

EVOLUTION OF THE "KENTUCKY REEL" *

By Dr. James A. Henshall

THE multiplying fishing reel originated in Kentucky about the beginning of the Nineteenth Century. It has been asserted that it was first made in England, but I have been unable to find any reference to it, even in the oldest British works on angling. It certainly has not been used there within my recollection. For a century the British angler has used the single-action reel for all branches of fishing.

James Lane Allen has shown that the good people of the blue-grass region of Kentucky exhibit many of the distinctive traits and customs of their English and Scotch-Irish ancestors; but in no feature is this heredity more pronounced than in their love for angling. With them, angling is the outward manifestation and practice of an inherent and inherited attribute, and is in no sense a fad or hobby.

Black-bass fishing, as an art, had its origin on the historic soil of Old Kentucky, in that particular portion known as "God's own country"—the blue-grass section. It was especially the counties of Fayette, Bourbon, Woodford, Scott and Harrison that were renowned for their skilled anglers, who fished the then famous streams of the Kentucky River, its tributary, the Elkhorn, and the Licking, Stoner and other adjacent waters.

At that time the Kentucky River was a free-flowing stream, without dams between Frankfort and its mouth. It abounded in black bass, pike-perch (called "salmon"), pike and occasionally a mascalonge. I have seen heads of the three last-named species from the Kentucky, Ohio and Tennessee Rivers, preserved as trophies by old-time anglers, of which the fish must have weighed at least forty pounds.

Most of these anglers were among the best and brightest and most intelligent

and cultivated men of that period, who adorned the several professions or were the lordly proprietors of vast domains of perennial green. Among others may be mentioned the well-known Kentucky family names of Clay, Bedford, Hume, Brown, Morris, Bibb, Bacon, Holman, McCurdy, Mills, Ennis, Harvey, Blair, Crittenden, etc.

The rods used by these pioneers of bass fishing consisted of the upper ten feet of a well-seasoned, light and straight native cane reed, weighing from four to six ounces when complete with guides and tip. The reel was lashed or seized to the butt of the rod, the reel-plate having holes in the ends for this purpose, as may be seen in some of the illustrations following. The line was that known as "seagrass," though really raw silk, and the size the smallest made, or No. 1. It will be seen from this that the tools and tackle were as light, if not so suitable or elegant, as those of the present day.

Mr. J. L. Sage, of Lexington, Ky., a veteran angler, who is still making "Kentucky reels," presented me with a click reel, and showed me his fly-rod and flies, all made and used by him as long ago as 1848; so that fly-fishing for black bass was practiced as early in Kentucky as in any other section of the country.

At a very much earlier day, about 1810, there existed the Bourbon County Angling Club, of which George Snyder, of Paris, Ky., was the president; and he it was who made the first "Kentucky reel," which has since become so famous, and in my opinion the first multiplying reel in the world. Previous to this time the black-bass angler was compelled to use the old single-action reel, usually of English make, or the discarded spool from his wife's work-basket, when of large size, and mounted on a frame by the local tin-smith.

To this day the octogenarian angler in Kentucky calls his reel a spool. Mr. Sage informed me that he had seen the spool used on the Cape Fear River, near Wilmington, N. C., in 1839 and 1840.

George Synder was born in the same county as Daniel Boone—Bucks, Pa. He

*As Assistant Chief of the Fisheries Department of the World's Columbian Exposition, at Chicago, in 1893, I had charge of the Angling Building, and, among other exhibits, I had a collection of "Kentucky reels," embracing those of Snyder, the Meeks, Hardman, Milam, Sage and others. It showed the evolution of the reel from the old-fashioned, home-made wooden spool, mounted by the local blacksmith, to the fine productions of the present time. This article is based on that collection. The pen-drawings of the oldest reels are by Mr. Charles Bradford Hudson, except several by myself.

went to Paris, Ky., then called Hopewell, about 1803, and died there on February 10th, 1841, aged sixty years. He was a skilful watchmaker and silversmith; being a good practical angler, and seeing the necessity for a rapid multiplying reel for black-bass fishing with the live minnow, he proceeded to invent one. Snyder's first reel was made for his own use, about 1810. He afterward made reels for members of his club, and others.

Some twenty years ago the late David M. Snyder, of Cynthiana, Ky.—the last surviving son of George Snyder—showed me a reel made by his father, in which the ends of the spool-shaft were beveled to points which fitted into beveled recesses of pivots that screwed into the center caps of the outer disk-plates of the reel. By this compensating device any wear could be readily taken up, or the running of the reel regulated by a turn of these screw pivots.

It will be noticed, perhaps, that all of the Snyder reels figured are quite narrow in diameter of the spool, and also much longer than in those of the present day. This is in accordance with the fact that a long, narrow spool runs more rapidly, all things being equal, than where the spool is short and of greater diameter. I have seen but one Snyder reel of large size, which was no doubt employed for large fish, as mascalonge, pike and the so-called "salmon" (pike-perch or walled-eyed pike). This reel is shown in the illustrations. Its peculiarities are a curiously-shaped flat lever, for operating the alarm spring by means of a pin working in a curved slot, and the flat brass drag spring, which is on the outside of the back disk-plate. I imagine it was placed there to allow of its being used while the reel was running, which would prove quite an advantage while playing a large fish. This reel is in the possession of Mr. R. J. Snyder, of Louisville, Ky., who says it is one of the oldest reels made by his grandfather.

A very interesting reel is one made by George Snyder, in 1821, for Hon. Brutus J. Clay, who was a member of Congress in 1864. It is now owned by his son, Mr. C. F. Clay, of Bourbon County, Ky., and is still in good condition, though it has been used by Mr. Clay and his father for nearly seventy years. It is marked in script, "G. S., Feb. 1, 1821." This, like all of

George Snyder's reels, has the steel ends of the spool-shaft projecting through holes in the center of the disk-plate. Also, as in all of Snyder's reels, the pillars are riveted to the back plate, and project through the inner front plate, where they are secured by wire keys.

Another reel made by George Snyder, not later than 1825, is reproduced to show a peculiar feature, one that I have never seen before nor since in a "Kentucky

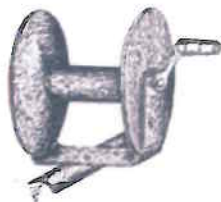


Mr. Benjamin C. Milam.

reel," and that is the absence of both drag and alarm. There is nothing but the lock-stop, whereby a pin in the flat brass spring drops into a hole in the spool-disk. I cannot conceive how a Kentucky angler of the olden time could be content to fish without an alarm spring to his reel! I am free to say, however, that of all of Snyder's reels which I have seen I prefer this one, for, personally, I have no use for either drag, click, alarm or lock in a multiplying reel.

After Snyder's death two of his sons, John and Charles Snyder, succeeded to his business, and they made a few reels. One is now in my possession, and I have seen but one other, owned by Mr. W. W.

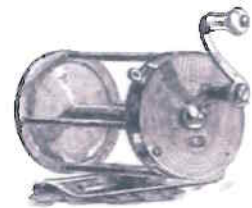
Evolution of the "Kentucky Reel"



1. Old Wooden Spool.



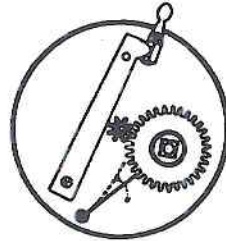
5. Large Snyder Reel, Back View.



9. Snyder Reel.



2. G. Snyder's Own Reel.



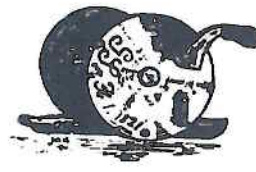
6. Large Snyder Reel Gearing.



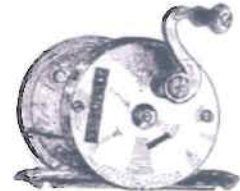
10. Snyder Reel Gearing.



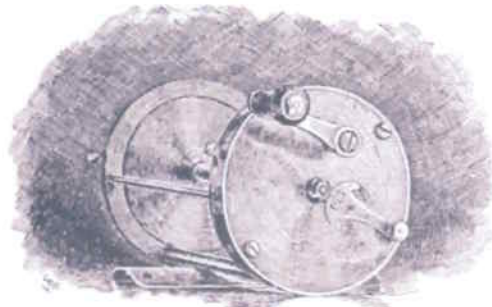
3. G. Snyder's Own Reel Gearing



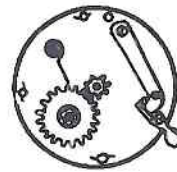
7. Clay's Snyder Reel.



11. J. & C. Snyder Reel.



4. Large Snyder Reel, Front View.



8. Clay's Snyder Reel Gearing.



12. Massie's Reel Gearing.

Fig. 1.—Black wooden spool mounted on iron frame. Disk $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches diameter; $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches between disks; flat iron crank with black wooden handle; holes in ends of reel-plate for seizing to rod.

Fig. 2.—George Snyder's own reel, made of brass in 1810. Disk-plates $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches diameter; length of spool $1\frac{3}{8}$ inches. Marked in script "G. Snyder" and stamped "G. S."

Fig. 3.—George Snyder's own reel gearing. Brass lock spring, silver alarm spring.

Fig. 4.—Brass reel made by Geo. Snyder about 1820. Disk-plates $2\frac{1}{8}$ inches diameter; length of spool, $2\frac{3}{8}$ inches.

Fig. 5.—Showing back disk-plate with drag-spring outside.

Fig. 6.—Showing gearing. Steel wheel with 32 leaves; steel pinion with 8 teeth, a quadruple multiplier.

Fig. 7.—Reel made by George Snyder in 1821; brass, in good condition; $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches in diameter; length, $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches.

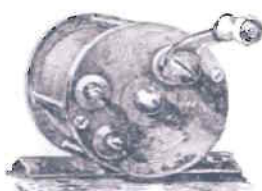
Fig. 8.—Gearing. Brass wheel with 21 leaves; steel pinion with 7 teeth; triple multiplier.

Fig. 9.—This reel was made sometime between 1818 and 1822. It is of brass, like all of Snyder's reels. It is in excellent condition to-day. Diameter, $1\frac{3}{8}$ inches; length, $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches.

Fig. 10.—Gearing. Brass wheel with 24 leaves; multiplies $3\frac{1}{2}$ times.

Fig. 11.—Brass reel stamped "J. & C. Snyder." Diameter $1\frac{3}{8}$ inches; length of spool $1\frac{3}{8}$ inches; multiplies four times.

Fig. 12.—Brass reel made by Charles Snyder for present owner, Mr. W. W. Massie. Diameter, $2\frac{1}{8}$ inches; between disks, 2 5-16 inches. Operated by a bent arm of steel wire, which is moved by a small block attached to an outside oblong slide.



13. Higgins' J. F. Meek Reel, Front View.



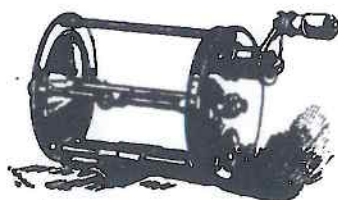
17. Vertner's J. F. Meek Reel, Back View.



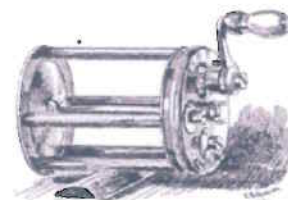
21. Bell Click.



14. Higgins' J. F. Meek Reel, Back View.



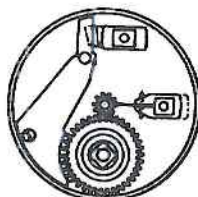
18. Hardman Reel.



22. Meek & Milam Reel.



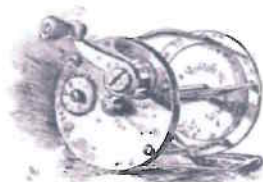
15. Higgins' J. F. Meek Reel Gearing.



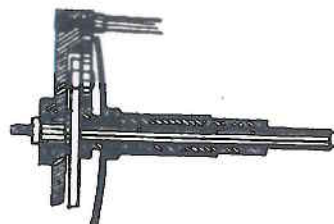
19. Hardman Reel Gearing.



23. Meek & Milam Reel Gearing.



16. Vertner's J. F. Meek Reel, Front View.



20. Bell Click Gearing.

Fig. 13.—Brass reel made by J. F. Meek about 1840. In fair condition, perfectly plain. Diameter $1\frac{3}{8}$ inches; length $1\frac{3}{4}$ inches.

Fig. 14.—Showing back disk-plate of No. 13.

Fig. 15.—Gearing. Steel wheel with 34 leaves; steel pinion with 8 teeth; multiplies a little more than four times.

Fig. 16.—Solid silver reel made by J. F. Meek about 1840. In good condition. Diameter $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches; length 1 15-16 inches.

Fig. 17.—Back disk-plate of No. 16.

Fig. 18.—German silver reel made by J. W. Hardman. Diameter 2 1-16 inches; length 2 inches.

Fig. 19.—Gearing of No. 18.

Fig. 20.—Epicycloidal wheel.

Fig. 21.—Bell click, showing bells and hammers.

Fig. 22.—Brass reel made by B. C. Milam and stamped "Meek & Milam No. 1." In excellent condition. Diameter, $1\frac{3}{8}$ inches; length, 1 5-16 inches.

Fig. 23.—Gearing is essentially as made to-day.

Massie, of Paris, Ky. The latter is stamped "G. S.," but was made by Charles Snyder expressly for Mr. Massie, who saw him at various times at work on it. Both reels were made between 1841 and 1844.

The next person to turn his attention to reel making, after the elder Snyder, was Jonathan Fleming Meek, also a skilful watchmaker. He went from Danville, Ky., to Frankfort, about 1833, where he made his first reel for Hon. Mason Brown, of Frankfort, a noted jurist of his day, and a devoted angler. Judge Brown, having had his Snyder reel borrowed or stolen just at a time when the bass began to bite their best, prevailed on Mr. Meek to make him one.

At an early day there were quite a number of Kentuckians who owned plantations in Mississippi, Louisiana and Arkansas, but spent thier summers in Kentucky. Two of the Meek reels shown



Mr. J. L. Sage.

were made for such parties. One for Mr. K. Higgins, of Lexington, a Mississippi planter, the other for Mr. D. Vertner, a Louisiana planter. The latter reel is now in the possession of his grand-daughter, Mrs. Alexander Jeffrey, of Lexington, Ky.

These reels, it will be observed, are improvements in some respects on the Snyder reels. There is a collar around the crank-shaft; the ends of the spool-shaft do not project, and the alarm and drag springs are operated by sliding buttons, as in the modern reel.

It seems that about the time that Jonathan F. Meek made his first reel, in 1833, or soon after, at least one reel was made by Theodore Noel, also a watchmaker of Frankfort.

J. F. Meek continued to make reels until about 1840, when he formed a partnership with his brother, Benjamin F. Meek, who was likewise a fine watchmaker. After this the reels were made by B. F. Meek, and stamped "J. F. & B. F. Meek."

About the year 1843 a very fine workman and expert watchmaker, of Louisville, Ky., named J. W. Hardman, began making multiplying reels for black-bass fishing. His reels were a great improvement on those previously made by others. He shortened the spool and increased the diameter, affixed the pillars to the disk-plates by screws instead of riveting, added some ornamentation, and altogether made the first true and substantial improvements in the "Kentucky reel," both as to its practicability and appearance, and these were followed thereafter by all other makers. The "Kentucky reel" to-day bears testimony to his unmistakable genius and fine handiwork. The Hardman reel illustrated is the property of Mr. J. F. Speed, of Louisville, Ky., and is in excellent condition. It was made about 1845, and is a very handsome piece of work, of German silver. The sliding buttons are gold-plated, as are the screws. The ornamentation is very fine and workmanlike.

Mr. Benjamin C. Milam, whose name is almost synonymous with the "Kentucky reel," went to Frankfort, Ky., in 1835, and worked awhile with Beverly Noel, a watchmaker, a brother to Theodore Noel, previously mentioned. He visited Paris, Ky., in 1836, and saw George Snyder and his reels. In this same year he engaged as an apprentice to J. F. Meek, and it was not long before the reel making was given over to him and B. F. Meek, when the latter came into the firm.

The Meek brothers dissolved partnership about 1851, Jonathan going to Louis-

ville, but returning again to Frankfort just before his death in 1884. After the withdrawal of J. F. Meek, the firm became Meek & Milam, which in turn was dissolved at the end of five years, though the former partners continued to occupy the same store, Milam devoting himself to making reels, while B. F. Meek took the watchmaking and jewelry business. All reels made by Mr. Milam continued to be stamped "Meek & Milam" until 1878, when he used his own stamp of "B. C. Milam." In later years, having trained his son to the trade, he took him into his business under the firm name of B. C. Milam & Son, which is continued to the present time.

There were a few reels with so-called "centrifugal gearing" made at an early date by B. F. Meek, a Mr. Barbour, of Georgetown, Ky., and B. C. Milam. Among the reels I exhibited at the Chicago World's Fair was a very elaborate and ornamental one of solid silver, made by B. F. Meek, about 1846, for an artist of New Orleans, T. S. Mayeau. A novel feature of this reel was the "bell-click," made upon the same principal as the repeating watch, whereby the artist-angler could really enjoy the "Music of the reel," the two bells being tuned in thirds.

The peculiar mechanism of the reel is the application of the principle of the epicycloidal wheel, whereby reciprocating motion is converted into circular motion. While the power of this plan of gearing is greater than in the ordinary reel with two wheels, the friction is also too great for casting; consequently it was abandoned.

An old reel stamped "Meek & Milam" was exhibited in my collection, made somewhere about 1844, and is shown in the accompanying illustrations. The pillars are still of the Snyder plan, as also the long narrow spool. The improvements are a collar to crank-shaft, sliding buttons for alarm and drag, and a better shape to front disk-plate. Here we have for the first time the bent or U-shaped alarm spring formed of a piece of watch spring. It will be further observed that with the exception of the ornamental bars or pillars of the Hardman reel, this reel is a close imitation of it in its general form, in the sliding buttons and their screws, in the collar and the retaining screw of the crank. A strong resem-

blance is also seen in the gearing, more especially in the sliding blocks and drag spring.

Mr. J. L. Sage, of Lexington, Ky., but previously of Frankfort, was also an early maker of the "Kentucky reel," and I am



Mr. Benjamin F. Meek.

satisfied that he was the first to make a click reel, in Kentucky, for black-bass fly-fishing, of which branch of angling he was one of the pioneers. I have the smallest and neatest "Kentucky reel" I have ever seen; it was made by Mr. Sage.

In 1883, Mr. B. F. Meek went to Louisville, Ky., where he entered on a new era of reel making. He formed a partnership with his two sons. He made a new departure in the gearing of the reel, which he called the "spiral gear." This consists in cutting the teeth of the wheel and pinion obliquely or diagonally, instead of horizontally. The space between the teeth, at their base, is also cut rounding, instead of flat or square.

Other makers of the "Kentucky reel" are Geo. W. Gayle, of Frankfort, and James Deally, of Louisville. The reel as now made is still principally for black-bass fishing, though larger sizes are furnished for striped bass and tarpon.