers of this state now provide the major base of jewelry supplies, machinery, equipment and materials for manufacturers all over the country. No other section, including the heavily populated precious jewelry industry in downtown New York, provides the sweep of services to the manufacturer that is provided in Rhode Island. The dependence of the supply industry on the manufacturer, and each on the other, has solidified the industry geographically.

The late '60s were prosperous for many Rhode Island manufacturers of jewelry and silverware and a number have been acquired by conglomerates. The results of mergers, amalgamations, and these acquisitions by conglomerates on the industry are not yet discernible. It does not appear, however, that they will adversely affect the industry in Rhode Island but might, indeed, lend it a new stability and financial base which has often been inadequate.