

## A Taste of Freshwater Taffy

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Taffy Reel Company produced a fascinating fishing reel in Cleveland, Ohio, sometime around 1950. The reel was invented by Arthur W. Sawitzke, who filed a patent application in May, 1949, for his “improved fishing reel having a construction providing advantages of use not heretofore obtainable.” Most of the objects of the invention included improved control of the reel by the angler.

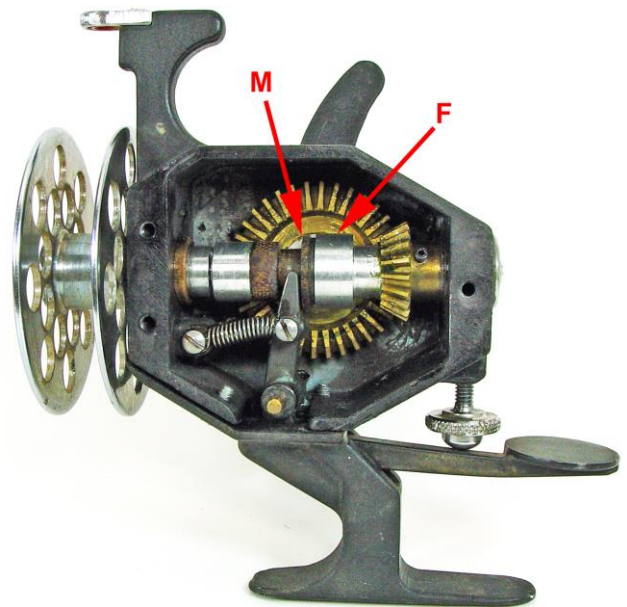
The reel resembled an open-faced spinning reel that was to be mounted above the rod, much like the relatively common Ashaway and OTCO “Slip-Cast” reels made by Ohio Tool Company, with which most collectors are familiar. But *Sawitzke’s device was not a spinning reel at all*. During casting, the spool rotated and the line flew off at right angles to the rod, passed through an agate line guide above the spool, and turned toward the rod guides to continue on its way.

The key to the reel’s operation was a thumb lever at the back, which allowed the fisherman to brake the reel during the cast. The lever tightened a friction clutch, which connected the beveled-gear train to the freely-rotating spool. To retrieve line, the angler had to press down on the lever as he cranked, producing drag that was completely under the control of his thumb. An adjustable screw was used to provide constant pressure when needed.



*Sawitzke’s “Taffy” reel. The spool spins freely unless the thumb lever is depressed to engage the friction clutch. The line goes through the agate guide above the spool. The knurled screw just behind the spool is an anti-backlash device, which would not be needed for a fixed-spool reel.*

The reel shown here has an aluminum case with a crinkled black finish and is marked with the company name and “Pat. Apl’d For.” The patent eventually was granted on January 6, 1953, so it is probably safe to assume that the reel was made between 1949 and 1953. However, I have been unable to uncover any documentary evidence of Taffy Reel Company’s existence during that period.



*The pressure between the male (M) and female (F) members of the friction clutch is adjusted by the thumb lever. The clutch members are made of Micarta and aluminum, respectively. The knurled screw above the lever can hold the lever at a pre-selected position.*

Details about Sawitzke himself also are elusive. He was born in Ohio, probably in Cleveland, on the last day of 1906, the youngest child of a German-born carpenter. At age thirteen, he was living with his widowed mother and three older brothers, who worked with various machines at their trades. Young Arthur became a toolmaker.

In 1946, Sawitzke applied for a patent for a newspaper vending machine, which was granted in 1950. He assigned half the patent to Glenn H. Garden, who was employed at W.J. Schoenberger Company, which manufactured valves for gas appliances and which would become a subsidiary of

Bell Aircraft Corporation. Perhaps he and Garden were coworkers. Family members believe that Sawitzke also patented a submarine-related invention, but I have not been able to identify it.

Sawitzke's personal life was rife with problems, and his family relationships were severely strained. Family members confessed that he was an alcoholic and abandoned his Cleveland children. Although I have not identified his place(s) of employment, phone and city directories indicate that Arthur and Victoria, presumably his wife, were living at 2252 West 95<sup>th</sup> St. from at least as early as 1951 until as late as 1964. Victoria died in 1971. At some point, Arthur moved to Florida, where he appears to have married again. Although Sarasota Co. recorded the divorce of an Arthur W. Sawitzke on Feb. 20, 1986, he was living in a long-term care facility in Cleveland when he died on January 11, 1988. His Cuyahoga County death notice indicates that he was a widower, and his obituary (*The [Cleveland] Plain Dealer*, Jan. 13, 1988) mentions that he had resided formerly in Florida.

Although I have not seen hard evidence that the inventor played a direct role in the manufacture or sale of the Taffy reel, he probably was involved in some capacity. He may have created a fictitious company name for the purpose of marketing the reel. Papers packaged with the reel indicate that Taffy Reel Co. was located at 3402 Clark Ave., Cleveland. The current occupant of the rear of the property, United Tool & Gage, could not provide any information on its predecessors. In 1941, the front of the property included a three-family house and garage, which was occupied by the Home Family Club, a non-profit cultural club founded in 1928. The Rite-Aid Corporation bought the site in 1997.

I believe the Taffy Reel was probably manufactured by one or both of two firms with ties to the Sawitzke family. When Henry R. Sawitzke, one of Arthur's older brothers, registered for the World War I draft in 1917, he was the tool room foreman of Dill Manufacturing Co. in Cleveland. When he registered again in 1942, he was a toolmaker at Ohio Tool Co. at 3160 W. 106<sup>th</sup> St. After the war, he opened his own shop—West Side Machine Tool & Die, Inc., which was still in business in the early 1950s.

Ohio Tool Co., where Henry had worked earlier, began to manufacture the top-mounted Ashaway "Slip-Cast" reels at least as early as 1948. These reels, although true spinning (fixed-spool) reels, have a superficial similarity to the Taffy Reel. Ohio Tool Co. was probably uniquely qualified to make the Taffy Reel under contract, but it is also possible that West Side Machine Tool & Die produced the reel or at least played a role in its manufacture, perhaps adding internal parts to frames made by Ohio Tool.

I would appreciate additional information on the mysterious Taffy Reel Company and its unusual product.

#### Acknowledgements

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