



THE FINE POINTS

*Of many unique forms of barbed wire, only rare remnants remain.
Just like the history of the West, collectors of these miniature
metal sculptures are wrapped up in wire.*

BY TROY SMITH

Some people claim the winning of the American West was made possible by the repeating rifle and the six-shooter. Consequently, O.F. Winchester and Samuel Colt earned their places in history, along with gun-toting frontiersmen of Western lore. In fairness, however, a share of the credit goes to inventors like Joseph Glidden and their strings of steel. Regardless of how the West was won, it wasn't domesticated until it was wrapped in barbed wire.

Into the early years of this century, large parcels of the Plains remained in the public domain, unfettered by fences. From 1863, when the first homestead act went into effect, until the last vestiges of open range were allotted, "civilization" crept westward. Settlers brought the wire and fenced fields to delineate boundaries, but mostly to keep out the range cattlemen's stock. Then the cattlemen strung their own fences — mostly to keep out the sodbusters.

Disputes over land sometimes brought those famed firearms into use, and they certainly fueled demand for fencing supplies. Traditional rail fences were a near impossibility on the tree-scarce prairie, so wire became the material of choice. Equipped with barbs, it commanded more respect.

Nineteenth century entrepreneurs sought to fill the need — and their own pockets — by designing, manufacturing and selling barbed wire. The new industry was a cornucopia of creativity and some foolishness. An array of designs featured single- and multiple-strand styles sporting barbs that ranged from simple to bizarre, and from relatively humane to downright vicious.

The creativity of barbed wire designs is viewed as an art form by modern collectors like Jim Goedert of Kearney, Neb. Wrapped up in wire for more than 20 years, the retired college professor has one of the largest collections in the country. According to Goedert, the U.S. Patent Office has processed more than 500 patent applications for different designs, but more than 2,000 different types of barbed wire have been found.

“There were millions made in the barbed-wire business and much of it illegally,” explains Goedert. “For a period of years it was lucrative enough to rival the moonshine whiskey business. Plenty of shady characters manufactured wire in hideaway blacksmith shops and even on barges along the Mississippi and Missouri rivers.”

Floating production contributed to the variety of wire available, but even among manufacturers of patented designs it was a game of outdoing the competition. Wire makers tried to come up with something better or at least unique.

“They tried to make wire that was more or less severe than the competitors’. They used varied combinations of wire strands, barbs and even warning plates to make a fence more visible,” offers Goedert. “But most of the styles designed and produced ultimately failed in the marketplace, usually because



TROY SMITH PHOTO

Along with an extensive wire collection, Nebraskan Jim Goedert collects a variety of wire-related paraphernalia, including tools for splicing and stretching wire. Here he holds a rare sample of the ornate wire walking sticks that an old-time wire manufacturer distributed as a sales promotion gimmick.



Bill Thornton, Aurora, Colo., displays a collection of fencing tools and liniment bottles. Thornton has assembled what may be the world’s largest collection of wire and fencing tools.

they were too expensive to manufacture and too impractical to use.”

Joseph Glidden is considered the “father of barbed wire,” says Goedert, not because he was the first to build barbed barriers commercially, but because Glidden’s simple design was functional and inexpensive. With some modifications to his wife’s kitchen coffee grinder, Glidden fashioned a twisted double-strand wire with two-prong barbs — the same basic design used by wire manufacturers today.

The Illinois farmer’s 1874 patent was challenged by a neighbor, Jacob Haish, who came up with a very similar design at about the same time, but Glidden won the ensuing 10-year court battle.

Like many barbed-wire enthusiasts, Jim Goedert started his collection by gathering as many different types as possible, including the common wires made under patents held by Glidden and his eventual partners. Goedert later narrowed his focus toward the more rare and unusual designs. They illustrate the evolution of the industry.

“Many of the early wires were a single strand of wire, but some had three or four. A twisted double-strand wire was found to stretch better and stay tight longer. Ribbon styles were strips of sheet metal with sharp notches or barbs attached. In fact, most early designs required that the barbs be attached after the wire was strung, so there was a variety of tools made for fastening barbs to the wire,” Goedert adds.

Disputes over property boundaries, water access and rights-of-way may have encouraged the development of really severe and barbarous styles. Also aiding was the fact

that mostly wild, range-raised cattle had little respect for fences. Various sizes of barbs twisted around or into the wire might flaunt two, three or four sharpened points. Sheet metal barbs were made in geometric shapes or almost any shape capable of presenting a razor-like edge. There were five- and six-point stars, diamonds, spur rowels and even cast metallic barbs that resembled cockleburbs.

Trainloads of wire were shipped to the Plains, and it is believed that railroad companies also contributed to the diversity among wire designs. Back East, the “fence-in” concept was accepted, meaning stockmen were responsible for keeping their animals under control. On the open range of the West, a “fence-out” concept meant landowners, including railroads, had to fence property to keep out free-ranging livestock.

Some old manufacturers’ advertisements listed the availability of “railroad wire” for fencing track corridors. Legend says that railroad companies purchased distinctive wire for use along certain stretches of track — styles that were different from others available to the local public. It seems that some settlers thought it was more economical to “borrow” wire from along the track than to buy their own. A special kind of wire could be identified if it showed up in a farmer’s fence.

Economics won out in the development of the barbed-wire industry, but not before some manufacturers promoted a variety of styles that collectors now call “obvious” wire. Warning plates of sheet metal or blocks of wood were attached at regular intervals, “obviously” to make the fence more visible to livestock. Some designs offered a combination of doodads to enhance visibility



RON LARSEN PHOTOS

In 1881 Thomas Dodge, Worcester, Mass., patented this single-strand wire with a six-point sheet-metal barb. Scarce and sought-after, samples fetch \$125.



This 1882 split-ribbon variation by Illinois inventor Andrew Upham featured a twisted sheet-metal ribbon with two-point wire barbs set in slits that were cut in the ribbon. Its approximate value is \$20/collector sample.



Designed to be more visible to livestock, this two-strand twisted wire holds wood blocks with a two-point spike barb through each block. Collectors pay up to \$150 for samples of this wire, patented in 1884 by Arthur Hulbert of St. Louis, Mo.



A twisted two-strand wire with 10-point spur rowel barbs made of sheet metal was patented in 1887 by Chester Hodge of Beloit, Wis. Its approximate value is \$5.



This forerunner of the wire design commonly seen today was patented in 1874 by Joseph Glidden. With two twisted strands and two-point barbs around one strand, this design was declared the winner in the legal fight over barbed-wire patents. Today collectors value this wire at about 24¢/18-inch piece.

and barbs for animals that didn't pay attention. Either way, these styles were expensive to produce and difficult to use.

Practical for their intended purpose or not, rare and unusual styles are sought by collectors like Goedert and his barbed-wire buddy, Bill Thornton. After retiring from the military nearly 30 years ago, Thornton ranched in Colorado. There he found fences strung with types of wire that he hadn't seen since his Oklahoma childhood.

"I'd seen lots of old-time barbed wire in Oklahoma during the Depression, and I found some of the same kinds on the Colorado ranch — even some galvanized ribbon wire that had to be close to a hundred years old," shares Thornton. "In an arid, high-

elevation climate some of it was still good. I got to thinking that if we didn't preserve it, we were going to lose an important part of history."

Thornton joined a collectors' club, and the hobby mushroomed. Since he fully retired from gainful employment, Thornton has been driven by the quest for wire and fencing tools. He has assembled what may be the world's largest collection of the latter, including 120 panels, each 3 feet by 4 feet, mounted with samples of tools for transporting, stretching, splicing and attaching barbs to wire. He travels an average of 20,000 miles each year to barbed-wire shows and swap meets.

"Twenty-five years ago you could go out to a farmer's junk pile and turn up some

collectible wire or a tool, but that doesn't happen much anymore," adds Thornton. "There aren't many 'new finds' anymore. Old rascals like me have already found most of them, so we trade around among ourselves. There are some new people getting involved too."

To further the cause, Thornton has provided more than 200 samples of barbed wire to the National Cowboy Hall of Fame in Oklahoma City. He also promotes two museums devoted exclusively to barbed wire and related paraphernalia. One is the Devil's Rope Museum in McLean, Texas, and the other is the Barbed Wire Museum in La Crosse, Kan.

Thornton sits on the board of directors for the Kansas museum, and Jim Goedert serves as a director for both.

"Each museum houses extensive displays of wire and tools, but few dispute La Crosse's claim to being the Barbed Wire Capital of the World. That's where we hold our annual symposium — sort of a national collectors' convention," says Goedert.

Asked about the value of collectible barbed wire, Goedert says the value of a standard 18-inch sample can be priced anywhere from 25¢ to \$500. Naturally, value depends on the scarcity of the particular style.

"But only the rarest wires have that high-dollar tag," he adds. "Most samples trade for \$5 or less, so it's not such an expensive hobby to start. And once you start, it's pretty easy to get wrapped up in it."

