

Strange Variations

Walter Shawlee

One of the real delights of slide rule collecting is suddenly to come across a seemingly familiar rule that is strangely and unexpectedly different. This can take a lot of forms, from special packaging (moon flight marked Pickett boxes, or 100th anniversary marked Aristo boxes) to completely bizarre, one-of-a-kind factory prototypes. There are also the thousands of specially marked Sama and Etani circular rules, each made for a specific customer as a company promotion, and endless production variations. The champion of variation, of course, remains the world of slide charts and Perrygrafs, where hundreds of thousands of design exist, many far more complex than regular solid body slide rules. Annual production of these today remains at about 6 million units (Fig. 1).

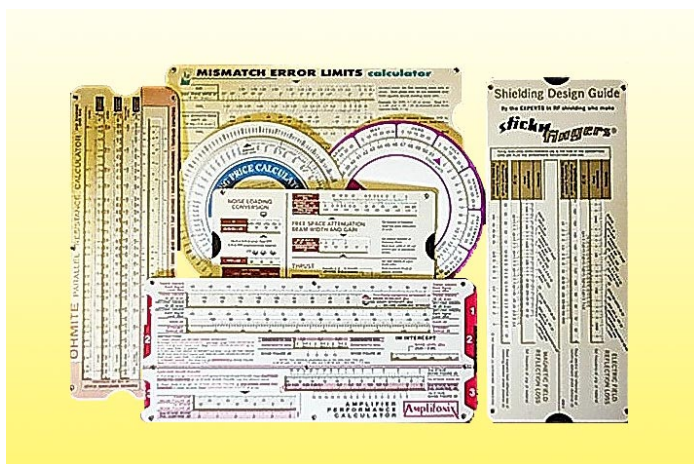


Figure 1. Slide Charts

Many manufacturers also made cosmetic variations for customers, with logos added, different colors to match corporate color schemes, imprinted cases and rules, and similar changes. These subtle differences add some real interest to collecting, as they exist outside all the catalogs and references, and just appear at random in the rule population.

Every major rule also had some production variation in its lifetime, changing cursor styles, modifying scales and scale marks, plus color and style changes that often completely altered the rule's appearance over time. Just collecting all the changes and variations of the venerable K+E 4081 series and its eventual models and sizes can fill up a large collection. Faber Castell had some of the most interesting rule changes, often completely redesigning some key rules over time, so that each new rule example showed their best art at the time, only to be replaced by even more ingenious examples along

the way. The body and scale variations of the FC 2/82 and 2/83 family from pocket to full sized rules is an especially rich selection, full of wonderful rules, and some amazing evolutionary changes.

Some years ago, I bought a few boxes of "surplus" partially completed and bulk packed rules left over from the closure of the Pickett factory in Mexico. One box contained a host of surprises, including mismarked rules (T marked yellow body rules), experimental end braces in several styles on common rule types, and a strange hybrid aluminum and plastic rule (Fig. 2). Talk about a bonanza of strange discoveries! There were even a few green body rules from Pickett, a very uncommon factory variation they made for a few customers.

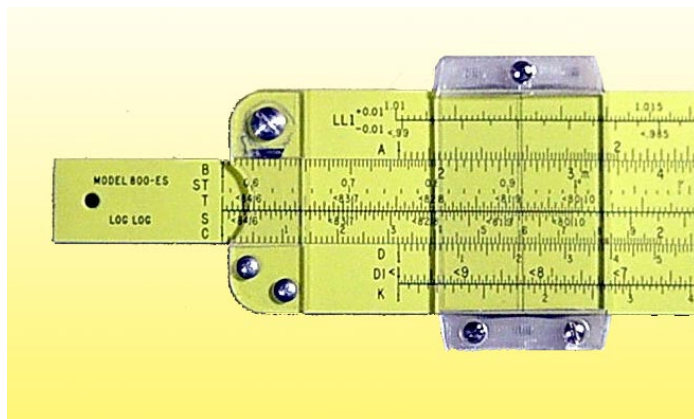


Figure 2. Hybrid Pickett

No matter how many rules we see, there is always something that is new and unexpected. This month, I got a new Faber Castell 63/83 that caught my eye because it was colored green instead of the regular red that all the 63/ series pocket rules have been so far (Fig. 3). It has the green braces and green stripes that were on all the full sized FC plastic rules like the 52/82. What does this mean? I have no idea, was it an early type, changed for some marketing reason, or custom made? I just don't know, but visually, it's amazing. Years ago, I got a K+E Deci-Ion that had a factory green case, not the normal orange sewn leather case. It had the Deci-Ion logo and everything, but was made of the cheap composite case material. I have never seen that variation shown anywhere or found another since, so it remains one of those enjoyable moments of discovery that makes collecting especially interesting.

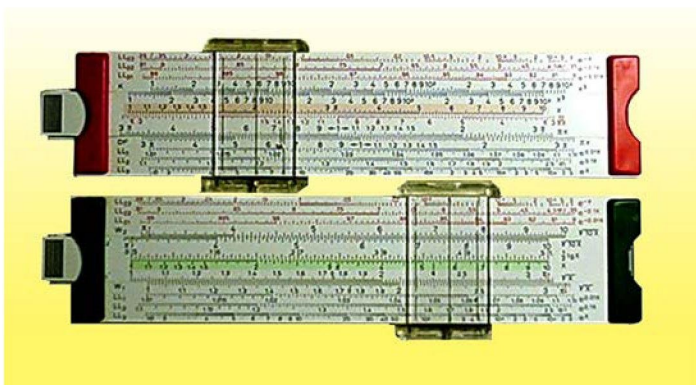


Figure 3. Faber-Castell 63/83 Variants

No matter what your area of slide rule interest is, if you look a bit deeper, you will find the hidden pattern of variations that followed every maker and model. Paul Ross and

Ted Hume in their landmark Post Catalog article found that the ubiquitous “Versalog” from Post was really a family of rules, with several subtle variations, and it originated as a very rarely seen Hemmi 258. You can see their research efforts here: <http://www.sphere.bc.ca/test/post.html>

So, my advice is to look a bit deeper and see what you can discover for yourself. All for now, and the best of luck in the hunt.

Walter Shawlee 2 is a long time helicopter avionics system designer and collector of blue things, pocket knives and slide rules. He lives in Kelowna, British Columbia, Canada and is proprietor of the extensive Slide Rule Universe website. www.sphere.bc.ca/test/sruniverse.html
