

HOW HIPPIES MADE THE WORLD SAFE FOR PMC

Alan Bell

Thank you, Mr. Nishio. I've had the great pleasure of knowing and working with Akira Nishio for a few of years, now. He is a true gentleman and a man of his word, and, by the way, the world's greatest advocate of Precious Metal Clay. If he had his way, we'd be building our furniture out of the stuff.

Thanks, Tim McCreight for inviting me. I must have confessed to him over a tall beer at some point, that public speaking is one of those things that makes me really sweat.

You know, this is amazing. We're gathered here in Wooster, Ohio for the next three days. All because of a material none of us had ever even heard of just seven or eight years ago.

I promised Tim I'd talk about the jewelry business from a somewhat global, and historical perspective, and discuss how I saw PMC fitting into that picture. I also warned him, this would be a highly personal and un-scholarly tour. Since I've only been around for the last half of the past century that's where I originally thought I'd start. Then I realized I was going to have to stand up here and talk to you for more than five minutes.

So, I'd like to go back another fifty or so years and briefly sketch the world my father grew up in. In 1996, Rio Grande reproduced a 15th century engraving of a medieval goldsmithing shop on our catalog cover. My father, who died a few months after the catalog was published, noted, any modern jeweler would be able to sit down in that studio and go to work because the tools and techniques haven't changed that much in the last six hundred years. Of course I was a little disappointed that my father didn't notice the clever way we'd inserted tools and equipment from our line, into the engraving, but who could blame him? They looked the same. My point is, jewelers are notorious for being slow to adopt new materials and techniques.

Of course when Al Gore's uncle the dentist invented lost wax casting, we picked that up pretty quickly, but usually, we're slow to change. Most fine jewelry, one hundred years ago, was still handmade by skilled craftsmen. The difference between a jewelry studio and a jewelry factory in those days had more to do with the number of people working than the techniques used. In a factory there might be more specialization, fabricators, stone setters, polishers, etc., but the techniques were the same, and as I pointed out earlier, would have been quite familiar to a jeweler in medieval Europe.

As for my father, when he was eight years old, and that was in 1908, folks, he was sent to live with his mother's brother, and begin his apprenticeship, just as his uncle had begun his apprenticeship with his father, my great, great grandfather, when he was a youngster. The fact that the family had relocated from Odessa, in the Ukraine to St. Louis, in the Missouri in the interim, made no difference. Tradition.

Now, let me briefly walk you through the way jewelry was made in my great uncle's shop. To start, you took a copy of your gold permit to the bank. For you youngsters in the audience, this is because until the 1970's you had to have a permit from the federal government to possess gold in this free country of ours. You bought pure gold ingots from the bank at the federally controlled price of \$35 per ounce. By the way, that would be about \$600 or so dollars today.

Then, in your coal fired furnace you put your gold, along with copper and silver in the correct proportions and cranked the billows until you generated enough heat to melt the metals into an alloy.

Then, if you wanted to make wire, you poured the molten metal into a rod ingot mold and if you wanted to make sheet you poured it into a flat, rectangular plate. These then got worked down either through draw dies for wire or a rolling mill for sheet. Finally, you could make jewelry.

If your tools wore out you used that same furnace as a forge and hammered out new ones.

This is the world my father worked in for the next eight years, mastering every aspect of the jewelry craft from alloying the metal to engraving it, and everything in between. I remember seeing practice pieces he'd done as a kid. paving pinheads into a copper penny.

To complete his education, after his apprenticeship, my father went to Drake and studied watch making. This was in the days when the title watchmaker meant exactly that. It meant you could make a watch. When a part in a watch wore out, you sat down at your beautiful little Swiss lathe and made another one.

With all those years of training, honing his skills as a jeweler and watchmaker, my father did what you'd expect a seventeen-year-old kid to do. He took a job with Western Electric, building telephone switchboards. By the way, he wound up in Washington DC wiring the telephone switchboard at the War Department during WWI. Because all communications from Europe came in through the war department, my father knew the armistice had been signed before the White House did. Dropped everything and took his whole crew to Maryland because DC was dry in those days. Got em all drunk. Which is why I'm not speaking at a telecommunications conference today.

But I digress. I believe I'm here to talk about jewelry. Jewelry. My point in telling my father's story is because by the time he got skilled up and ready to take his place in the world as a jeweler, he and his ilk were rapidly becoming anachronisms. Yes, anachronisms.

It was the other "ism's" that did it. Yep. The other "ism's" were in the process of killing off the likes of my father, by the time he opened his own retail jewelry store in the 1920's.

The most obvious -ism in this long list of culprits is industrialism. A hundred years after other crafts such as weaving and pottery and furniture making succumbed to mechanization, jewelry manufacturers discovered the punch press. By the way, do you know why Providence, Rhode Island is the center of mass produced jewelry in this country? Well, I'll tell you. Before jewelry, shoe manufacturing was the major industry in the area. Now, shoes have little metal parts. Eyelets, hooks, buckles, those kinds of things. It happens, in the shoe industry, those little metal parts are called findings. In any case Providence was chock-full of toolmakers who could design and build dies to crank out thousands of little metal parts. Viola! A new industry emerged from the ashes of the old.

And the guy sitting at the jewelry bench never had a chance. Industrialism certainly drove a spike through the heart of the traditional jewelry studio, but there was another bunch of "ism's" out there as well, that I think have to take some credit.

If you go back to the time of that fifteenth century engraving that I mentioned earlier, what you see, are likely members of a jewelry guild practicing their craft. Next door on one side might be a furniture guild, and on the other, members of a painter's guild. We think it odd today, but at that time, it was not unusual for a painting to be a collaborative effort just like a piece of jewelry or a chair. George did the backgrounds and Harold did the faces and Guido who was really good at getting the folds right, did the clothing.

Now I suppose there was a pecking order among guilds, and painters may have considered themselves a notch above the others, but I'm also pretty sure a member of The Worshipful Society of Goldsmiths back then would have considered himself a peer with those painter fellas.

This began to change in the nineteenth century. It may have started earlier, but I warned you this is a personal and un-scholarly perspective. In any case, it's clear, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, art had distanced itself from craft. More "ism's" emerged.

Impressionism, cubism, Dadaism, expressionism. All linked to an evolving philosophical movement, existentialism, which pretty much rejected all things decorative or beautiful in the traditional sense. Painting and sculpture became as much or perhaps more, intellectual exercises than they were visual or tactile.

I once had a painter tell me, if an artist didn't confound most people, they weren't really advancing the medium. This school of thought reached its pinnacle in 1971, I think, when a performance artist named Chris Burton did a piece called *Shoot*, wherein the work of art consisted of Burton having himself shot with a gun. But I digress. My point is, the chasm between art and craft was rapidly becoming an unbridgeable gulf.

So, there you have it. By the 1920's, the jewelry craftsman had been marginalized on the left by an increasingly didactic artistic community and marginalized on the right by the industrial revolution. Now, up to this point, a jewelry store such as my father's in St. Louis, was pretty much the norm. You could go into a jewelry store and expect the proprietor to be a jeweler. Also not unusual, my father had two benches in the back. One for jewelry making and one for watch making. His sister Jean would greet you when you came in, but if you had a problem with your watch or you wanted a piece of jewelry made, my father would come up and serve you personally. Even so, in order to survive, most of the jewelry he sold in that store came from the emerging factories in New York and Providence. Lost wax casting hadn't emerged yet, so most of this jewelry was struck on presses. The designs were necessarily limited because dies are expensive, which made the manufacturers conservative, and because of the mechanical constraints of die striking. But it was cheap to make.

Move ahead a couple more years into the 1930's, and we are in the great depression. Thousands of independent jewelry stores like my father's failed, effectively closing the door on an already dying era. So, what does a guy with skills no one values, in a trade no one needs in the depths of a depression do in 1937? Well, if you're my father, you pack up your brand new bride and the tools of your trade in your Hupmobile and you come out to New Mexico and buy White Eagle Trading Post, and you become an Indian trader.

This might seem like the mad act of a desperate man, but there was a method in his madness. You see, he'd been coming through New Mexico on the Santa Fe railroad, bound for vacations in California. The train always stopped for a spell in Albuquerque, (by the way, did you know the Santa Fe railroad never went to Santa Fe? Probably saved that town.) Anyway the train did go through Albuquerque, and stopped, giving the passengers a chance to get off and stretch their legs, and, of course haggle with the Indians who had their pots and baskets and blankets and jewelry spread out under the portals of the train station and the adjoining Harvey House hotel. Naturally, my father took a close look at the quality of all this silver jewelry spread out there, and tucked away in his mind, that here was a place that could use a man with his skills.

And things went according to plan. He set up benches in the back of the trading post, hired some native Americans from pueblos with no jewelry making tradition and therefore no preconceived ideas about how jewelry should be made, gave them proper tools and training, and quickly established a reputation for having the best quality Indian jewelry in town.

But again the worm turned. We entered WWII. Young men went off to war, leaving those benches empty, and on top of that, silver became a strategic material and therefore unavailable. I've no idea what they were doing with silver that made it strategic. Maybe making bullets for the Lone Ranger?

In any case it was Plan B time once again. Interestingly, because gold was already controlled, it remained available to jewelers during the war. My father went back to the factories that'd supplied his jewelry store back in Saint Louis and convinced a few of them to let him wholesale their goods in New Mexico. Since most of these guys thought you needed a passport to get into New Mexico, and knew you couldn't drink the water, they were more than happy to let him have the lines. So in the back of White Eagle Trading Post, Rio Grande Wholesale Jewelers was born in 1944. Fast-forward a couple more years. The war is over. Hundreds of thousands of men are flooding back into the workforce. Many of them have been badly injured. For these guys, vocational rehabilitation is in order.

Picture this:

Vocational Rehabilitation counselor. Next.

Soldier. Howdy, how ya doin'?

Counselor. Fine. Enough small talk. What are you here for?

Soldier. Well, I got my leg blown off in the war.
Counselor. Sorry to hear that. What did you do before the war?
Soldier. I was a stevedore. Unloaded ships.
Counselor. Guess you can't do that any more.
Soldier. Nope.
Counselor. Your eyes okay?
Soldier. Yep.
Counselor. Your hands?
Soldier. They're okay, too, I suppose.
Counselor. Great. We're sending you to watchmaking school. Next.

That's why most of the watchmakers I knew as a kid walked with a limp. Of course, watchmaking wasn't watchmaking any more. Al Gore's clever Swiss uncle had invented the Ebauches System. This system standardized the parts that went into watch movements, and allowed a watchmaker to turn to a catalog instead of his lathe, and call in an order for a quarter dozen mainsprings for a ETA 2801 movement, from his local watch materials house, which in Albuquerque New Mexico would have been Rio Grande back in those days.

That's right, a quarter dozen. Sort of watchmaker code for three. Of course some of these watchmakers were clever guys who soon figured out there was far more money in selling new watches than there was in fixing old ones, and while they were at it, why not sell a little jewelry? A whole new generation of jewelry stores was born. Jewelry stores run by guys who weren't jewelers. Hell they weren't even watchmakers, really.

So, by say, 1955, as a five year old kid my early memories of going down to daddy's store looked something like this. You came in and there were two long counters. One side was the watch materials counter where Mr. Edwards held court, selling quarter dozens of this and half dozens of that and three quarter dozens of the other thing. Three quarter dozen? Of course if you came up and said "I'll take nine", you were immediately shown the door as an obvious impostor.

On the other side the showcases contained a dusty display of tired, industrial strength jewelry. At the end of the counters, stuff got more interesting. The remnants of White Eagle Trading Post. The materials silversmiths needed. Sheet and wire silver. Findings in candy jars. Pliers and saws and hammers. If you wandered through the door, into the back, you'd find a thriving trade shop. Those Indians who came back from the war, the ones my father taught so well, were now busy sizing rings and re-tipping prongs and repairing the hinges on cheap locket. Of course, this was a thriving business because of all these new jewelry stores were run by guys who were not jewelers. "We'll have to send that out, ma'am". We were the Out they sent it to. I realize now we missed a great marketing opportunity. "Genuine Indian handmade ring resizing"

The other sea-change occurring in the jewelry business around this time was the mass merchandising of jewelry. Department stores like Sears noticed they could generate more dollars per square foot with jewelry than anything else. This trend continues today. Of the top five retailers of jewelry in the US today, only one is a jewelry company. Two are discount stores, one is a department store and the other is a television shopping network.

In any case, getting back to my story, many of this new breed of jewelers, who weren't really jewelers, decided what was good for the goose was good for the gander. Their stores began to look like miniature department stores. As a little kid, I remember some of the fine jewelry brands Rio Grande Wholesale Jewelers sold. West Bend pots and pans. Waring blenders. Samsonite luggage. Sony, which as I recall, was a little company that made pretty good transistor radios.

But the low point, the day my father saw that the jewelry business had reached absolute bottom, was Thursday, June 14, 1956 at 2:56 PM Eastern time. Actually, I made that up, but sometime in the mid-1950's this really did take place.

My father went back east on a buying trip. My dad was in New York, and he decided to visit a company that, through the miracles of modern chemistry, was making

pretty decent simulated pearls. I guess he thought he could squeeze another line onto the shelves, between the pots and pans and the suitcases. So my father makes an appointment to see the line. When he arrives, the receptionist tells him that the salesman is tied up, but he is free to go on in and look at the line while he's waiting. She shows him into a room with a long table running down the middle. On the table, there are hundreds of jewelry boxes. So my father goes up to the table and opens one of the boxes. Nothing inside. He opens another. Nothing. And another. All the boxes are empty. So, he figures there must be some mistake and he sits down and waits for the salesman. The guy finally shows up, apologizes, and asks my father if he's had a chance to make some selections. My dad explains, there must be some mistake. He came to look at pearls. The salesman looks at him like he's crazy. All the pearls are the same, he explains. It's the boxes he's here to select. If he's selling to drugstores, the cheaper boxes are down at that end of the table, if he's selling to better jewelry stores, the nicer boxes are at the other end.

I submit that the jewelry business went into total eclipse that perverse moment, when someone determined the box mattered more than the contents. You're probably wondering where I'm going with all this. Aside from finding a way to stand up here and talk for the better part of an hour.

So, let me ask you a question. If Mr. Nishio here, had shown up in America with precious metal clay at that particular moment in time, would we have been ready to embrace it? I don't think so. We needed a renaissance of sorts first — and we got one. Eventually.

Fast forward to the late sixties. Viet Nam war. Timothy Leary. Bob Dylan. Rolling Stones. Beatles. Grateful Dead. Judy Collins, Joan Baez, Joni Mitchell, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix. Cream, Commander Cody and the Lost Planet Airmen. Jefferson Airplane. The Who, The Kinks, The Moody Blues. If nothing else, a golden age in music, certainly! Peter Max posters. Bell bottoms. The Chicago Seven. The world being turned on its head.

Except jewelry, of course. All jewelry, I think, was still being designed by Pat Nixon.

In 1967 a couple of buddies and I took a little unauthorized holiday to San Francisco during spring break. I was seventeen years old, and I'd been out of New Mexico maybe three times in my life. We picked up a couple of hitchhikers around Big Sur. Hippies. Real, long haired, tie dyed, sandal wearing, tuned in, turned on, dropped out, card carrying hippies, who, it being the time of brotherly love, offered to let us crash in their pad on Fulton Street in Haight-Ashbury. The epicenter.

This was a time when the Diggers were feeding all comers for free in Golden Gate Park across the street. The Fillmore, that great rock and roll emporium, was a couple of blocks away. The Jefferson Airplane lived just down the street a ways. And the neighborhood was filled with shops like I'd never seen before. Coffee houses. Poster stores. Health food stores. And head shops. And it was in San Francisco, for the first time that I saw a crude hint of a nascent craft movement. Tie dye, macramé, leatherwork, pottery, and, of course, because necessity is the mother of invention, roach clips banged out of brass wire and decorated with glass beads.

Our sojourn was cut short by parents demanding that we high tail it back home. The experience, though, left a lasting impression on me.

When I turned eighteen the wanderlust sparked the year before came to full fire and I packed a duffel and like tens of thousands of my peers, I stuck my thumb out and took off. A year later, after wandering across a large chunk of the United States and Canada, I found myself back in San Francisco. Rented myself a tiny apartment on Stanyon Street, on the edge of Haight-Ashbury.

Now, as romantic notions are wont to do, the San Francisco I settled into was not the same one I'd seen in the spring of 1967. The fizz had gone flat. Most of the hippies still there were a little too turned on, tuned in and dropped out. The really cool ones had all gone off to communes. In New Mexico!

Now, back in high school, while my friends had waited tables and pumped gas (whoa, remember when people actually pumped gas for you?), I'd spent my afternoons at the bench, under the tutelage of my father, repairing Pat Nixon's jewelry.

Naturally, with that background, I found a job as a pump mechanic, had fun kicking around San Francisco for about a year before I decided it was time to go home and

apply myself to something serious. Like acting. Or writing. Or photography. Something, anything that had nothing to do with Pat Nixon's jewelry!

The New Mexico I returned to seemed a slightly altered place. As the Buffalo Springfield said, there was "Something happening here." Hippie communes sprang up all over the northern part of the state. Some of them, like The Hog Farm and New Buffalo, the commune immortalized in *Easy Rider*, were large and reasonably well established, and out of these communes poured a lot of wild, creative energy. In Placitas, New Mexico, Buckminster Fuller's geodesic dome took on new meaning. A community of free form constructions loosely based on the isosceles triangle, known locally as 'zomes'. "A whole mountainside of them. Being inside one definitely put you into an altered state.

Either because they were consciously rejecting the status quo or just as often, I suspect, because they were ignorant, in all fields, new forms and new materials were being tried.

And at the universities, strange things were happening, too. Kids swarmed in from all over the country. Suddenly, the curmudgeons, the keepers of the flame, the second class citizens in the university art departments, the ones relegated to the corners of the basement, the teachers of fiber arts and pottery and metal arts — well. Kids were clamoring to get into their classes. Kids who wanted to get their hands dirty. Wanted to do something. Kids who were turned on by the idea of making things. Kids who looked and acted a lot like those hippies in the communes.

And the hippies were busy, too. Somewhere, perhaps on the banks of the Rio Grande, some fuzzy headed kid pounded out a pair of brass earrings on a rock. They looked groovy. Someone bought them right off her ears. Word got around. Soon, the ring of metal being pounded could be heard across the land.

As for me, I'd enrolled in a few classes in photography, and because it was what I knew, I set up a bench in the living room of my apartment and began taking in jewelry work in order to pay the rent.

Now, that made me a regular customer of Rio Grande, where I'd drop in every couple of days to pick up supplies from that counter left over from the days of White Eagle Trading post. And that counter was getting pretty crowded. Indians, of course, who'd been coming in for years. More of them, now, as Indian Jewelry was on the verge of an unprecedented explosion in popularity. But that's another story for another time. But alongside the Indians were all these kids in bell bottoms, sandals, long hair, crazy jewelry. Those were the students. You should have seen the hippies!

Many of them had no idea what they were doing, but they soon learned, if you asked the old guy with the white beard — that would be my father — he was more than happy to take you back to his bench and show you how it was done. Delighted, in fact, that someone passionately wanted to know what he'd misspent his youth learning.

I'm sure there were thousands more like him around the country. Practitioners of almost lost arts, suddenly finding their skills and knowledge in demand. Furniture makers, potters, weavers, leather crafters and jewelers, finding a passion for their craft suddenly rekindled by kids who'd seen enough of the chromed and vinyl covered world that industrialism had wrought.

Kids who either didn't know or didn't care much about the other "ism's" either. Kids who found themselves more drawn to Sidartha than they were to Kant.

As I said, that jewelry supply counter at Rio Grande was getting crowded so one day I moved around to the other side to help out for a little while. Now, I'm not sure how long "a little while" is, but that was in 1971...

Anyway, we all found ourselves in the middle of something big. A huge rebirth of crafts. A tsunami rolling across the country. People with a deep-seated, almost primordial craving to make things with their own hands. People with no pre-conceived notions, no baggage — bursting with creativity, willing to give anything a go, new materials, new shapes, new techniques.

And on the receiving end, a willing audience. Our mothers began coming home from arts and crafts fairs with hand thrown pots in macramé hanging baskets, wearing big hand-wrought hoops in their ears. Craft galleries sprang up throughout the country.

Arts and Crafts fairs burst on the scene in seemingly every burg and village, subtly changing our sensibilities about craft.

And the really great thing is, it stuck. Craft regained respect. A few lonely dissident voices who'd never given up, became a large and vocal chorus. Artists doing real art can legitimately work in wood and clay and metal. Or any one of us can just jump in and have fun. The water's fine.

Fast forward to the mid-1990's. Some of those wire pounding kids from that era are still doing it. Some in a big way. Robert Lee Morris, David Yurman, John Atencio all tell eerily similar stories about awakening to their chosen craft in the late sixties, early seventies. Zeitgeist.

And perhaps most importantly, the students from the sixties and seventies are now the teachers, opening us up to new ideas, broadening our perceptions about what jewelry looks like, and what it's made from. Prominent among them is a prolific writer and teacher up in Maine, Tim McCreight.

One fine day in 1995 or thereabouts, Tim called me up. "I've been messing around with this new material," he says. "It's going to alter the way we think about metal," he says.

Indeed.