

"ZENITH" woodworking planes from Marshall Wells Hardware Company.

Marshall Wells Hardware Company was started in 1892 when Albert Morely Marshall bought controlling interest in Chapin Wells Hardware Company in Duluth Minnesota and changed the name to Marshall Wells Hardware Company. He was at that time owner of both "Lufkin Rule" and "US Graphite". As early as 1898 they offered Stanley planes and advertised in the 1905 "Zenith" company magazine that they had the "Union" "X" planes for sale. They decided to sell their own line of planes with the "Zenith" name and introduced them in 1910.

The planes were first made by Sargent and later by Vaughn and Bushnell of Chicago. These first Zenith planes included most of the available Sargent planes except the "700" series of "Autoset" planes. Marshall Wells used numbers in the catalogs to compare with the Stanley planes they still offered for sale. These early "Zenith" planes did not have Zenith numbers on the metallic planes but did have numbers on the wood bottom transitional planes. Some Zenith planes did have the Sargent numbers in the casting and most had Sargent numbers on the frogs and lever caps. Some of the Zenith planes had the name behind the knob in front of the throat. Some of them had a flat unmarked raised place where the Sargent name would have been and then some of them did not have even that.

The Zenith cutters had the "Star Burst" logo which was on the sides of the metallic bench planes. It was also on the toe of the transitional planes. The Zenith bench planes also included the Sargent "Shaw's Patent" planes. In the catalog they were given numbers to compare with the Stanley "Bedrock" numbers. The Sargent "Shaw's Patent" number 7 plane with the Zenith logo on the shoulder and cutter would be listed in the Marshall Wells (M-W) catalog as a "Z-602". The other "Shaw's Patent" planes from M-W had corresponding numbers. The Sargent # 15 would be a Z-605 1/2. The transitional planes had the Zenith "Starburst" logo on the toe as well as the cutter. They did not have the "Starburst" logo on the sides as shown in the catalogs.

The numbering system for these planes changed at some point. The early transitional planes had a number like the Stanley numbers with, of course, the "Z" in front of it. At some point they changed the numbering to correspond to the page number in the catalog and the position on the page. Sometime in the late 1918's to early 1920's M-W started selling planes made by Vaughn and Bushnell in Chicago with the Zenith name. These had the sloped frog much like the early "Bedrock" and the round top shoulders typical of the early V&B planes. The shoulders were not marked like the Sargent planes but the lever caps were marked with the Z and the number. The 24 inch bench plane was marked "Z-8" on the lever cap and had the later "Football" logo on the cutter.

They also supplied block planes with the same logo on the cutter and they had the very distinct and different "knuckle Joint" lever cap which Vaughn and Bushnell used. These V&B planes were never described in the catalogs as such. M-W had offered the "Shaw's Patent" planes as competition to the Stanley "Bedrock" planes. When Sargent dropped the "Shaw's Patent" planes in 1918 it seems logical to assume M-W replaced them with the V&B planes. They were very much like the early "Bedrock" planes.

The "Zenith" planes were only offered for a short period of time. By 1923 they were no longer listed in the catalogs. There is one catalog which has the pictures or drawings of the "Zenith" planes showing the "Starburst" logo but the descriptions are all about Stanley planes. There is a reprint of an early M-W pocket catalog with a green cover from W-WTCA. It shows the Z-45 and Z-55 planes. Those were the # 1080 and # 1085 combination planes made by Sargent and introduced in 1916 according to Dave Heckel's book. The only real difference between the Sargent planes and the "Zenith" planes was the mark on the body. The "Zenith" replaced the Sargent name. They came in the same suitcase style wooden case but the cases were marked Z-45 and Z-55.

The reprint also has the full original name of the company on it, Marshall Wells Hardware Company. The May 1918 "Zenith" magazine states that the cover which has the full original name was designed before they changed the name and dropped the "Hardware" part to become just "Marshall Wells Company". The reprint suggests it is from 1910 but I think 1916-1918 is closer.