

Embee Sunshade Co., Inc.

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Made In The Shade

In rain or shine, Greenpoint umbrella company has it covered
by Drew Fetherston

Early in the last century, Morris Brickner offered his customers shelter from the storm. He made and sold rain umbrellas.

When his sons were ready to go into business on their own, they found a different niche: They offered shelter from the sun.

The family tradition continues in a time-darkened brick building on Metropolitan Avenue in Greenpoint, where a third generation of the Brickner family manufactures that precious, gratifying, sometimes life-preserving, commodity-shade.

The factory is showing its age, and the gap-toothed sign outside reads, rather mysteriously, EM EESUNSH.

Inside, Barnett Brickner and his cousin, Herbert Brickner, work to preserve their business-making shade umbrellas for beach, garden, café and food cart-against an onslaught of foreign competition. Restoring the sign so that it reads EMBEE SUNSHADES can wait.

"This business was started, I would say, in the early 1930s," says Barnett Brickner. "We're in this building since the mid-1940s-I think it was 1943 or '44." Morris Brickner, he explains, came from Poland in the early 1900s and started his rain-umbrella business on the Lower East Side.

The second generation-Barnett's father, George, and Herb's father, Max, both now deceased-saw an opportunity and formed Embee. Like the parent for whom the business was named, the Brickner brothers started out on the Lower East Side of Manhattan.

Shade umbrellas were also a refuge from the overseas competition that was then beginning to weaken the rain-umbrella business, according to Barnett, a problem that Embee itself is now starting to feel.

In the beginning, Embee would sew the fabric and attach it to frames the brothers bought from other manufacturers. "We moved here and started making the frames, too," Barnett says. According to neighborhood lore, the Metropolitan Avenue building once housed a stable.

At first, almost all Embee umbrellas went to the beach. (Lifeguards at New York City beaches are still sheltered by Embee umbrellas.) Today, the beach business is supplemented by umbrellas that adorn cafés, food carts and home patios.

Both shade and rain umbrellas are highly evolved: Although they are structurally complex and ingenious, the basic design is difficult to improve.

People keep trying (the U.S. Patent Office has granted more than 150 patents covering umbrellas in the past 18 months) but any umbrella on the market is almost certain to be an arrangement of ribs around a shaft, supporting a fabric canopy.

"An umbrella is an umbrella," Barnett says with a smile and a shrug. The Embee catalog offers what few variations exist: The standard flat-top; the pagoda, with a canopy that curves upward as it nears the center pole; the double tier, with a second smaller canopy perched above the first. Some umbrellas come with valances and fringes; others lack these frills.



Mario Munoz puts finishing touches on an umbrella. Embee Sunshades are used at New York City beaches, including Rockaway, below. Newsday Photo / J. Conrad Williams

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Umbrellas do vary in the number of panels in their canopies. This is partly a function of size; a bigger diameter—say, 10 feet—may require 16 triangular panels for its canopy; a small umbrella can make do with six, eight or a dozen panels.

But here, too, things are pretty simple: Embee's panel patterns are stored near a cutting table in a corner of the production floor; there are eight short stacks of them and they look very much alike.

Still, every customer has a preference. Lifeguards don't like valances or fringe, so the handsome blue-and-white umbrellas that Embee supplies for the Long Beach guards are plain no-frill flat-tops.

Cafés and hot-dog carts prefer umbrellas that are 6 - 1/2 feet in diameter; patio-table umbrellas are usually a foot wider.

Embee's umbrellas range in diameter from 5 - 1/2 to 10 feet, and in wholesale price from \$42 to more than \$150. They are on many of the public beaches and private beach clubs in the metropolitan area, the cousins say.

"This year's color preference is hunter green," Barnett says. "A couple of years ago, we did all iridescent day-glo colors." If the umbrella needs something printed on it, Embee sends the panels out to a silk screener, then sews them together. The company also does private-label manufacturing, Barnett says, for other companies.

Making umbrellas does require some special machinery. Not far from the cutting table is a venerable Singer sewing machine that seems to have been stretched; the sewing head is at the end of an abnormally long horizontal arm.

"This is almost irreplaceable," Barnett says of the machine, which sews a reinforced ring around the top of the canopy. The long arm of the machine allows the canopy to be passed through as it is rotated to form the ring.

Nearby are two tiny cast-iron, gas-fired furnaces of great age (made in Baldwin, Long Island; patented in 1921); these are used to heat steel rods to incandescence so that they can be flattened at the ends and otherwise shaped to serve as umbrella ribs. A worker's lunch, carefully wrapped in aluminum foil, nestles against one furnace wall, absorbing heat as the midday meal approaches.

Embee buys the rib stock cut-to-length from a Brooklyn supplier. "It's oil-tempered spring wire," Barnett emphasizes. "What does that mean? I'll show you." He takes a length of the rib stock and bends it almost double. When he releases it, it springs back to its original shape, with no distortion. "It adds cost to use it," Barnett says, "but it adds quality." Quality is Embee's hope. Shade umbrellas are now under the same pressure that struck rain umbrellas when George and Max Brickner were about to step into the business: Foreign competition.

"It's very difficult with all the product coming in from Taiwan and China," says Herb Brickner, who lives in Manhattan.

The imports create intense price pressure. "I would say, off the top of my head, that imports have over half of the market—maybe well over half," Barnett says. "They can land an umbrella here—generally, not one of good quality, but an umbrella—cheaper than I can buy the parts, before any labor cost." So Embee uses oil-tempered steel wire in its ribs and wires them to the slide by hand so that they can be repaired if necessary. If the model has a crank mechanism, Embee equips it with a wire cable rather than the nylon cord common on imports.

Embee, which wholesales across the country through sales representatives, has recently added commercial poolside furniture from other manufacturers to its catalog.

"Put it this way: You can't come in here and buy three chairs," Barnett says. "But if someone needs furniture, we can get it at a good price and sell it to them." Foreign competition has kept Embee's business basically flat for the past several years. "We make between 30,000 and 35,000 umbrellas a year," Barnett says.

"We also supply frames to other umbrella makers. I would say we sell about 8,000 to 10,000 of those a year." Embee's work force varies in a narrow range throughout the year: There are 25 workers now, when demand is still high; the number might dip to 22 later in the year.

"We're open all year, but we close down everything for three weeks after the summer, usually the first three weeks in September," Barnett says.

Company sales approach \$2 million a year. "One year, when the weather was really bad, I actually saw a dip," Barnett says. "But as long as the sun shines, there's going to be business."