



Brooks Barrel Company, by Ken Knox, 2 May 2007

The Brooks Barrel Company is one of a few surviving slack cooperages (barrel makers) in the United States. Paul Brooks started the company in 1950. A century ago Maryland's Eastern Shore had a busy barrel-making industry, drawing on the stands of good yellow pine. Brooks Barrel still buys local pine logs. Ken Knox joined the company in 1978, and in 1991 he became president. As speaker, Ken presents the history and present day operations of barrel making.

When Paul Brooks decided to go into the barrel business in 1950, he called in an expert, Frank Knox. Frank had learned the ancient trade of coopering on Virginia's Eastern Shore around the turn of the century. . . and he taught Paul and his small crew how to perfect handcrafted barrels. As time went on, other cooperage's closed and Paul purchased the antique equipment and incorporated these hand-operated machines into his business. Today, Brooks barrels are still made in the time honored tradition. Brooks Barrel Company is one of a few slack cooperages left in America, and the process is still totally hand-operated.



Cutting crews go into various woods on Maryland's Eastern Shore, cut yellow pine and truck the timber to our plant. It is then cut, sawed, and beveled into staves. These staves are cured outside until they are ready for production. Depending on the barrel's diameter, between 14 to 18 staves are set into a forming ring, and deft handling brings them tightly together for a full circle. The cooper then drops a cable around the flared out staves, jerks it taut, and up they pop. . . bulging into perfect symmetry. Next, a machine called the "five-in-one" slips the metal hoops into place. A crozier whizzes around the inside of the rigid, open-ended barrel, cutting a groove in the barrel, which allows for the installation of the barrel heads. . . and the job is done.