



Field & Stream



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Field and Stream's

Thirty-Fourth Year

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No. 11

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JUDGING THE BEAUTIES

Combining business with a little fishing.

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With the hope that trout fishing in this great stream will be preserved.

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Edited by SETH BRIGGS

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CAPT. PAUL A. CURTIS

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IROQUOIS DAHL

KENNEL DEPARTMENT

FREEMAN LLOYD

AMONG THE GUN DOGS

HORACE LYTLE

GAME BREEDING

HORACE MITCHELL

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The Kentucky Reel

Development of the bait-casting reel in this country

By ROBERT PAGE LINCOLN

NOTHING has had a more fascinating hold upon the fancy of the fishermen of this country, if not the world, for that matter, than the history of the multiplying reel. This great interest, of course, has had impetus in the fact that the bait-casting reel is largely, if not entirely, the result of American ingenuity and inventiveness. It owes practically nothing to the craftsmen of other countries. The multiplying reel is a native product. Indeed, bait casting as we know it—that of casting from a free reel—is strictly American in origin and development.

The bait-casting reel is to this country what the familiar fly-reel is to England. The difference, however, is that whereas we have built a number of patterns of fly-reels and use an immense number of the English-made product, the English in turn but very rarely make use of the quadruple multiplying winch. Indeed, in many sections of England and on the Continent our pet product is practically unheard of. Thus the exclusiveness of this wonderful reel which has meant so much to us in our fishing days on lake and stream.

It is doubtful when the first fishing reel was made. We have that reference in Walton's immortal work which points to the fact that some variety of winch was in use in the early days, but whether this was merely some sort of wooden spool or a more ingenious work of art we do not know. The chances are strong that it was a round spool used for winding on the line and was, no doubt, the basis for the fly-reel which in due course of time was to follow. However, whether it was a crude spool or whether it was a better developed affair, nevertheless the idea had early taken hold. That a more finished and scientific product did not materialize until a rather advanced date is not strange, inasmuch as the method of casting with a rod shorter than the fly rod also is comparatively modern.

It is highly probable that the early reel-makers of this country foresaw the need of a special reel in the taking of our national game fish, the black bass, and it is significant in this respect that the multiplying reel found its inception in a black bass region. The state of Kentucky may not to-day rank with other black bass centers, its waters having been more closely fished than many others. The fact remains, however, that bass fishing in Kentucky was at one time something to conjure with. And it was in the taking of this fish that the multiplying reel was founded. It was not made to catch salmon, trout or any other like fish. It was a bass-fishing reel pure and simple.

Just as the settling of the wilderness of Ohio and Kentucky opened up a demand for firearms, so did it attract the gun-makers who made those long-barreled Kentucky rifles—the "pea-shooters" that sent a shiver of dread through the savage heart and firmly established the white settlers in the land of their seeking. Many of these gun-makers were skilled in watch-making and in jewelry work. Often, indeed, they worked at a number of these intricate branches of endeavor at the same

time and were men very highly appreciated and thought of by the community.

While the frontier was at strife, gun-making was the business that predominated in importance. But later on, when conditions were more normal, gun-making lost its hold to a great extent, and watch-making and jewelry work took the lead. The reel producers were all jewelers and watch makers that entered upon the scene during the normal times that followed our period of internal stress. Very few of the known Kentucky reel-makers, save probably J. L. Sage, were gunsmiths.

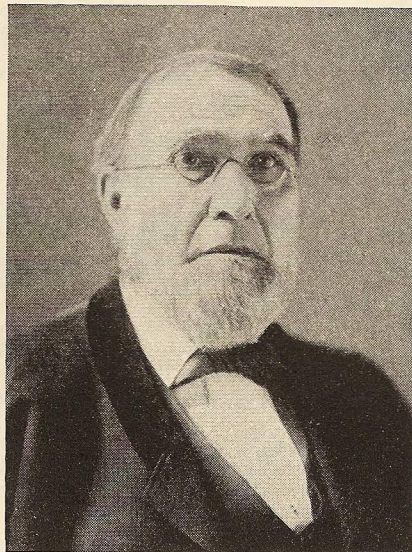
So far as records go, one of the first of the known reel-makers and probably

desire to make reels originated in the Meek establishment with Jonathan Meek himself. Here again we have tradition to go by and also some known facts. Jonathan Meek had a younger brother by the name of Benjamin who started to work for him as an apprentice, obviously to learn the watch-making trade. Benjamin at that time (1835) was eighteen years of age.

Several years later another boy, by the name of Benjamin Milam (born July 1, 1821) also was apprenticed to Jonathan Meek. He was at the time but sixteen years of age.

It is interesting to note that at the time Benjamin Meek went about making his first Frankfort reel he was still in his teens. But as was often remarked, he was a better mechanic at fifteen than most men who thought they were good mechanics ever got to be. His desire to be a reel-maker evidently took hold with him early, even before he entered his brother's employ. The opportunity to get a start offered itself in due course of time.

A SPRING day, at the opening of the fishing season, one Judge Mason Brown, a son of John Brown, aide-de-camp to Lafayette and the first Senator from Kentucky, sauntered into the shop where Ben Meek and his brother were busily at work repairing watches. The Judge being an enthusiastic angler, the conversation naturally drifted to the sub-

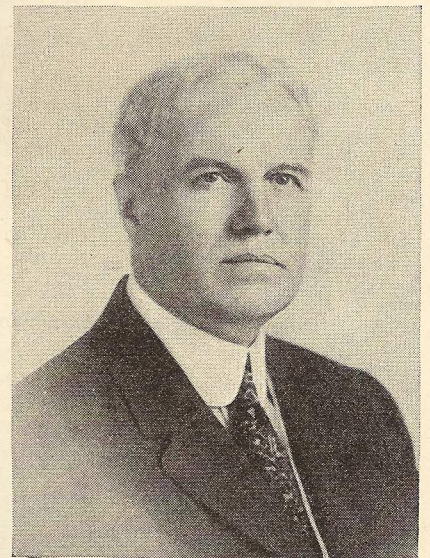


Benjamin C. Milam (1821-1904)

the discoverer of the multiplying type of reel was a Mr. Snider who operated at Paris, Kentucky, in the year 1810. He was an old-time watch and clock maker. He made but very few reels, and these mostly for his own amusement and gratification. Comparatively little, if anything, is known about him, and to the best of my knowledge and that of the investigators who have made this piece of writing possible, no specimens of his work are preserved.

TWENTY years later, in 1830, to be exact, one Theodore Noel, another old-time watch and clock maker, established his business in the town of Frankfort, Kentucky. It is on record that he made a few reels, also for his own personal gratification and to supply the needs of those friends of his whose pastime was angling. There is little doubt that Noel got his reel-making ideas from studying specimens of Mr. Snider's reels that still existed. Whether succeeding reel-makers took their cue from Noel, as Noel took his from Snider, we do not know. The fact remains that no specimen of Mr. Noel's work is to be had for inspection.

Jonathan Meek located in Frankfort in the year 1835 and took up the business of watch-making and working in jewelry. It is highly doubtful if the incentive or



John W. Milam (1859-1928)

ject of fishing. According to the Judge, the only drawback to the pleasures of the sport was the lack of a satisfactory reel. If he only had a reel, then all his troubles would be over. He said so in no uncertain words.

Jonathan turned to his brother with an expansive smile on his face. "Well, Ben," he said meaningly, "you have threatened many times that you could make a reel as perfect as a watch. You've often looked for the opportunity. Here it is. Get busy and make the Judge a reel that will make

The Kentucky Reel

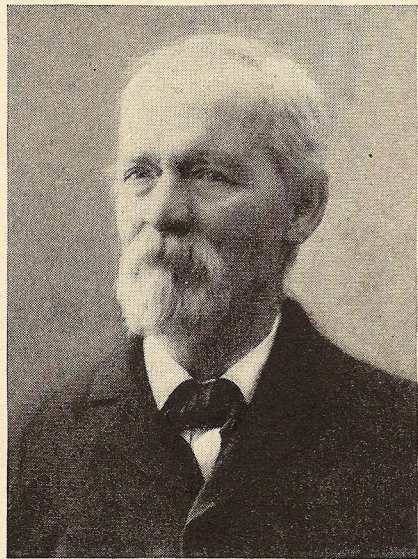
his mouth water and his eyes glisten. And if you succeed as well as you think you will, we'll go into the reel-making business as a side-line."

Benjamin Meek was both thrilled and delighted by this commission and went into it with an enthusiasm upon which failure had no impression. How long it took to make this reel we do not know. At that time, Danville was the only town in the state that possessed an engine for cutting the gearing of the wheels. Accordingly Mr. Meek went to Danville and there accomplished the more intricate business in the making of that initial reel.

IT was presented to the Judge, whose delight was such that most of his time thereafter was devoted to fishing and he lost no opportunity in telling his friends about it and making extensive trips to display the object of his happiness. He often reiterated the statement that "the Meek shall inherit the earth."

The Judge proved to be an unexcelled publicity agent, and as a result more orders came in than could possibly be filled. An addition was built to their shop. The two brothers and young Milam all worked on reels for a time. Then Ben Meek turned over the watch-making business to his brother and devoted himself exclusively to the manufacture of reels.

A party of New York sportsmen and an English nobleman once made a trip to the



Benjamin F. Meek (1817-1901)

shop of the Meeks. The Englishman purchased one of these reels and brought it back to England with him. This started a flood of orders from the British Isles, aimed at that little shop in Frankfort. Shortly the news of this invention had spread around the world and orders were being received from every country, sums being offered for single reels far in excess of the price asked by the makers. For twelve years Mr. Meek bent all his energies to satisfying the wants of skilled anglers, even sending to Switzerland for tools that could not be obtained in this country.

In 1839, Jonathan Meek and his brother formed a partnership under the name of J. F. & B. F. Meek. They made reels under this name until 1848. Then they were joined by Ben Milam, who had been with the Meeks all of this time except for an interval when, as a captain in Humphrey Marshall's regiment of cavalry, he served in the Mexican War. The firm now became known as J. F. Meek & Co. The reels, however, were continued to be

stamped "J. F. & B. F. Meek." In the year 1852 this firm failed. Jonathan Meek left Frankfort and went to Louisville, where he continued his business as a jeweler and watchmaker until his death.

One year after the failure of the old business, Ben F. Meek and Ben C. Milam established a new firm under the name of Meek & Milam to continue in business at the old stand. This was on January 1, 1853. In this business Meek did all the jewelry work, while Ben Milam made the reels, stamping them "Meek & Milam." In 1855 this partnership was dissolved, Meek keeping up the jewelry business. Milam devoted himself to reel manufacturing. Recognizing the value of the name of Meek on a reel, he continued to stamp them with the old firm name, Meek &



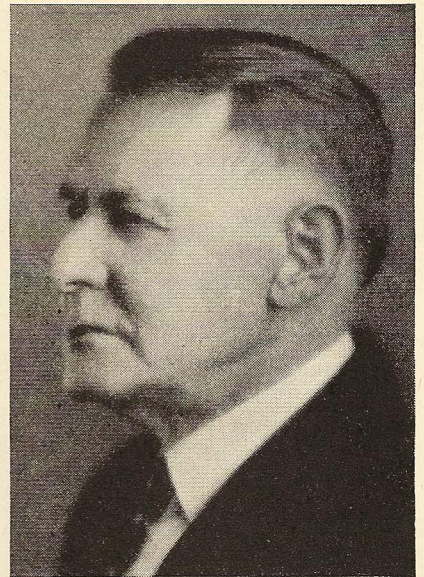
George W. Gayle (1834-1896)

Milam, for twenty-five years, from 1855 to 1880, when the name was changed. During all this time Meek had nothing to do with the manufacture of these reels—in fact, was not making reels at all. Ben C. Milam continued to make his own reel at the original place of business until his death, January 29, 1904, at the age of eighty-three.

For twenty-seven years Ben F. Meek had kept away from reel-making, and it looked as though he would never again set his hand to the business that he had made famous in the town which was now equally as well known to the anglers of the world. Then, in the year 1882, at the age of sixty-five, he left Frankfort and went to Louisville. Once more he plunged into the reel-making business with his two sons, Pitman and Sylvester. In the shop in the rear of his modest home at 839 Seventh Street, the Meeks were active in making fine reels for sixteen years.

IN 1898, the business was abandoned, owing to the advanced age of the elder Meek and the death of his son Pitman. Ben F. Meek then sold his business and went back to Frankfort, spending his last days with his daughter. His death occurred in 1901, when he was in his eighty-fifth year.

To Ben F. Meek is due a great deal of credit. According to Clarence Gayle, the last of the old-time reel-makers, "More credit is probably due Ben Meek than any one in establishing the character, design and quality of the Kentucky reel." It was he who introduced a revolution in reel-



A recent photo of Clarence Gayle

making with the spiral gearing which so far surpassed the so-called spur gearing as to afford no comparison. Not only did the spiral gearing make for a greater durability with less wear, but very little trouble was given because of a broken wheel, tooth or pinion leaf. Ben F. Meek was also the pioneer in jewelery the pivot bearings of fishing reels in such a manner as to have the pivots run directly on the jewels, the advantage of which is that the reel runs more freely in casting and also when winding in.

THE strangest part of the story of Ben F. Meek, the reel-maker, is that he himself was no fisherman. His friends could recall no time in which he accompanied them on their fishing trips. Another oddity is that none of the old-time reel-makers ever did any casting, with one exception, Clarence Gayle, the last survivor of the old school, being a good caster.

It is said of Ben Meek that he was possessed of a splendid education and was a great book-lover. No matter how many orders he had on hand, if he was seized with a desire for study, the fishermen had to wait in patience until he chose to make the reels. He was an autocratic old man and apparently cared nothing for money. He refused to take out a patent on his reel. "If any man can produce a reel equal to mine, he is welcome to all the money he can make from it," he was wont to remark with a quiet smile when urged to patent his invention.

Meek sold his reels cheaply, provided the purchaser did not ask the price when giving the order. To have the price asked in advance angered him. He was proud of his workmanship. It was his boast that in the sixty-two years he manufactured reels he never lost one cent from a bad customer. This was remarkable, for whenever he received an order, whether it was from New York or Australia, whether he had ever heard of the purchaser or not, he immediately sent the reel.

"When a man gets one of my reels," he used to say, "he will open the package, and when he finds out the kind of reel he has the chances in nine cases out of ten are that he will send me a check for it. If he does not, the first time he is out on the river bank fishing there will be a small voice to speak to his conscience from that reel. He will wind up his line and go home and send me the money." (Continued on page 77)

It was February when Joe finally sent the following night letter:

MR. LEDFORD BAINES,
Kansas City, Mo.

I have Dan broken on birds and he is a good shooting dog. He is just what I have been looking for for twenty years. I will send you check for \$250 which I think is fair price for him. Is it a deal? Wire reply.

JOE BISHOP

The return wire read:

"It is a deal. Thanks for taking elephant off my hands."

L. T. BAINES

That night Joe brought Dan into the house to be his dog, to follow him, to hunt for him, to be his companion. No more train trips, no more strange trainers, no more kennels for Dan. The dog seemed to feel the change. He came over by the fire, threw himself down upon the hearth rug and, breathing a long contented sigh, put his head upon Joe's foot. Danny the Dip had found his birthright.

THE KENTUCKY REEL

(Continued from page 27)

And the old man's faith in his reel as a conscience-awakener was never disappointed.

Years ago, certain parties in Milwaukee made a reel that would distribute the line evenly on the spool. Not wholly satisfied with this device, these people sent a pattern to Mr. Meek, saying that in using their invention a noise was produced resembling the onward movement of an ice wagon. Meek wrote back that he could make them a reel remedying all defects, but that it would cost them seventy-five dollars. He was told to go ahead.

In due course of time Meek sent the finished reel to these people. Soon after, he received a letter enclosing a check for eighty-five dollars and saying that his work was so satisfactory as to demand an additional ten dollars as a mark of appreciation. Well may he have received it, since in truth, for a little less than a hundred dollars, he had made perfect the level-winding device which has proved so beneficial and which is one of the most eagerly sought features on the modern bait-casting reel.

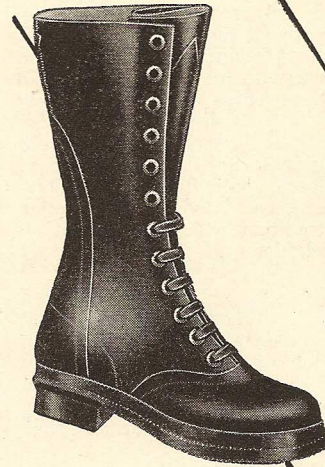
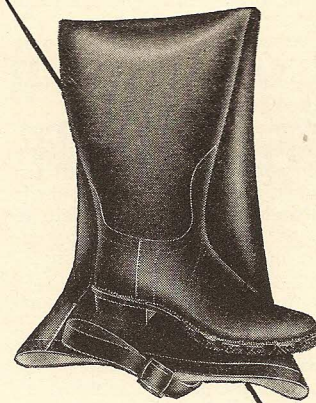
The care bestowed by Mr. Meek in the manufacture of his reels will be shown when it is stated that he and his two sons counted seven as the extreme number of fishing reels that they could complete in one month. He never made an exhibit of his reels at any show or exposition and would never contract with any one for the exclusive sale of his work. A number of years ago he sold seven thousand dollars' worth of reels to an Eastern concern at his regular retail price, giving the purchasers only a discount of 10 per cent for payment within a certain time.

During the period of stress that held the country in its grip from 1860 on through a number of years, into the reconstruction era, reel-making, of course, was more or less at a standstill. It is interesting to make note here, however, of the fact that at least one reel-maker, W. B. Conry, whose name was new at the time, was making reels in 1860. He, too, made only a few, but those he did produce were substantial and well made.

Clarence Gayle stated that two years ago a reel came to his shop for repairs which was different from any he had seen. It was a large reel, about a No. 5, made of brass and unusually long. There was no name on it, but when Gayle showed the reel to John Milam he said that he knew the reel and that it was made by Conry. This reel-maker made no more than twenty reels all told.



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Black Sportpac



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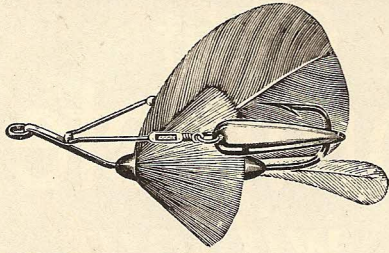
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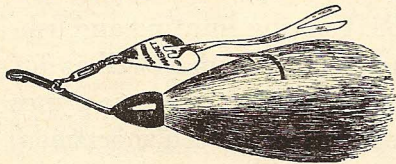
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New and Mighty FISH-GETTERS



SHANNON PERSUADER

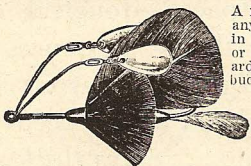
The old unbeatable double-spoon lure—mounted on swivel guards that do not interfere with hooking the fish—that do not catch on the line, landing net or any other obstacle. They are as natural as birds' wings in action. Easy to cast, easy to retrieve in the thickest weeds or in open water. A mighty fish-getter for bass, pike, pickerel and muskies. Standard colors, feather or bucktail fly. Price each 95c.



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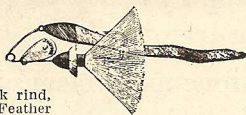
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Other reel-makers that started operating in the early eighties, at the time Ben F. Meek went into reel-making the second time, were Mr. J. L. Sage and George W. Gayle. In the year 1881, Sage started making reels at Frankfort. He was a New Englander and had learned the trade of gun-making at a gun factory in Hartford, Connecticut. He had a gun repair shop and during his idle time between gun jobs made fishing reels. He stamped his reels "J. L. Sage" and made probably about one hundred all told. He later moved to Lexington, Kentucky, where he died about 1897.

In the year 1883, George W. Gayle, who was born in Frankfort in 1834 and was another old-time watchmaker and jeweler, began making fine hand-made reels in Frankfort. He stamped these reels "Geo. W. Gayle & Son," his son Clarence Gayle being associated with him in the business. Clarence Gayle is still living in Frankfort at the age of sixty-two, the last of the old-time reel-makers. George W. Gayle died in 1896.

Clarence Gayle continued making hand-made reels comparable to the Meek reels in beauty, durability and worth until ten years ago, when the making of hand-made reels was abandoned. From that date to the present, the Gayle shop has concentrated on the making of a line of single-action fly-fishing reels.

Sitting there in his busy little shop one late fall day, we discussed the reel-makers, the history of the reel and Gayle's plans for the future. I have already mentioned that Ben C. Milam continued making his own reel in Frankfort until his death in 1904. The business was continued, however, by his only son, John W. Milam, until he too passed away, March 27, 1928, at the age of sixty-nine years. John Milam went to work with his father about 1878 and was with the elder Milam continuously during his father's life, and after his father's death still remained at the old place of business. The Milam shop is at this time closed. Only the shop of Clarence Gayle keeps alive that singular Frankfort tradition which has meant so much in reel history.

"THE Kentucky reel has always been a strictly hand-made reel," Gayle told me, "in that almost all of the operations in the production of it have been entirely by hand. The first reels back in the 1840's were made with cast caps and axles, and as late as 1880 the caps of all reels except the No. 3 size were made of two pieces of metal. This reel had a cap made of a single piece that was punched or raised up by the use of a forming punch and a sledge hammer.

"When Meek went to Louisville and there began to make reels, he had all of the caps and also plates for his reels punched out at one of the metal plants in the East. Milam had a small hand-power screw press with an arm about five feet long for getting out his plates, and this tool is still standing in his old shop. At first my father had the plates and caps used on his reels made in the East, but later put in a power punch and forming presses.

"The handles on all of the old reels that were made prior to 1880 were chopped out of the sheet metal with a cold chisel and then filed up to the correct shape. The wheels were made on old Swiss cutting engines having a bow for a power drive. After the teeth were roughly slotted, they were run through a rounding-up tool that was simply a file shaped to the form of the finished wheel or pinion tooth and held in alignment.

"The screws of the first Kentucky reels were made with the old-time screw plates,

which cut no two screws alike. As a result, every screw was fitted to its own individual place. In order that it might be put back where it belonged when a reel was taken down, both the screw and the screw hole were numbered. This was done with very small numbering punches. Because of the fact that the genuine Kentucky reel has been altogether hand-made and that no two of them are exactly alike in all parts, no two parts are interchangeable. Should one of these reels need repairing at any time—a very rare occurrence—the reel had to be sent to the maker for the needed repairs.

"In making the Kentucky hand-made reel," continued Gayle, "each part was individually fitted to its component part with the greatest exactness. While none of the older generation of reel-makers used or knew how to use micrometers, verniers or any other very exact measurement instruments, yet these old reels were, every one of them, very perfect specimens of fine mechanical work, both as regards the lathe work and the fitting and filing and scraping that all combined to make the reels so smooth-running and durable."

"SPEAKING of durability of the Kentucky reel," I said, "what principal reason do you ascribe for the excellence of it? That is to say, what made it so durable and so apparently immune to wear?"

"Well," replied the last of the old-time reel-makers, "one of the main reasons why the Kentucky reel has been so durable is that the main wheel has always been made from either a brass casting or a section of brass rod that has been hammered with a hammer on an anvil until it became very hard and tough. The small wheel, or pinion, has been made of the very best tool steel, hardened and tempered. This combination of hard-hammered brass and polished, tempered tool steel produced a set of gearing that, while it required a great deal of time to make, was almost indestructible."

Would Gayle again go into the manufacture of hand-made Kentucky reels to keep up the reputation of Frankfort? The question had been on my lips during our whole conversation. And now I asked it. That last of the old-time reel-makers looked out into the mist of the autumn day. In that far-off, half pensive gaze he probably visualized his days of past toil at the bench, the days of unremitting labor, the labor of love that he had put into the making of many a Kentucky reel. Probably the thought oppressed him that, in a day when machines are pouring out reels by the thousands, how hopeless must seem the work of one man producing a very few reels in order to keep alive an ideal.

But it was probable that he would again set his hand to making Kentucky reels. He said so. The appeal of money, however, would have nothing to do with it. He wished that to be very plain to me. He would make reels—perhaps a handful of them, possibly hundreds—but no money appeal would ever creep in to disturb his thoughts. He would make each reel as a work of art, something that he would put his very heart and soul into—a means, he said, "of leaving behind me after I am gone something by which I will be remembered by the very best class of people on earth—the real sportsman-angler."

Somehow, when I left Frankfort that day, I felt a sense of elation that I could not explain. Probably it is that we cling persistently to the old and do not like to sever our connection with the past. In a psychological sense, even the fact that one of the old masters is still at work on the old stand may add an extra joy to the thrill we derive from angling.