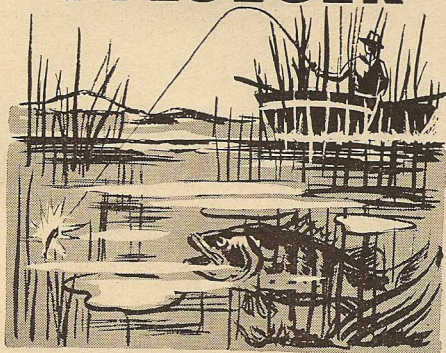


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JANUARY 1953

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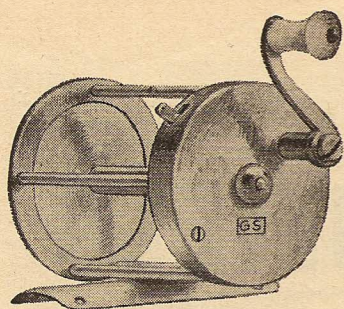
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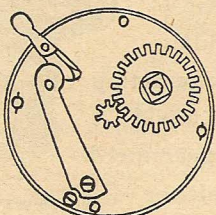
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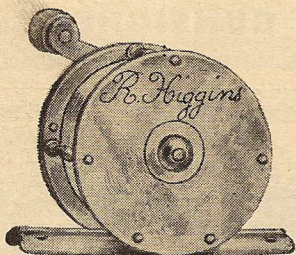
# MY OLD KENTUCKY REEL



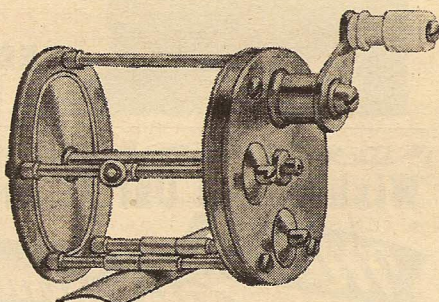
SNYDER REEL, 1810



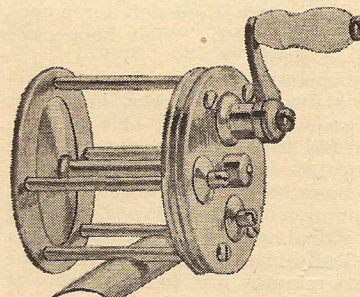
SNYDER GEARING



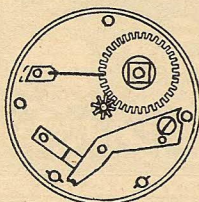
J. F. MEEK REEL, 1840



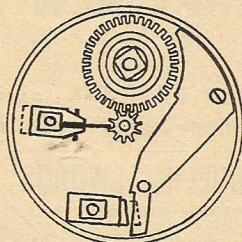
J. W. HARDMAN REEL, 1844



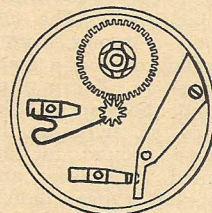
MEEK AND MILAM REEL, 1845



MEEK GEARING



HARDMAN GEARING



MEEK AND MILAM GEARING

## Fishing

A. J. McCLANE  
Editor

*Being a story of watchmakers who never*

*made watches—and reels that actually made music*

THERE was a group of anglers living in Kentucky at the turn of the nineteenth century who were convinced that the road to happiness lay in fishing for black bass. To be precise, this was more than a conviction, because in the same way they were convinced that it was a good idea to eat. They went down in history as the most rabid collection of technicians that ever spooked a fish. At that time, the Kentucky River was a free-flowing stream where the people of Bourbon County dipped their branch water and savoured the crystal melody of a singing reel. The fact that reels could sing had its basis in fact; a feature of one reel was the "bell click," which was made on the same principle as an alarm clock. The bells were tuned in thirds, and when a fish was hooked—sweet music filled the angler's ears. We can presume that the actual music fell short of the reel's ability to make it, but this was tuned to the period in which our hero lived. Enter here the man who revolutionized the sport.

George Snyder migrated from Pennsylvania to Hopewell,

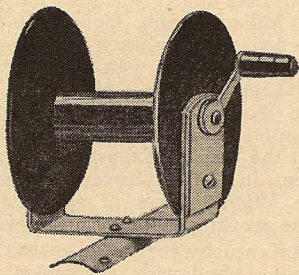
Kentucky, in 1803. He was a watchmaker by profession and, like most honest anglers, seldom concerned with snaring worldly luxuries. In fact, George mended the march of time just to keep Bourbon County anglers on schedule. After trusting him with their watches, they brought reels for repair, and, having a craftsman's pride in the smooth clicking of parts, it was a simple matter to put them in shape. There were only two kinds of bait-casting reels available in that day—the English single-action reel made of brass or the wooden kind, usually made from a discarded sewing spool mounted on a frame by the local tinsmith. The rods used by these pioneer bass fishermen were native woods (bethabara, hickory, Osage orange, etc.) nearly ten feet long, but they were extremely light—weighing from four to six ounces. With a fine raw silk line they could cast live minnows about fifty or sixty feet, provided the wind was right. The "cast" was what we know as strip-casting today. The angler would lay coils of line in the bottom of his boat or, if he was really

good, hold them in his hands and propel the bait with a side-swiping motion. The inertia of a heavy single-action spool was too much for the bait to overcome.

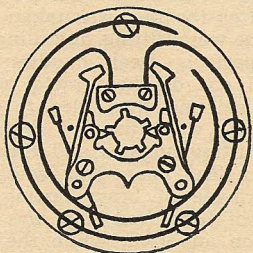
This was nearly one hundred years before James Heddon manufactured the first bass plugs, so Snyder's customers were actually looking for a very sensitive spool with which to cast live baits. Having a watchmaker's knowledge of gearing, one thing became immediately apparent to George—the spool should revolve several times to every turn of the crank handle, not once, the way single-action reels do. That was a waste of mechanical efficiency, so he set out to make things right.

History in the making is seldom more recognizable than a horseman galloping through the park. We might both admire his skill, never realizing that the horse is a runaway and that the rider eventually broke his neck. Thus, different observers come upon the episode admiring his form, or wondering how long he will stay on the saddle, or wondering at the very last where he will land. Being a blue-grass gentleman, George Snyder didn't fall off a horse. Historically speaking, he was seen at a wild gallop. In 1810, he built the Kentucky reel—the first multiplying reel in the world—and although elected president of the Bourbon County Anglers Association, he remained unknown to the angling public.

There was no such thing as mass production in those days, so even though George had won local acclaim in making the greatest reel ever, he could make very few of them. However, more watchmakers were about. You must remember that these men were watchmakers by virtue of their training, but this peculiar history of Kentucky's repairmen happened at a time when the Licking, Elkhorn, Stoner, and dozens of other streams were heavily populated with black bass and walleyes. Some of those timepiece experts would no more repair a watch than write a cycle son-



WOODEN REEL, 1800

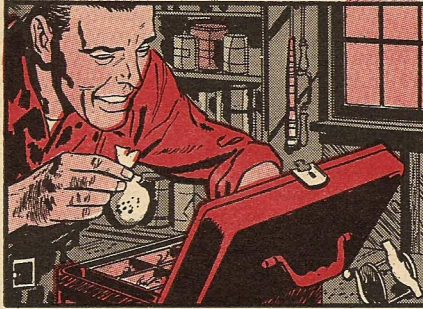


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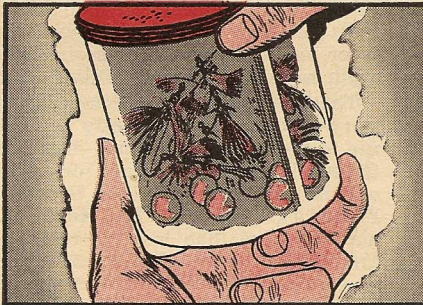
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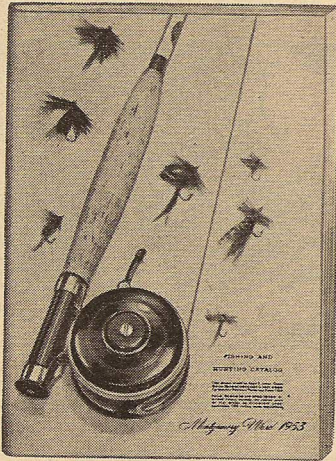
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net on the subject. There was too much fishing to be done, and Snyder's clients were flipping their minnows with telling effect.

In the Snyder reel, the steel ends of the spool shaft were beveled to points, which in turn fitted in beveled recesses of pivots that screwed into the center caps of the outer disc plates of the reel. This compensating measure would take up any wear and the running of the reel could be regulated by a turn of these screw pivots. How sound George's methods were is best shown in the reel he made for the Honorable Brutus Clay in 1821. Seventy years later the same reel was being used by Clay's son! This, like all of his reels, had its pillars riveted to the back plate and projecting through the inner front plate, where they were secured with wire keys. Snyder reels were also quite narrow in spool diameter and long, in accordance with the belief that a long narrow spool runs more rapidly than a short one of greater diameter—all things being equal. On some of his reels he built an oddly shaped flat lever to operate the click spring with a pin working in a curved slot.

There are pivotal characters in any story—those who innocently contribute to the course of events—like Mrs. O'Leary's cow in Chicago or, as in our narrative, Judge Mason Brown in Frankfort, Kentucky. His Honor did nothing more than lose his reel, and finding George too busy to make him a new one, he went to another watchmaker by the name of Jonathan F. Meek. Although Jonathan has often been credited with "inventing" the bait-casting reel, let it be stated here that he had only the improving urge, and because of the rapidity of events that followed, he was often seen riding George's historical horse. Jonathan's reel was an improvement over the Snyder. His best work was probably the reel he made for a customer named Higgins—the one shown in our illustration. There was a collar around the crank shaft; the ends of the spool did not project, and the click and drag springs were operated by sliding buttons, as in the modern reel. He made the reel for Judge Brown in 1832 and continued making reels alone until 1840, when he formed a partnership with his brother, Benjamin F. Meek, who was, of course, a watchmaker. Ben proved so good at building reels that for a while he made all of their production, stamping the side plates "J. F. & B. F. Meek."

I would hesitate to tell you of the gallons of mellowed branch water that passed down the throats of Walton's disciples in the year 1840. But this simple and moral diet was accompanied by platters heaped with chunks of black bass, like warm snowballs flaked with gold, and these foods were not without spiritual profit. The Kentucky rifle had sent a shiver of dread through the savage breast, and in tracking the clay feet of history, we now find our blue-grass pioneers living by the best traditions of Old Isaac. They would fish at the drop of a jug, or, as a popular ballad, "You Get a Jug and I'll Get a Pole," allowed—at the filling of one. These were unquestionably days of inspired merriment. The art of jugging for catfish

had its origin in the picnic parties of their forefathers. Sport fishing was on the march, however, as there are evidences of fly fishing for black bass just six years later and a fantastic demand for Meek reels.

At about this time, still another maker of watches turned to reels, a man named J. W. Hardman of Louisville, Kentucky. His reels were a great improvement on the Snyders and the Meeks. Instead of the 3 to 1 and 3½ to 1 gear ratio popularized by Snyder, Hardman used a 4 to 1 gearing—and as a result he is often credited with making the first quadruple multiplying reel. However, George Snyder had been using the quadruple gearing in his personal reels several years before Hardman began building. Hardman did make a more modern looking reel; he shortened the spool and increased the diameter, affixed the pillars to the disc plates by screws instead of riveting, and added some ornamentation. The use of screws, incidentally, made the Hardman reel the first one having a "take-down" feature. The Hardman reel of 1845 was made of German silver with gold-plated click buttons and screws. But there's another name to contend with—a watchmaker who had visited Hopewell, Kentucky (then called Paris) to see George Snyder.

Benjamin C. Milam was most unique in that he stated flatly that he didn't like the watch repair business. On the streets of Frankfort this pronouncement was probably no more epoch-making than a comment on the weather. Milam joined forces with the Meeks as an apprentice. After the retirement of Jonathan Meek, the firm became known as Meek and Milam, which was in turn dissolved at the end of five years. The partners continued to occupy the same store, Milam devoting himself to making reels while Ben Meek reestablished his watchmaking and jewelry business. All reels made by Mr. Milam continued to be stamped "Meek and Milam" until 1878. Having trained his son to the trade, Milam took him into the business under the firm name of B. C. Milam & Son. How well they succeeded may be seen in the fact that a Milam reel won the international first prize in Chicago in 1893 at the World's Fair, at the Fisheries Exposition in Bergen, Norway, in 1898, and at the World's Exposition in Paris, France, in 1904. Grover Cleveland wrote Milam letters of appreciation for the workmanship in his reels.

The Kentucky reel prior to 1880 was entirely a handmade mechanism. Yet every one of them was made with painstaking exactness. No two screws were alike, and as a result every screw had to be put back in its proper place after the reel was taken apart. The lathe work, fitting, and filing were truly perfect. Reel handles were chopped out of sheet metal with a cold chisel and then filed to shape. The gears were usually slotted on Swiss cutting engines and then filed by hand. The main gear wheel was always made of brass casting or a section of brass rod that was hammered on an anvil, while the small wheel or pinion gear was made of the very best tempered tool steel. This resulted in a gearing that was almost

indestructible. Considering the labor involved, Ben Meek's monthly production, for instance, was about seven reels, and these would sometimes bring sixty or seventy dollars apiece. Customers didn't ask the price in those days—they ordered and were charged what the builder thought it was worth. The best a sporting goods dealer could hope for was a ten per cent discount, and the order was filled when the "manufacturer" was in the mood.

An old reel exhibited at the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893 stamped "Meek and Milam" is shown in the illustrations. This one is of 1844 vintage; the pillars are still of the Snyder plan, as is the narrow spool. The improvements are a collar on the crank, sliding buttons for the click and drag, and, for the first time, a bent or U-shaped click spring formed from a piece of watch spring. With exception of the ornamentation, this reel closely resembles the Hardman in general form.

Ben Meek wearied of his watch trade, and in 1883 he headed for Louisville, Kentucky, where he started a reel business once again. His indecision can probably be explained by the fact that Ben was never an angler. Of all our Kentucky reel-makers, this autocratic master knew little about fishing and couldn't care less. He formed a partnership with his two sons, and together they created a new departure in the gearing of reels, which is called the "spiral gear." This consisted of cutting the teeth of the wheel and pinion diagonally instead of horizontally. The space between the teeth at their base was rounded instead of being made flat or square. But even more significant was the fact that the Meeks started building reels in an organized fashion. Here is what the *Tri-Weekly Kentucky Yeoman* of November 21, 1882, had to say in an article on Benjamin F. Meek.

"He proposes, we learn, to make his reels entirely of metal, no casting or drawn wire being used, and the machinery will be as perfect as that of an astronomical instrument. For this purpose he has provided himself with machinery of the most improved pattern, most of it being invented by himself, and made under his immediate direction at Waltham, Massachusetts, by the American Watch Tool Company. This, which is costly and intricate, will run by a gas engine, which he is now engaged in putting up. But such is the nature of the works that the greater part has to be done by hand, and Mr. Meek says that there will not be a piece that will not receive his touch. . . . He will not be able to turn out reels before the first of February, but after that time he will endeavor to supply the demands. We commend Mr. Meek as in every respect worthy of the respect and confidence of the people of Louisville, and as to his reels, they will commend themselves."

Meek made reels for the next sixteen years, and by the time he died in 1901, he had made some of the most important contributions toward the development of modern bait-casting reels. His use of spiral gears instead of spur gears and the introduction of jeweled pivot bearings reduced wear,

resulting in a smooth-running reel. The tiniest weight would set a Meek spool in motion. E. J. Martin of Rockville, Connecticut, started making braided silk casting lines in 1884, so the delicate sensitivity of Meek reels was brought to full flower. Ben cashed in his chips just as the game ended; bait-casting rods had been growing shorter all the time—now they used five-foot bamboo sticks and cast Dowagiac minnows in "Kalamazoo" style. The overhead, or Kalamazoo, cast was the dawn of a new era, and the end of the Kentucky reel-maker. Bait casting became immensely popular, and mass production methods became absolutely essential.

The Talbots, Gayles, Noels, the Sages, and many other itinerant watchmakers had burned the mid-night oil in the back rooms of Kentucky shops. However, none of these men made significant changes in the multiplying reel. A Wisconsin firm, Wheeler and McGregor, made a device for level-winding the line—which Ben Meek perfected for them. Their original design is still embodied in the level-wind devices of today. But the old-time reel-makers would have none of it; the blue-grass artists stuck to their Kentucky pattern right down to the very last. These were great reels, and while none of them are made now, the modern bait-casting reel owes its existence to the watchmakers of Frankfort, Louisville, and Paris, Kentucky. Some of their reels are still being fished with; it's possible that there's one in your attic.

So George Snyder did not declare a war, change a money system, or build

a rocket to the moon. But students of angling who learned to cast before the age of spinning mark his name well. Like sinners in sack cloth we sniff the dry roses of regret—not only has the Kentucky reel vanished, but now a geometrized, streamlined non-revolving cone is dissolving the ranks of bait casters. Things have gotten to a state where a mere stripling of a child can throw a plug to the other side of the lake. There is no more apprenticeship to serve, no more backlashes to philosophize over, no purring of a carefully balanced spool—and these moderns don't even smell of oil. How can they? Few people know where to squirt at the uncannily correct self-contained reels of spinning. But take heart, good friend, my old Kentucky reel was a way of living rather than a manufactured product, and may you and I be granted no worse an inheritance while we walk under the sun.

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