

Assailed in Two Cities: John Kopf, Reelmaker

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It was the best of times, but not for long. By the dawn of the 1880s, the country had gradually recovered from the Panic of 1873. Small businesses were thriving in the east, larger businesses were beginning a wave of mergers and acquisitions, and as the railroads once again extended deeper into the hinterlands, the economies of the western states were expanding rapidly. Politicians argued incessantly about the gold standard, silver coinage, and tariffs. The U.S. Treasury showed a surplus, a happy state of affairs that would continue for a decade.

The two-story factory at 57 and 59 Scholes St. in Brooklyn, N.Y., was home to several small businesses around 1880. Louis Struttwolf manufactured white-metal goods there at least as late as 1879, but he would move out soon.¹ The following year, Robert Brass was running a machine shop on the lower floor, while the upper floor was occupied by the Steinborn & Huppelsberg Braiding Works. In September, 1880, a fire damaged the factory; the combined losses of \$6000 sustained by the two firms were covered by insurance.²

John Kopf was manufacturing “fishing tackle” at 57 Scholes St. by 1883, and by the next year, at the latest, he was specifically manufacturing fishing reels there. Over the next several years, Kopf was listed in directories³ variously as a reel manufacturer at both 57 and 59 Scholes and as a brass finisher at 59 Scholes, so his income was not dependent entirely upon reel production. Born in Bavaria in 1857, Kopf had labeled himself an “engineer” in the 1880 U.S. census and in Brooklyn city directories through 1882, before he established his business in the factory. By 1887, he would take up residence in the building.

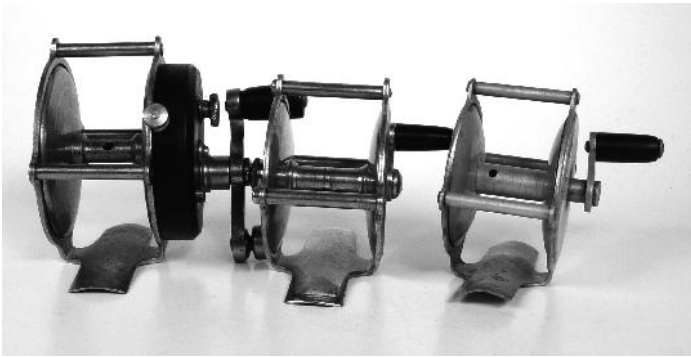
Initially, Kopf’s business prospered; his reels were featured heavily in catalogs published by William Mills & Son and were sold from Brooklyn to Boston, at the least. But times change, and the rest of the decade saw increasing consolidation of American

industries, increasing protectionism for American raw materials, and increasing labor unrest, all of which contributed to increasing pressure on small businesses and certainly did nothing to prevent the Panic of 1893. The “Gay ‘90s” would not be kind to Kopf.



A small baitcasting reel with a plated-brass frame and Kopf's patented rubber panels. The only markings are a “4” under the foot and “PAT.APL'D.FOR” at the bottom of the headcap. The reel was shown in the 1885 Mills & Son catalog but was absent from the 1888 catalog.

Kopf’s major asset probably was his inventive mind. In October, 1883, he applied for the first of his six known fishing-related patents. Granted on October 7, 1884, the patent described a means by which a hard-rubber panel can be secured within a circular recess on the metal plate of a reel. On December 16, 1884, Kopf was granted one of his two best-known patents for a means of folding a single piece of stamped sheet metal into a U-shaped reel frame, which was supported at the top by a single cross-piece. Kopf’s third reel patent, granted on May 19, 1885, described an elegantly simple clutch that allowed the fisherman to separate a multiplying reel’s



Three "Eureka" reels made with Kopf's patented, folded frame.

two gears by shifting an external lever. The lever swiveled an internal, curved plate on which the main gear was carried toward, or away from, the pinion. The inventor also described a simple spring brake whose pressure was adjusted by rotating an external nut.

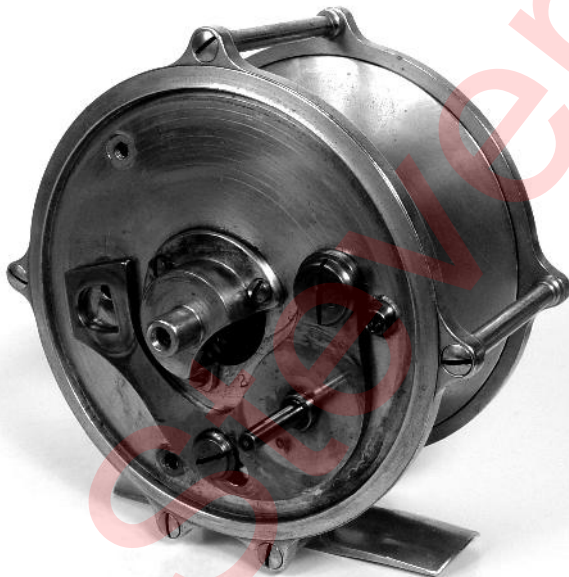
Kopf assigned one-half of each of his first three patents to Thomas B. Mills, who, with his father, had concentrated the focus of William Mills & Son on fishing tackle, leading the New York City firm toward a future in which it would become one of the world's most influential retailers of sporting goods. The reelmaker clearly enjoyed a close relationship with the Mills firm. For years, Mills catalogs featured a variety of single-action click reels and multiplying

bass reels, both round and with raised pillars, which were made according to Kopf's initial, rubber-panel patent. These included the Mills "Gem" reels, whose catalog illustrations were marked with a patent date of Dec. 4, '84.

The one-piece-frame patent of December 16, 1884, was the basis of Mills & Son's extensive, highly varied line of "Eureka" reels. Although none of the models was truly "one-piece"—each frame was supported by three raised pillars—both single-action and multiplying models were made in plain brass, plated brass, or rubber and plated brass. The 1888 Mills catalog stated that "We no longer make the common unburnished plain click reels, as our new Patent Eureka Reels supersede them." The reels were offered at least as early as 1885 and were made for several years.



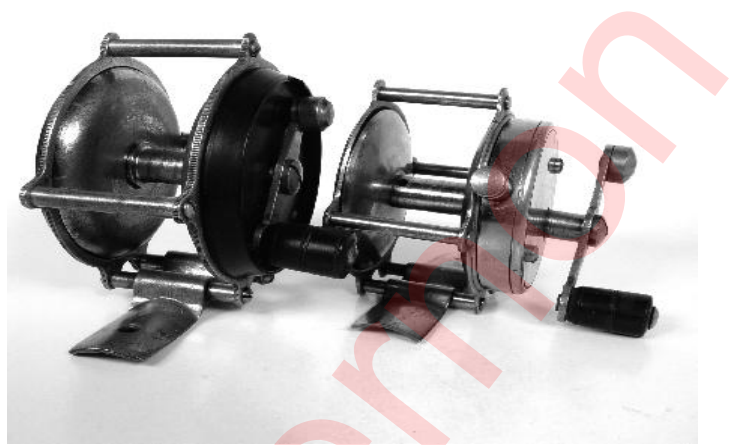
An "adaptation" of Kopf's clutch in a later Julius vom Hofe casting reel.



Kopf's clutch in a German silver/hard rubber reel. A pin extends into the hole at the end of the curved plate and swivels the plate when it is shifted by a lever. The reel is significantly larger than the Mills "Imperial" bass reels and is suitable for saltwater fishing.

Despite the fact that Kopf's lever-operated freespool clutch was eventually imitated by other makers, including Julius vom Hofe, we have not seen it illustrated in catalogs. However, Mills catalogs from the mid-1880s stated that "*We have recently perfected and patented a simple device for throwing a multiplying reel in and out of gear...which is simply pushing a lever or index one way to ungear the reel and the reverse way to gear it for reeling in or playing the fish. We apply it to our Imperial Reels...*" We are confident that the "device" was Kopf's clutch. The "Imperial Black Bass Reel" was a raised-pillar casting reel made of German silver and hard rubber

and was one of the most expensive reels Mills offered during the period. Made “with adjustable click on either plate,” it was advertised as “new” in the December 26, 1885, issue of *The American Angler*. The clutch cost an extra \$5.00. Henshall described the clutch in *More about the Black Bass* in 1889: “The device for this purpose is operated by a short, arrow-shaped lever.”⁴ Kopf’s patent drawing showed such a lever. Whether or not Mills & Son retained exclusive rights to market these three types of patented reels is an open question.



A click reel and a multiplier fitted with Kopf's corrugated foot. The foot usually is soldered to the pillars and often has an additional plate soldered beneath the foot to add support.



A pair of similar bass reels. The left reel's frame is plated brass and is marked "PAT.APL'D.FOR" on the rubber-faced, metal headcap. The click on the tailplate is marked with Edward Vom Hofe's 1883 patent date. The right reel has a German silver frame and is stamped with the Wm. Mills & Son mark. The reel on the left probably is a "Gem," and the other, an "Imperial." The reels are described in more detail later.

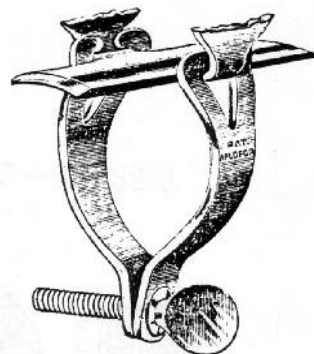
Kopf’s fourth reel patent was, perhaps, his best known. Granted on November 24, 1885, it described a reel foot with two transverse corrugations that fit over the two bottom pillars of a reel frame. Kopf did not assign his patent, but reels employing the foot, often stamped with the patent date, are probably the most easily recognized of Kopf’s products. Many examples of the reels, usually made relatively cheaply of stamped sheet brass, are marked “Trowbridge/Boston,” which suggests that the Boston retailer sold a lot of such reels over an extended period of time. Because the patented foot was used on a surprising variety of reels that lack maker or retailer marks, it seems doubtful that Trowbridge and Kopf had any agreement of exclusivity.

On December 12, 1885, Kopf was granted a patent for a reel clamp, one-half of which again was assigned to Thomas B. Mills. The Mills catalog indicated that the clamp was especially suited for their “Eureka” reels.

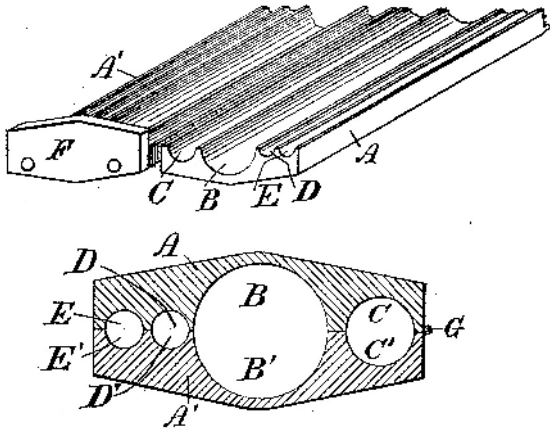
These five inventions were sufficient to get his

fledgling business off the ground and to establish his shop as an important supplier to the tackle trade. A Kopf “Silver Queen” reel was awarded as the third prize in the Heavy Bass Casting contest of the National Rod & Reel Association 1887 Casting Tourney. A Conroy “Silver King” was awarded as second prize, and both reels were valued at \$35.00.⁵ Kopf’s reels were competing with the best that New York had to offer. Therefore, the late 1880s must have been a heady time for Kopf, and he expanded his product line to include rods, as indicated by listings in Brooklyn directories of 1890 and 1891. He also patented a hinged, two-piece, fitted rod case on December 9, 1890. By the time the patent was granted, the United States Net & Twine Co. (U.S.N.&T.) advertised a rod and a rod/reel combination in custom-fitted Kopf cases. Things were going well enough that he and his wife, Mina, bought the Scholes property in mid-1891 from Robert Brass for \$8500, of which \$4500 was mortgaged.⁶

MILLS' PATENT CLAMP FOR EUREKA REELS.



Kopf's reel clamp as shown in an 1888 Wm. Mills & Son catalog. The accompanying text disparaged the “old, clumsy and insecure style of ring” still available on cheap clamp reels.



Patent drawings showing how Kopf's hinged rod case encloses the various rod sections.

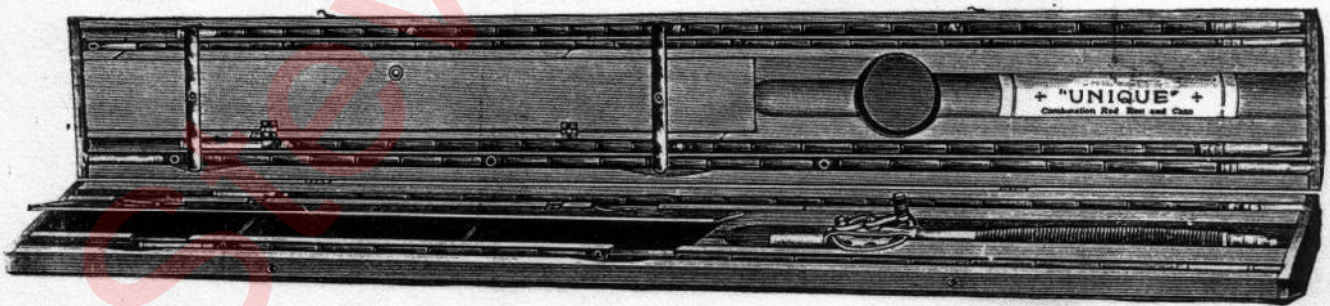
Kopf was last listed at the Scholes St. address in an 1891-2 directory. We next find him listed in an 1892 directory as a fishing tackle manufacturer at 11th Ave. and 20th St., Whitestone, Long Island, so he appears to have moved his factory shortly after buying the Scholes St. building. The new location was the site of the Whitestone Net & Twine Co., which was owned by U.S.N.&T.

A pair of 1891 advertisements in the *Sporting Goods Gazette* provides clues to Kopf's business over the next couple of years. Kopf announced that he was manufacturing non-patented reels at the Whitestone factory. The reasons for what appears to have been a severance of his special relationship with Mills & Son are unknown. He may have had a falling-out with Thomas B. Mills; he may have felt

that restricting his product line to his patented designs was thwarting his ambitions. In any case, U.S. Net & Twine, whose murky history is enmeshed with those of Frederick Malleson, Montague City Rod Co., A. G. Spalding & Bros., and many others, announced that they were now the "sole agents" for "John Kopf's Celebrated Fishing Reels." The copy in the ads was especially interesting, as it mentioned that there were "no patents with high-sounding names" ["Imperial," for example?] and "we do all the adjusting before they leave the factory." The U.S.N.&T. address advertised was 219 Fulton St., N.Y. At the time, the company also had an address at 163 Grand Ave., Brooklyn, the location of a reel factory bought by Montague City Rod Co. in the last year or two of the century.⁷ Although Kopf was no longer making reels directly for Wm. Mills & Son, Mills probably carried reels obtained wholesale from U.S.N.&T. It is also conceivable, at least, that the Mills firm purchased the remaining half of his patent rights from Kopf.

A U.S.N.&T. wholesale catalog⁸, undated but probably issued sometime in the late 1880s, shows a few reels that could have been made by Kopf, but absent any patented features or mention of his name, we can not be sure who manufactured them. Judging by the title page and copy in the catalog, the company's reel manufacturing appears to have been outsourced.

Complicating the situation is the coexistence of a company named United States Twine & Net, whose earliest addresses we know of were 180 Montague (or 189, depending on the directory) and 210 Fulton St.,



This case contains a specially selected split bamboo, closely wound, with an 80 yard adjustable click reel making a combination of a 10½ foot fly or a 9½ foot black bass rod. It also has compartments for carrying lines, flies, etc., making solid rod and tackle case in one.

A U.S.N.&T. advertisement in the *Sporting Goods Gazette*, November, 1890, shows their "Unique" rod/reel combination in a custom-fitted Kopf rod case.



Although it may not be clearly visible in the advertisement, this is the "cradle reel" of the "Unique" combo. Kopf probably manufactured rod, reel, and case.

N.Y., in 1882-3 directories. At the time, U.S.N.&T. also was located at the Fulton St. address. Later, U.S.T.&N. was listed at 242 Plymouth, Brooklyn, then at 23 Fulton, Manhattan. The company remained there until 1900, when it moved to 50 White St. It labeled itself as "Makers of seines, nets & twines and dealers in fishing tackle generally." Occasionally, reels are found marked with the company's name. Whether or not U.S.T.&N. produced reels or contracted separately from U.S.N.&T. for reel production is yet another open question.

Whatever the details of his arrangement with U.S.N.&T. may have been, Kopf's business seems to have begun a steep, downhill slide. On August 4, 1893, the *New York Times* reported, under "Business Troubles," that "John Kopf, manufacturer of fishing tackle at Whitestone, L. I., has confessed judgment for \$5,042 in favor of the Whitestone Net and Twine Company for money loaned, part of which went to pay for his factory property. He has been in business since 1882." This cryptic announcement meant that Whitestone had taken legal action to collect a debt, and that Kopf had agreed to a judgment against himself. The nature of the debt is unknown, but Kopf's acquiescence protected the property from creditors other than Whitestone.¹⁰ Once again, Kopf left town.

Once again, Kopf went into business. In an 1893-4 Brooklyn directory, he was listed as a laborer living on Butler St., but by the next year he was a "manufacturer" living at 421 S. 5th St. At some point during the period, he entered into a short-lived partnership with William F. Ottmann to form Kopf &

Ottmann, and the two of them, along with William Kopf, were listed as fishing tackle dealers, 108 S. 4th St., in an 1895-6 directory. Ottmann, previously listed as a clerk living at 445 E. 121st St. in New York City, left the firm and opened his own tackle business at 2366 First Ave., N.Y., by 1896. His business continued until at least 1910. William Kopf was two years younger than John and probably was his cousin.¹¹

For the next two years, John and William lived together at 55 Johnson Ave. and ran what was now the Kopf Reel Works at 104 S. 4th St. But disaster raised its ugly head. By 1898, William left the firm and went to work as a machinist at the Empire Machine Co. in Manhattan. John deserted their 4th St. address and was listed as a laborer first, then as a dealer in fishing tackle at his home address in directories to 1901. Whether or not he somehow continued to manufacture reels after William left the Reel Works is not known, but this possibility is discussed later.

On June 19, 1898, William Kopf was found dead, sitting on the steps of a shoe factory on 4th St., about a block from the former Reel Works. Unable to accompany his wife to a Saturday-night church picnic, he apparently sat down to rest while returning from work in Manhattan. A police officer ignored him, believing he was merely resting, and he was

NOTICE TO DEALERS IN FISHING TACKLE.

HAVE YOU EVER USED ANY OF THE

JOHN KOPF'S CELEBRATED FISHING REELS?

IF NOT IT WILL PAY YOU TO DO SO NOW.

These Reels are Made in a First-Class Manner.

NO ADJUSTING REQUIRED !!! As we do all the adjusting before they leave the factory.

NO TAKE UP OF WEAR !!! As they are made in such a manner that there is no wear to them.

No patents with high-sounding names to obtain correspondingly high prices.

* * JOHN KOPF, * *

WHITESTONE, QUEENS CO., L. I., - - NEW YORK.

NOTICE TO DEALERS IN FISHING TACKLE.

HAVE YOU EVER USED ANY OF THE

John Kopf's Celebrated Fishing Reels?

These Reels are all made in a first-class manner.

NO ADJUSTING REQUIRED

As we do all the adjusting before they leave the factory. No take up of wear, as they are made in such a manner that there is no wear to them. No patents with high-sounding names to obtain correspondingly high prices.

UNITED STATES NET AND TWINE CO., SOLE AGENTS,

219 Fulton Street, New York.

Advertisements from 1891 editions of the *Sporting Goods Gazette* indicate that Kopf moved into his Whitestone factory and produced non-patented reels. U.S.N.&T. became the sole distributor for his machines.

discovered, hours later, to have died, with his head resting between his hands. He was 39 years old.¹²

The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* carried the following announcement on January 25, 1900: “John Kopf, a manufacturer of fish hooks and fishing lines at 55 Johnson avenue, this morning filed with the clerk of the United States District Court his petition in voluntary bankruptcy. He schedules forty-five creditors with claims amounting to \$10,697.71 and values his assets at \$67.50.” With the exception of a single listing in a 1901-2 Brooklyn directory, Kopf’s career as a tackle manufacturer seems to have ended by 1901. We have not found any subsequent information on him until July 21, 1907, when he died at the age of 50 years.

It was a sign of difficult economic times that a high proportion of small businessmen like John Kopf changed both their working and residential addresses at a rate that seems astounding today. Even the former factories in which Kopf made his reels were put to different uses with surprising frequency. After Kopf left Scholes Street, the property was used by A. Foos & Co., tinware manufacturers. When that partnership was dissolved in 1886, the business was continued by William Wenzelburger, one of the partners.¹³ By 1897, a family named Gluck was making tables there.

Kopf’s former factory at Whitestone was identified as a “rod factory” in an 1894 advertisement by U.S.N.&T. It was closed for a few months, “owing to the depression in business,” but it was opened again after May, 1895. That revival, too, was short-lived. Closed within a couple of years, the factory was renovated for a school annex in late 1899, then sold in 1902, ironically, to a manufacturer of silk ribbons and mohair braiding.¹⁴

We may never know the full extent of John Kopf’s reelmaking legacy. His reels were sold by some of the most important tackle dealers of the period, but he faced a tough business climate in the mid-1890s. His competition in the New York area included the Vom Hofe brothers, among others, while his cheaper reels competed with those of Hendryx and Hendrick in Connecticut. He ultimately joined a long procession of tackle dealers and manufacturers whose businesses failed as the twentieth century approached.

This story leaves many questions unanswered. During the 1880s and 1890s, how much of Kopf’s production consisted of non-patented reels that may

have been sold by retailers other than Mills & Son? What kinds of non-patented reels did Kopf produce, and when? At least some of his German silver/rubber reels were of sufficient quality that they qualify for that group of unmarked New York reels that are frequently, and erroneously, attributed by collectors to one of the Vom Hofes, Malleon, or almost any other well-known maker but Kopf himself.

The most important questions may concern Kopf’s association with U.S. Net & Twine. What drove him to enlist that company as his sole distributor, or vice-versa, and when did that association begin? How many of the reels purportedly “made” by the company were manufactured by Kopf? Did Kopf produce the relatively common, inexpensive “Climax” reels fitted with the foot patented by Frederick Moog in 1894 and assigned to U.S.N.&T.? Did U.S.N.&T. and/or Montague continue to produce reels based on Kopf’s designs, possibly even using parts or machinery acquired from his shop? Perhaps most intriguing of all: Did Kopf produce any of the “Kosmic” reels?

The rest of this article will present a survey of reels that can be attributed to Kopf with a reasonable degree of confidence, as well as some whose origins are more speculative. Perhaps we can begin to answer some of these questions.

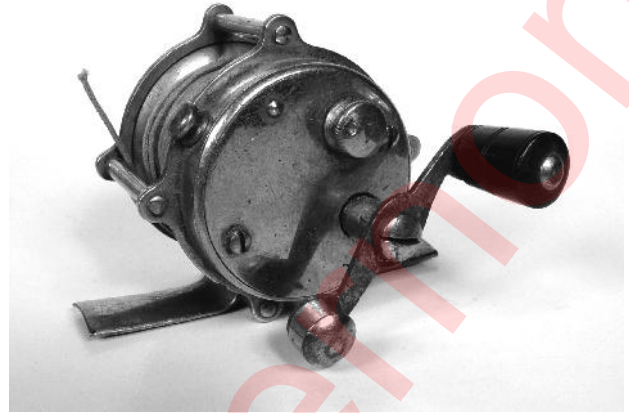
Identifying Kopf Reels

Reels marked with makers’ names can be used to identify their unmarked reels. After having seen many Kopf-patented reels over the years, the first evidence we encountered to suggest that Kopf was making his own reels was a brass, New York-style reel marked “John Kopf/Maker/Brooklyn, N.Y.” Only then was his manufacturing confirmed by documentary evidence. The S-handled, Kopf/Maker reel shown here probably was one of his earlier products.

Knowing that John Kopf was engaged in reelmaking for such a long time, how do we identify his reels? We have no reason to believe that anyone other than Kopf himself manufactured the products that incorporated his patented designs. It is reasonable to assume that he manufactured those reels whose patents were shared with Thomas Mills, whose firm marketed them. It also is reasonable to assume that he made the German silver/rubber “Imperial” reels, which could be equipped with what almost certainly



A typical New York-style, brass reel marked with Kopf's name. Note that the crank is a reverse "S".



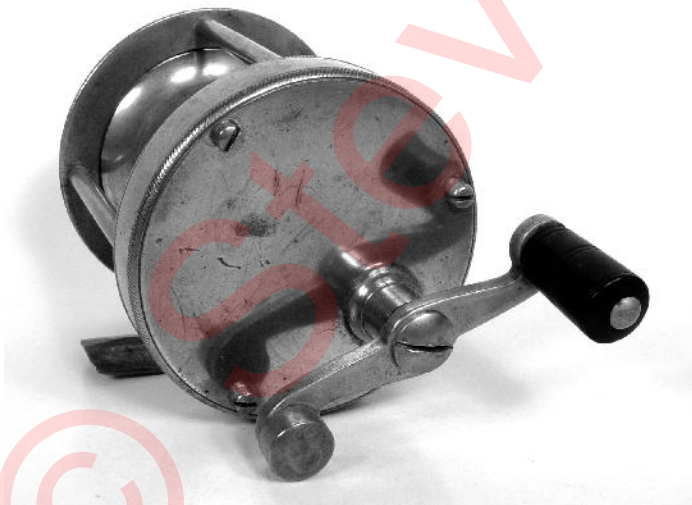
A plated-brass multiplier with a pop-out brake lever, rotating click, and Kopf's patented foot.

was his clutch. He also would have made the reels with his corrugated foot, although these do not appear to have been sold by Mills & Son. At least two reels known to collectors were equipped with the corrugated foot and were stamped inside with "John Kopf/Maker," confirming that the inventor manufactured his own inventions.

A few of Kopf's patented reels, probably built within the first few years of his reelmaking, are illustrated above. Patent dates on many of these reels facilitate their identification. To demonstrate the remarkable variety of reels that Kopf produced, illustrations of several reels incorporating the corrugated foot are presented here. As a group, his reels vary significantly in quality. Along with brass,



A riveted brass multiplier with an anti-reverse pawl-and-ratchet.



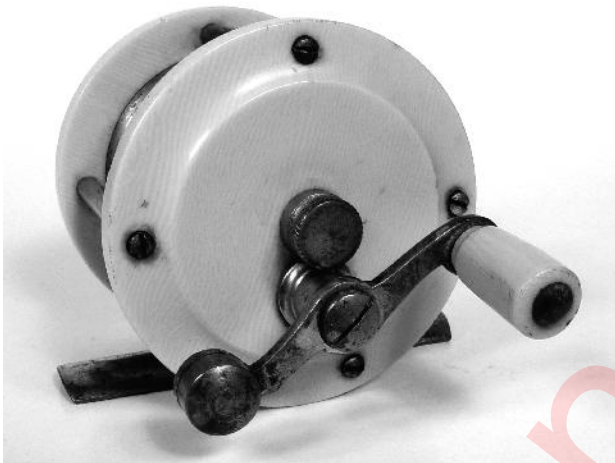
This brass reel is made with Kopf's patented foot and some decorative knurling around the headcap.



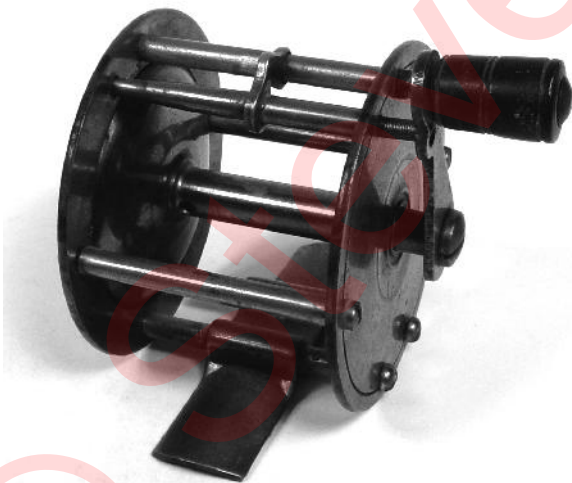
This plated-brass reel has decorative knurling similar to that seen on later Montague reels and on the marked reel described later.



The sideplates of this Kopf-footed reel are made of rubber or celluloid.



A similar reel with celluloid plates.

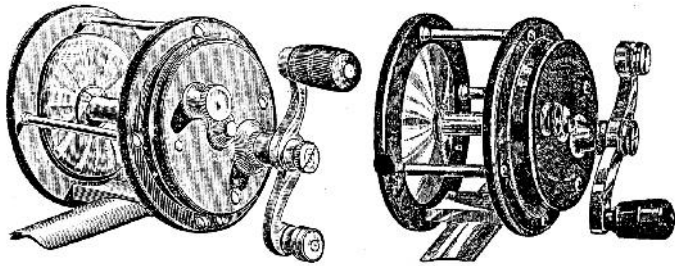


A surprisingly anachronistic, brass, stop-latch reel with the corrugated Kopf foot. (Photo by Steve Tillisch)

plated brass, German silver, and rubber, he used celluloid for sideplates. We suspect that his celluloid reels didn't last very long or sell very well, so they are scarce today. Although some reels were equipped with Edward Vom Hofe's sliding click and so marked, many employed rotating clicks. We believe that the idea of rotatably adjusting the brake in his third patent was merely adapted to operating a click. He frequently decorated with knurling—that will be more apparent later—and he produced reels with milled edges. Yet another reasonable supposition is that Kopf produced versions of at least some of these reels with more conventional, non-corrugated feet.

Of Kopf's four reel patents, his rubber-panel design is the most difficult to recognize. Its purpose was to enhance the appearance of reels by attaching rubber panels to relatively strong, solid metal plates. The attachment was accomplished by fitting each panel into a circular rim, or bezel, on the exterior surface of the plate. However, the same method can be, and was, used to secure rubber plates over the recesses of annular metal frame members, rather than merely facing solid metal plates. Whether or not such construction is covered by the claims of the patent is a matter for debate. Determination of how a rubber plate is attached often requires disassembly of the reel. The reels we have seen with rubber discs covering solid metal plates have been stamped with patent marks. Those with rubber discs on annular plates have lacked such marks, but it is likely that Kopf made such reels. Mills, after all, owned half the patent and may have wanted to make lighter reels using less metal. The "Imperial" was advertised as "light enough for use on a fly rod." On the other hand, the disc-attachment method could have been imitated by other makers. It is even possible that a debate over the claims led to the discontinuance of the special relationship between Mills & Son and Kopf, who may have wanted to use the method to make wholesale reels for wider distribution.

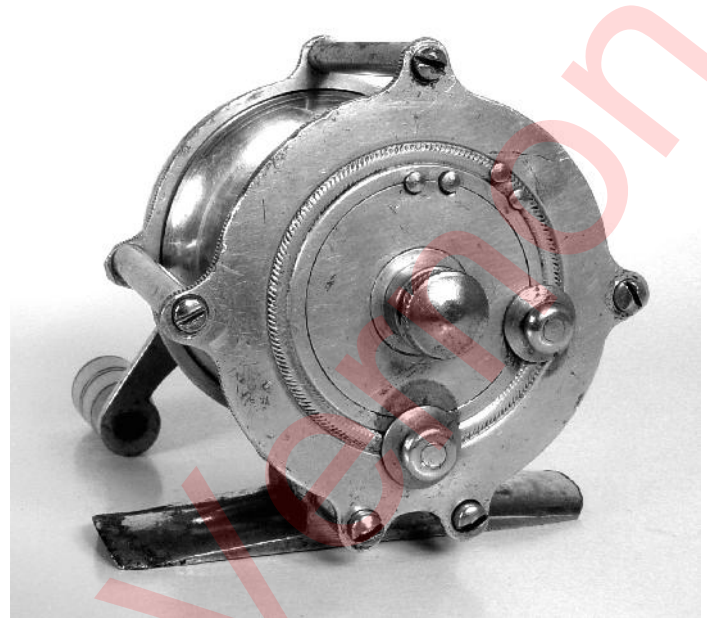
Referring to the photograph of the two bass reels shown earlier, the left-hand reel has Kopf's solid headcap faced with rubber. The right-hand, German silver reel has an annular tailplate whose recess is covered by a rubber disc secured within a bezel. The headcap is a rubber cup that forms a housing for the gears and is secured within a protective metal band. A reel that seems indistinguishable from the right-hand reel appears on page 43 of the 1890 Thomas H.



Imitation without flattery. Both reels have raised, rubber headplates, German silver frames, S-cranks, and rotating clicks. The left-hand reel is shown in the 1888 Mills & Son catalog, which blithely states "We wish to warn our customers against a Reel similar in style to this, but much inferior in quality." The other reel is shown in an 1892 Abbey & Imbrie catalog which alleges, "The advantage of our Patent Compensating Steel Pivot is made perfectly apparent by a comparison of the free running qualities of this reel with a reel of the same class not compensating." (We couldn't have put it better. The pivots, of course, were those patented by Julius vom Hofe.)

Chubb catalog. A similar reel is shown in Thomas J. Conroy's catalog for 1889, but it has a more traditional solid foot.

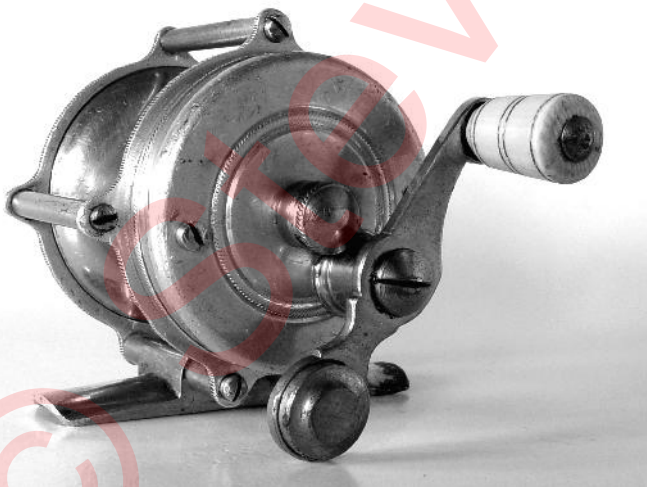
Rampant imitation among reelmakers of the period adds to the fun of trying to recognize Kopf's reels. Both Mills and Abbey & Imbrie sold fine-quality German-silver/rubber bass reels, which varied somewhat over the years, and identifying either retailer's reels is not always possible without a scorecard. Julius vom Hofe's advertisements stressed that "All genuine reels bear my name." In 1888, Thomas J. Conroy had to seek an injunction against Herman H. Kiffe to restrain him from selling a reel under the name of Conroy's "Silver King Reel."¹⁵ In his 1891 catalog, Henry C. Squires said of his "new



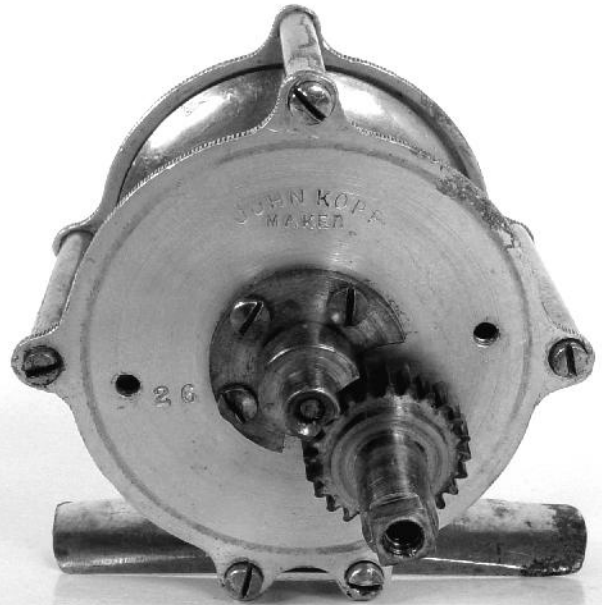
Tailplate of the aluminum reel. The twin rivet heads, which resemble the pattern seen on Hendryx reels, are on separate rivets holding the click spring.

style" salt-water reel that "others have copied it,...making it in an inferior manner." Augustus Hendrick used rosette washers on his best casting reels to imitate Julius vom Hofe. Kopf's products undoubtedly imitated others' reels, and vice-versa.

Fortunately, we have a "Rosetta Stone," a small, raised-pillar baitcaster marked inside with Kopf's name. As shown in several illustrations, the oil caps,



A raised-pillar multiplier with aluminum headcap, spool flanges, and tailplate, plated-brass crank, foot, and pillars.



Headplate of the aluminum reel showing the maker mark and the pinion housing.

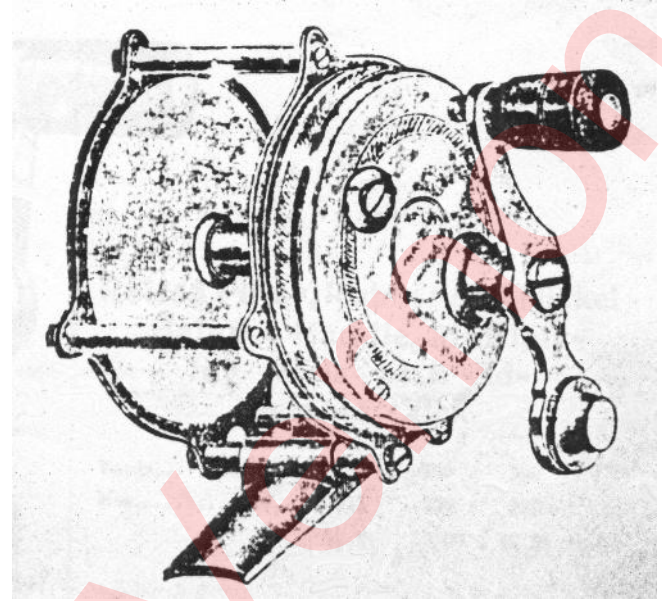


Closeup of Kopf's mark in the aluminum reel.

headcap and tailplate have decorative knurling, the plate edges are milled, and the counterbalanced crank has a celluloid knob.

Inside, the pinion is protected under a brass housing, which generally is indicative of better-than-average quality. Such housings were probably expensive features requiring labor-intensive installation, but they provided stable bearings for spool journals. The tailplate holds a brake and click, both adjusted with sliding buttons. Perhaps most importantly, the foot is similar in design to those shown on many reels seen in Mills catalogs. The crank, foot, and pillars are plated brass, but the headcap, tailplate, and spool flanges are aluminum, yet another material Kopf was willing to try. The use of aluminum for various reel components grew during the last decade of the century, and these lighter-weight machines were available from an increasing number of sources, including Mills, Abbey & Imbrie, the Vom Hofes, A.B. Hendryx, and Augustus Hendrick.

The reel foot may be one key to identifying Kopf's reels. The foot on the marked, aluminum reel, as noted, is typical of many shown in Mills & Son catalogs for over a decade, including that on the

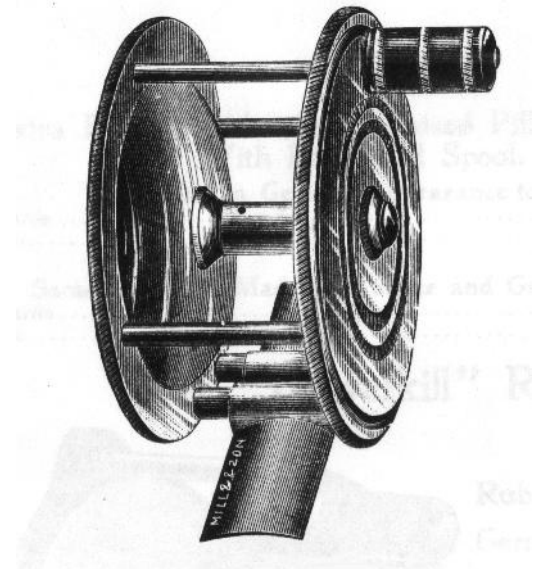


A "Steel Pivot," plated-brass reel in the 1899 Mills catalog strongly resembles the aluminum Kopf reel. The crank, foot, and knurling patterns of the two are the same.

"Gem" reel, a probable Kopf product. Of course, it is impossible to know whether or not Kopf made all the reels with such feet, but it may be instructive to point out that, viewed from above, they closely resemble his patented, corrugated foot. Could they have been designed with that resemblance in mind? There are reel feet shown in other catalogs that have superficial similarities, but they usually display some



Brake and click of the aluminum reel. The click spring is typical of many seen in identifiable Kopf reels. Note the shape of the one-piece foot.

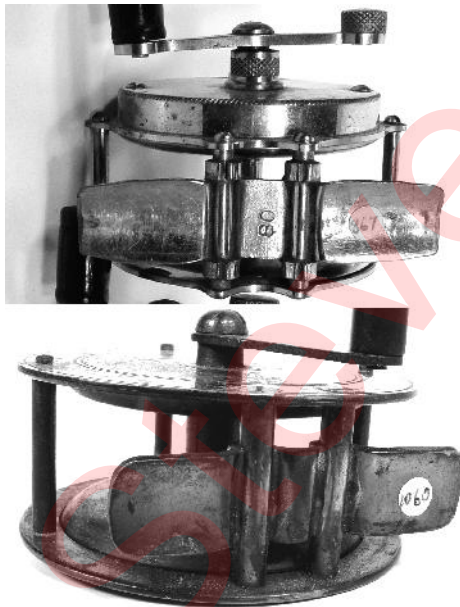


This aluminum click reel, with decorative knurling and the "Mills" foot described in the text, was offered in 1899 and 1901 catalogs. An "extra fine" version, also made in German silver/rubber, was available but not illustrated.



An unnamed aluminum reel has a "Mills" foot and extensive knurling. Even the rubber knob, which resembles that on the click reel in the previous illustration, is knurled. The click and pinion housing look like those on the marked aluminum reel, and we believe this reel also was made by Kopf.

differentiable structural characteristics. The Malleon "Patent Perfection" reel shown in 1884 advertisements had a foot similar, but not identical, to the foot on the Mills "Imperial." A number of reels shown in the 1901 Mills catalog also used the foot,



Imitations of the Kopf-patented foot. The upper reel is an "Empire City" multiplier. The corrugated foot is clamped to the pillars by tabs. The crank seems identical to that shown on a "Gem" click reel illustrated in a 1900 Abbey & Imbrie catalog. The lower reel is believed to be Canadian. The foot is much thicker than the dated, corrugated feet made by the inventor.

including an aluminum click reel with milled edges which already had appeared in the 1899 catalog. An aluminum baitcaster with some similar features is illustrated here. Similar reels of plated brass were illustrated in two 1891 catalogs from Conroy's and from Hibbard, Spencer, Bartlett & Co. If Kopf did, in fact, produce that foot, he may have continued at least to assemble reels after abandoning the Kopf Reel Works, possibly even after his bankruptcy. It is unknown how long such reels continued to be sold.

Various enigmatic reels in collectors' hands compound the difficulty of identifying Kopf's reels. For example, his corrugated foot was both adapted and imitated on reels that otherwise do not appear to be his products. Two examples are illustrated here.

The skeptical reader might suggest that the proposed criteria for recognizing Kopf's work are too speculative and may have little basis in fact. But he should consider that Kopf must have been making *something* during his peripatetic career, so why not some of the reels discussed here? If anyone can throw more light on the subject, we would all like to share it. Much research will be required before we can make more definitive determinations.

* * *

John Kopf made fishing reels over a span of fourteen years or more. In addition to manufacturing lines of "economy" and mid-priced reels, he produced high-quality machines that deserve comparison with those made by better-known competitors. Although his businesses in Whitestone and Brooklyn were dogged with financial problems, he managed to supply a highly varied, substantial quantity of reels to the trade during the closing years of the nineteenth century. We hope that his contributions to, and influence on, contemporary reelmaking will be further elucidated. There were far, far better reels he made than he has ever been given credit for.

Notes

1. Struttwolf disappeared from directories for several years, but he would be selling fishing tackle at another Brooklyn location by the end of the decade.
2. In an article on the fire in the factory, published on Sept. 29, 1880, the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* gave the address as "Nos. 55 and 57 Scholes St." However, all directory listings of the various companies during the relevant period included addresses of 57 Scholes, 59 Scholes, or both.

3. The city directories cited in this article include various editions of the following:

Lain's Brooklyn City Directory for the Year Ending May 1, 18—

Lain's Brooklyn & Long Island Business Directory

Lain & Healy's Brooklyn Directory for the Year Ending May 1, 18—

Trow's New York City Directory

Trow's General Directory of the Boroughs of Manhattan and Bronx/City of New York

Trow's Co-Partnership and Corporate Directory for Manhattan and Bronx

Upington's General Directory of Brooklyn, New York City, for the Year Ending May 1, 19—

Wilson's Business Directory of New York City

4. Henshall, James A., M.D., *More about the Black Bass*. Cincinnati, Oh.: Robert Clarke & Co., 1889, pg. 99. Henshall erred twice in stating that the click button was “wrongly” shown on the headplate in his illustration.

5. *Forest & Stream*, May 12, 1887, pg. 349. Kopf's address was given as “51 Scholes.” Generously shared by Todd Larson.

6. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 31, 1891. Robert Brass established a leading Brooklyn business as a tool-and-die maker and manufacturer of metal ware.

7. Brown, Jim, *A Treasury of Reels*. Manchester, Vt.: American Museum of Fly Fishing, 1990, pg. 126. Both U.S.N.&T. and Montague City Rod Co. were listed at 163 Grand Avenue in 1899 Brooklyn directories. The 1904 Montague catalog identified the address as the location of the company's reel factory.

8. Generously shared by Todd Larson, 2005.

9. *Trow's General Directory of the Boroughs of Manhattan and Bronx/City of New York*, 1898, pg. 456.

10. Graciously “translated” from the legalese by Paul W. Jones, 2005.

11. At the time of the 1880 census, John Kopf was 23 years of age, living in a household headed by his widowed mother. William Kopf, also born in Bavaria and 21 years old in 1880, was a cigar-maker and lived in a household headed by his father, another John Kopf.

12. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, June 20, 1898. The *New York City Death Index* listed him as 39 years old.

13. *ibid.*, September 22, 1886.

14. *ibid.*, May 8, 1895; October 22, 1899; November 28, 1899; January 4, 1900; March 7, 1902.

15. *ibid.*, May 15, 1888.

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