

The Henderson Quest – part 1 (Edward H. Cooley's collection found!)
By: Paul Nolan

I have always been fascinated by the stories of the old time whipmakers that I have read over the years in the Journal, with the pressure and cut throat competition necessary to survive in those days. The first Cecil Henderson whips that I had ever seen were the ones pictured in David Morgan's book "Whips and Whipmaking", and I was drawn to their beauty. Even more than the high plait count, I loved the look of them. The patterns were fancy, yet simple, giving them a very elegant look. Those pictures started me on a quest to learn all I could about the legendary whipmakers of the past, and get a chance to see their work in person, so I decided to start with Cecil Henderson, and the caption on those beautiful pictures stated, "Photo courtesy of E.H. Cooley".

My first step was to have a chat with David Morgan, to try to track down E.H. Cooley and get in contact with him. Mr. Morgan graciously spent hours on the phone with me discussing the Australian whipmakers of the past and their relations to each other, and really gave me a great foundation to start with, and lots of encouragement. He even went as far as to mail me photo copies of a couple of feature articles on Henderson from the 1950's that provided a wealth of information about Cecil Henderson and his family of whipmakers, and one of the articles included a couple of pictures of Cecil himself! When I asked him if he knew how to get in contact with Cooley or the whereabouts of his collection, he told me that he lost touch with him in the 1980's and at that time he was a very old man and had likely passed on since then. Regarding the whip collection, Mr. Morgan said that Cooley's children didn't share his fascination with whips, and they were likely sold in an estate auction for next to nothing, and were lost forever. From then on I had given up hope of ever getting a chance to see those whips in person, and I moved on to searching for other examples of Henderson's work.

Over the next 8 years or so I scoured all of the issues and bound journals of the Association looking for any tid-bits and mentions of Henderson. Talking to collectors and finding bits and pieces about him here and there. Along the way I ended up finding more than I thought I ever would, including letters from Cecil Henderson to Cooley from the 1950's (which will be displayed in upcoming articles), and as time goes on there has always been a little more and a little more.

A couple of years ago I decided to start sharing the information publicly that I had gathered on Henderson so far, and put up a section on my website. I had searched and searched the internet for any information on Henderson, and I was never able to find a single thing, so I figured perhaps there might be someone else out there looking for the same information and this might help give them a head start.

This past fall, in September, I received an email out of the blue that said:

"Hi Paul -- I happen to have a stock of antique whips made by Cecil Hendricks. An old family friend had collected them and given them to my mother, before he died about 12 years ago. The collector's name is E.H. Cooley, and his photos of his collection were

featured in a book (I believe by David Morgan) about the world's finest hand-made whips. I was wondering if you might be interested in appraising them, buying them, or selling them for us. Or even if you have any info to share, as we're kind of at a loss as to what to do with them. They're in good shape.”

I was absolutely ecstatic, but also somewhat skeptical at first. After a long discussion with the current owner of the collection, she agreed to send the whips to me to have a look at, and if nothing else to take pictures and document them. At that same time we were preparing to move over 2200 miles across the country to Nevada, so we decided to wait until after the move for her to send the whips.

Towards the end of November we had successfully made the move, and were starting to get settled in. I contacted her about the whips and she told me that knowing we were moving to Nevada, she went ahead and shipped the whips to her son who lives in Henderson, Las Vegas (about an hour away). So I made arrangements with her son to drive out and pick up the whips before Christmas.

The collection is even more amazing than I had imagined. There are 28 whips total in the collection ranging from a generic run of the mill cheap 4 plait whip up to a beautiful 36 plait 2 tone stockwhip made by Cecil Henderson! Overall the collection was in excellent condition, with minor signs of use on some of the whips here and there, and only one whip which was badly damaged. She also sent along all of the papers that Cooley had kept with the collection, which included letters of correspondence from David Morgan between 1964 and 1986, an original copy of the feature article on Henderson, and also one of Henderson’s original business cards!

There are 11 Henderson whips total still alive in the collection today. There was at least 1 more Henderson whip that used to be in the collection, the 36 plait bullwhip featured in David Morgan’s book. Unfortunately back in the 1990’s a portion of Cooley’s property flooded, and the place where he kept this prized bullwhip separate from the rest of the collection got the worst of it. When the bullwhip was found it had been completely destroyed by the flood.

There are too many whips and documents in the collection to list and picture every piece, so I have included a couple of “teaser” pictures from the collection.





There is quite a range of Henderson whips in the collection, from 8 plait to 36, from 6 foot to 16 foot in length, simple plaiting to patterns and name plaiting. There is even one bullwhip plaited entirely in single diamond, or as I like to call it “Checkerboard”. One of the stockwhips is shotloaded, another has a straight taper instead of the swing belly that the rest of them have. These whips really tell a lot about Hendersons work, and also some of the standard ways he would do things. I will go more in depth about these things in future articles.

One of my favorite whips in the collection is the full plait stockwhip pictured in David Morgan’s book.



It is 36x20 plait in black and what was originally natural tan, and the thong is 9ft long. You can't really see it in the picture in the book, and I didn't see it at first, but plaited into one side of the handle is "E.H. Cooley", and on the other side of the handle there are some different patterns with the year "1959" plaited in with them.

Every Christmas it is a tradition for me to work on a plaited project for myself for fun instead of the regular orders, and this Christmas I spent 2 days and plaited up a copy of the crop on that whip. In honor of the 50 years since the original was made, I plaited "2009" into the back of the handle instead of "1959". I'm pretty happy with how it turned out, and thought it was a pretty decent representation of how the handle would have originally looked when it was new before the natural tan darkened.



I will be putting up many more pictures of the collection as I get the chance on the APWA forum website, which I would like to add is an excellent place to talk plaiting, whips, and keep in touch with the other members of the Association. So, if you have access to the internet, be sure to check it out to get your fill between issues of the Journal. Chris has done an excellent job putting the forum together!

I have also created a photo gallery of the Edward H. Cooley collection at:

www.midwestwhips.com/cooleycollection

I will be handling the sale of Cooley's collection, which will happen in the coming months. Each whip will be sold separately, and it will be my responsibility to make sure that all of the whips go to homes where they will be well-cared for and preserved. There will be an entire section of the website devoted to the sale of this historic collection, so be sure to check the main page of www.midwestwhips.com in the next month or so for all the dates and details of the sale. There will be a version of the Catalog available to download, as well as a hard copy of the Catalog that can be sent through regular mail.

If anyone has any questions, or would like more information about this collection, please contact me:

by email at: cooleycollection@midwestwhips.com

by phone at: 314-484-0462
or by regular mail at:

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And lastly, I will leave you all with a picture I recently found of Henderson plaiting. I don't know when the picture was taken, but comparing the photos of him from the 1955 article, I would guess that it is sometime around the 1940's.



Enjoy!

Paul Nolan