

FRANCIS BANNERMAN EXODUS

1865 - 1959

By Robert Pins



ROBERT PINS

Bannerman family that the eldest son be named Frank.

Francis Bannerman's father worked as a scrap dealer before the Civil War and upon his return from the Civil War enlarged his business so greatly that he was able to send his son through school and where he received a Cornell University scholarship. Unfortunately, at this time his father became greatly afflicted by his war wounds and Francis had to spend most of the time attending to the business which was primarily concerned with the sale of surplus Navy rope and ship chandler supplies. Due to his father's illness, Frank had to decline the University scholarship which he had won at such a hard cost feeling it his duty to carry on the business for the father and as a result of these purchases the business soon out grew the little warehouse and store near the Navy Yard.

In 1872 the rope business became rather slack and Frank made a business trip to Europe to purchase rope more cheaply to ship in the United States. While there he met and married a young Scottish girl. When he returned to America with his bride, his second oldest brother assumed Frank's responsibilities in the father's business and with his father's blessing, Frank started his own establishment based on the shrewd assumption that competition would make for increased business. Once on his own he began attending more and more government auctions at which he purchased large quantities of Civil War surplus arms and accessories for which it seems there was quite a demand by underdeveloped nations who were unable to afford the more modern weapons offered for sale by large US manufacturers. He also began at this time to issue a catalog illustrating, describing, and giving the history of the weapons offered for sale. Soon his store at Atlantic Avenue in Brooklyn became too small and since the freight facilities in Brooklyn for shipping merchandise at his increasing mail order business were rather poor, he decided to open a store in downtown New York. The first was located at 1118 Broad Street in the financial district and a later one at 27 Front Street in the Ship Chandler's row. Finally, in 1897 he leased the store of Destiny, 579 Broadway, from which location many New York volunteer regiments were outfitted in the Spanish American War. He received a citation for his good work from the Ordnance Department. This placed him at the close of the war with Spain in a favorable position to purchase over 90% of the enemy small arms, ammunition, and equipment. The storage problem created by the acquisition of all this material which included millions of rounds of ammunition, necessitated the purchase of an out of New York storage place, for which he chose Pollopel's

Francis Bannerman will probably be best remembered to American arms collectors as the man who made collecting possible for everyone.

How many books do you find which are dedicated, "I first became interested in this subject after buying a from the "as if" table at Bannerman's." I am sure that among all you veteran collectors assembled here most of you almost always made certain to stop at Bannerman's when you visited New York on business or pleasure trips.

The personalities of "Butch" and "Mr. Scott" are equally well known to all of you along with the pungent aroma exuding from the very walls of the store and covering everything which as a result received the popular title of "that Bannerman aroma." Ah what pangs of nostalgia the memories evoke.

Francis Bannerman merchant and antiquarian was born in Scotland in 1851 and came to the United States in 1854 with his parents. His family had an illustrious history in the various battles fought in Scotland, and the name originated from an ancestor who rescued a clan pennant during a battle at Bannockburn. It was a rule in the

Island in the Hudson, located at the northern entrance of the Hudson highlands. There, he constructed harbors and storehouses patterned after the Baronial Castles of his native Scotland. This island also became the family summer home. In 1905 requiring more space Bannerman also acquired 499 and 501 Broadway the latter being the last location before the dissolution of the New York establishment.

501 Broadway was the property of the New York Metropolitan Museum and was sold to Bannerman at a price reduction of many thousands of dollars in recognition of his public spirit in maintaining a "free museum" in New York City.

Also credited to Francis Bannerman is the sealed bid method of selling government stores, and all acknowledged Bannerman as the founder of the low overhead military goods business. At the beginning of W. W. I. Bannerman donated thousands of guns and ammunition to Great Britain, his beloved land of birth, to assist in the great fight for freedom.

He was also a great patron of the Young Boys Clubs organization especially wayward boys and orphans, and contributed many thousands of dollars to this end. His demise in 1918 saddened hearts of many and the business was carried on with vigorous enthusiasm for a considerable number of years by his sons, Frank and David.

In the early thirties a general decline in gun collecting interest furthered by the crash of 29 as well as vast quantities of W. W. I surplus then being unloaded on the United States market led to a gradual demise and deterioration of the business.

Late in the Autumn of 1958 rumors began to circulate in the industry that the famous old store at 501 Broadway as destined for destruction. This fact was verified in December of that year by Charles Scott, Manager of the store, who then invited myself and another dealer in military goods come in and make purchase offers for the contents of the premises.

As a little boy it had always been my desire to really get a close look at the dark and musty recess of the upper stories of 501 Broadway. This was forbidden to me as a retail customer and I now found myself, to my astonishment and delight, riding up the elevator which in itself was perhaps a collectors item, to the 5th story of the building.

After a day of puttering around in the musty caverns of the upper floors and covering ourselves with a fine powdery layer of lamp black like soot we drew the following conclusion:

The building had been organized rather methodically at some period in the distant past by Bannerman into the following sub-divisions:

1. Sub-basement: Gun parts and leather goods
2. Basement: Cannon parts, ammunition, and edge weapons.
3. First floor - showroom and firearms
4. Second floor - museum, but lately buttons, buckles, badges and catalog storage center.
5. Third floor - uniforms and dry goods
6. Fourth floor - Cavalry and saddlery leather goods and shops. And in the front of the building a machine shop for repairing and restoring firearms on one side and a harness repair shop on the other.
7. Fifth floor - no real semblance of order, sort of a jumble of odds and ends that could not be placed handily in any of the previous categories.

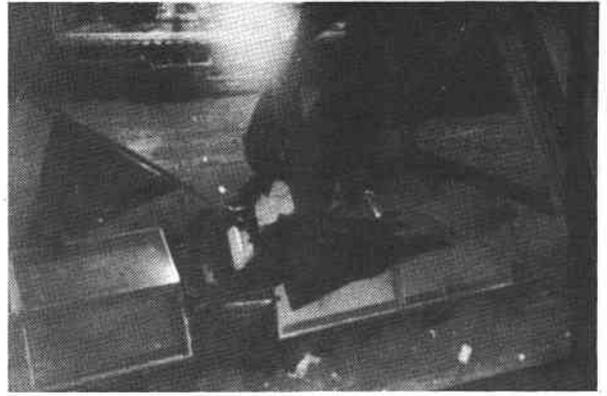
While this set-up was undoubtedly a marvel of efficiency when first organized, it had by this time fallen into seedier days. As a matter of fact, there appeared to be a totally disorganized jumble of everything on all floors.

Many people commented that we must undoubtedly have found many exotic goodies mixed in the rubble and perhaps in essence they would be correct, that is, if one were not squeamish about condition. For example, while an 1849 Ames Rifleman's Knife is a highly desirable article in fine condition, not many people would appreciate it with a huge bite from what must have been a pre-historic monster right out of the middle of the blade or for instance a lovely Common rifle with the barrel burst at the breech and the stock horrible dented for having been used as a prybar, however, such was the state of the goodies that were discovered buried among debris. The following illustrations taken by a fearless photographer friend at a dawn hour serve to illustrate what the place looked like at the time of its "Goetterdaemmerung."

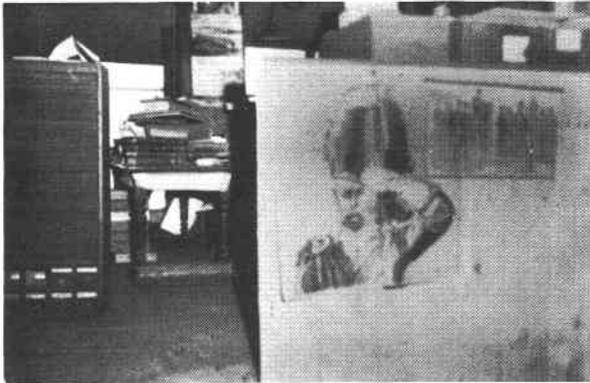
Now that you have seen these lovely pictures, it would perhaps serve Mr. Bannerman's memory best if you recall the palmier days of the early twentieth century when the racks were brimming with delights from all around the world, and the banners hanging from the walls were nice and new, and the name Francis Bannerman was a name to be reckoned with by all competitors as a champion of the Square Deal and Low Budget goodies for collectors of all ages.



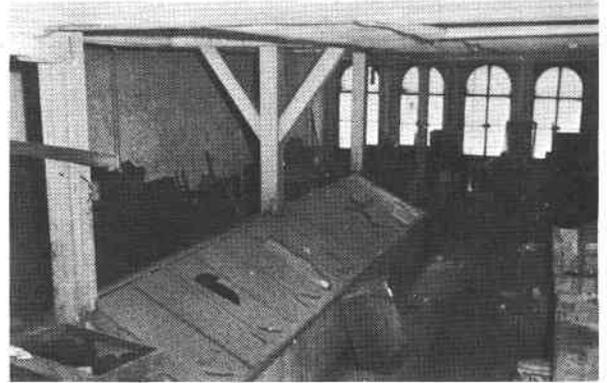
BANNERMAN'S SUB BASEMENT



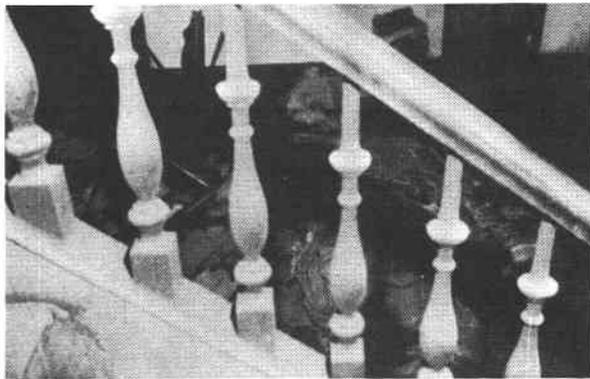
FIRST FLOOR REAR AS SEEN FROM SECOND FLOOR



SECOND FLOOR OFFICES



THIRD FLOOR LOOKING TOWARDS BROADWAY



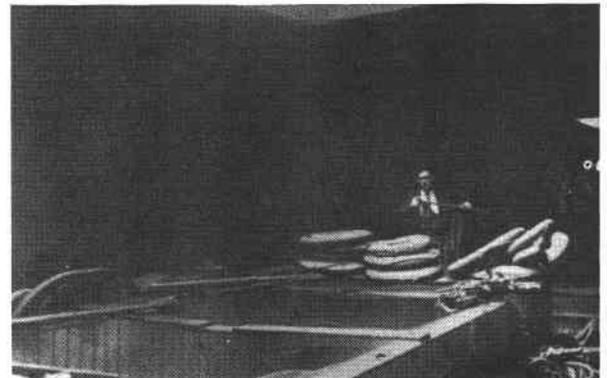
STAIRCASE FROM THIRD TO FOURTH FLOOR



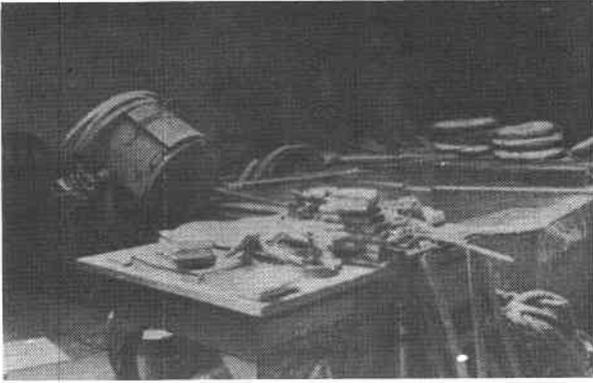
FOURTH FLOOR HARNESS DEPARTMENT



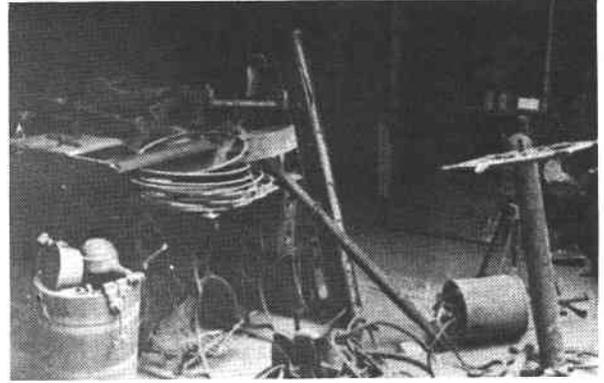
FOURTH FLOOR LOOKING TOWARDS REAR OF BUILDING



FIFTH FLOOR LOOKING TOWARDS REAR FROM FRONT. BOB FOUND A FLAG.



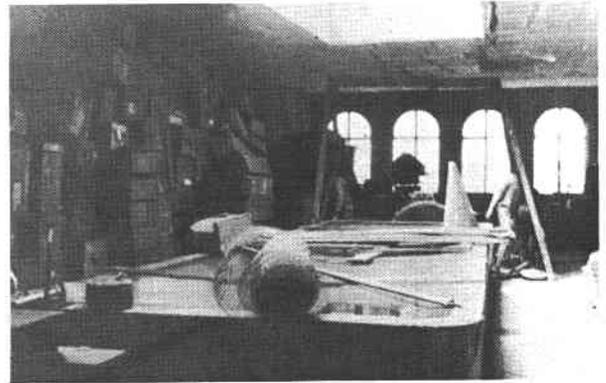
SEARCH LIGHTS, BOOKS AND LIFE PRESERVERS.



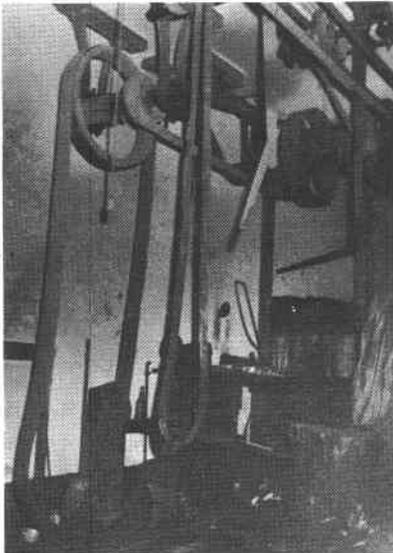
FROM ICE CREAM FREEZER AND SEWING MACHINES TO SHIP'S STEERING WHEELS



WHEELS, RIFLE BARRELS, WEATHER VANE AND WHAT HAVE YOU?



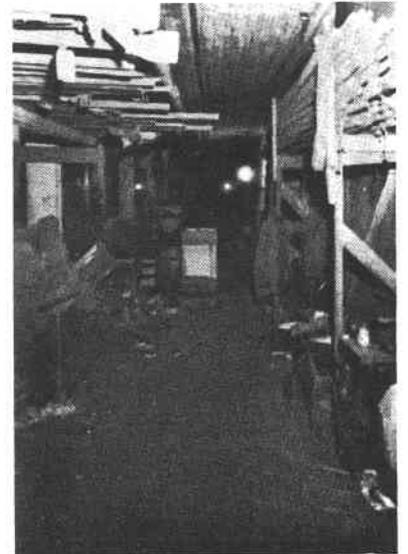
FIFTH FLOOR LOOKING TOWARDS FRONT OF BUILDING



FOURTH FLOOR MACHINE SHOP



FOURTH FLOOR SADDLE DEPARTMENT



ANOTHER VIEW OF BASEMENT