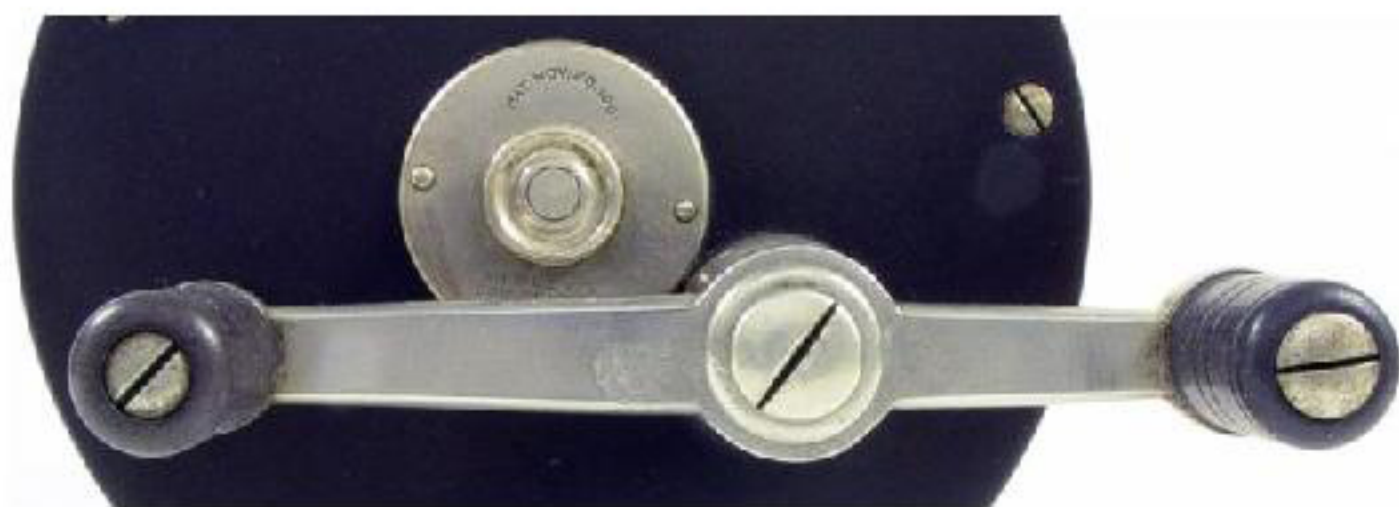


Cranking Out Smith Reels

Steven K. Vernon

Most ORCAnS are familiar with the adjustable crank invented by Harvey Carlton in 1903. Used on many Carlton and Rochester casting reels, the crank could be extended to increase “the leverage of the handle...so that the added resistance produced by the [9X] gearing may be compensated for.” Of course, Carlton used the same crank on his 4X multipliers as well. But his well-known torque-varying crank was neither the first nor the last to be used on a fishing reel.

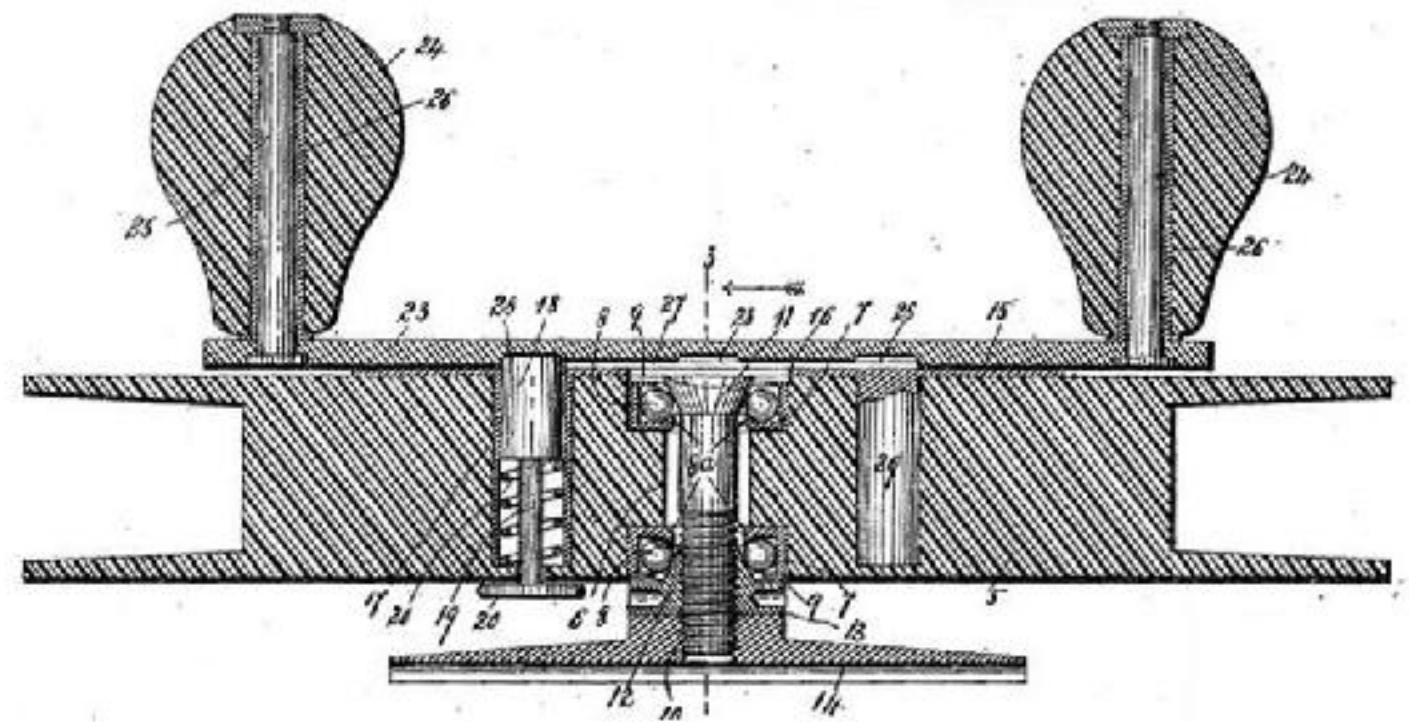
The earliest extendable crank I know of was a telescoping ball-handle invented in 1881. A decade later, an ex-vice-president of Westinghouse Electric Company invented a two-knobbed crank that could be varied in length using a built-in rack-and-pinion mechanism. Since then, reelmakers have provided us with cranks of widely varying complexity. Perhaps the simplest variable-torque crank, which was not extendable, was the asymmetric crank used on some Granville Medley saltwater reels. The two knobs (grasps) were located at different distances from the crank hub, so that they provided different degrees of torque. During the next century, reel inventors, including such luminaries as Oscar Kovalovsky, have given us folding, swiveling, and telescoping cranks on casting and trolling reels, more Carlton-like cranks, and variable-length cranks on spinning and spincast reels. Today, variable-torque cranks seem to have devolved into simple objects—offered by such firms as Penn and Okuma—that can be attached to the crankshaft through one of several holes, thus giving the fisherman his choice of crank length.



The asymmetric crank on this Medley trolling reel provides two different levels of torque.

In 1899, Harry J. Smith, of New York City, probably needing extra power to haul wagon wheels and such out of Manhattan’s rivers, patented an extendable crank for a side-mounted cod reel. Like those in the well-known Meisselbach reels, Smith’s

spool was supported by ball bearings. The bearing races were rectangular in cross-section, with flat sides, while the Meisselbach races were curved. To extend Smith’s crank, the fisherman slid the entire two-knob-bearing plate toward the edge of the reel. That movement carried one knob farther from the spool center, thus providing additional torque. A spring-loaded detent locked the plate in position. The patent drawings showed a flat spool arbor, in contrast to the concave arbors of the Meisselbach reels.



Smith’s plate (23) carries both knobs when it is slid to the left. The spring-loaded detent (18) pops into a hole in the plate. Note the flat sides of the ball bearing races (7) and the spool arbor.

I have never run across a reel with a crank like the one in Smith’s drawings. However, I’ve examined a wooden cod reel that was fitted with an adaptation of his invention. In this case, only one knob is movable, and when its spring-loaded detent is released, it can be slid about an inch beyond the spool’s edge. The necessary parts are housed in a recess in the spool, whose arbor is flat. Although the reel lacks ball bearings, I am reasonably certain that the crank represents Smith’s invention, adapted so that only one knob is moved during the crank’s extension.

Another, more ordinary-looking wooden cod reel is marked “Leader” and bears a central brass plaque marked with Smith’s patent date of August 8, 1899. Although it lacks Smith’s extendable crank, its spool arbor is flat, and the spool rides in ball bearings with flat-sided races.

It seems fair to infer that Smith not only invented his reel but was responsible for the manufacture of at least two models of wooden cod reels. But who was Harry J. Smith?

Trying to identify someone with the surname Smith while combing through old records is a descent into genealogical Hell.¹ The reel inventor patented a



A wooden, side-mounted reel with its crank extended to the left. Pressing the cylindrical, spring-loaded pin releases the detent. The mechanism is believed to be an adaptation of Smith's invention.

bicycle frame and a paper-cutting wheel over the next five years, using the same law office that had applied for his reel patent. The same office applied for Smith's 1920 patent for a poultry binding contraption. Smith also may have invented two ice-making devices. But the patent information does not tell us who Smith was.

Between 1895 and 1899, a Harry (sometimes listed as Henry) J. Smith was a toolmaker at 961 E. 135th St. in New York City. He may have been our reel inventor. In 1901, Harry J. Smith was selling "supplies" at 79 E. 130th St., and by the next year, the H.J. Smith Manufacturing Company was located at that address. City directories list the company through 1904, but what it manufactured remains a mystery.

Smith's whereabouts during the next decade are unknown, but a 1916 directory, probably compiled in 1915, lists the Smith-Emes Company, Inc., at 1900 Bathgate Ave., which sold sporting goods. The president was Harry J. Smith, and the secretary was Edward L. Emes, previously a "salesman" living at 1822 Bathgate Ave. The firm signed up entries in the 1917 Outing and Games sponsored by the I.U.S. & O.E. Local 20.² It was listed in local directories through 1918. By 1920, Emes was listed without any association with Smith-Emes. I have found no further references to the company or any incorporation records at the New York Department of State.

These scanty data permit the following hypothesis: The H.J. Smiths of the two companies were the same person, our inventor, and he produced the wooden reels that were based on his patent. He may have



A wooden "Leader" side-mounted reel with Smith's patent date stamped on the central plaque. The spool has a flat arbor and uses ball bearings in flat-sided races.

manufactured the metal parts to be fitted on wooden spools made elsewhere. Both companies may have been responsible for making cod reels intermittently or over a period of about 16 years.

I wish we could do more than merely speculate about the origins of these reels. I would greatly appreciate hearing from anyone who may have further information about Smith and the Smith companies or who knows the whereabouts of other examples of Smith reels.

Notes

1. There were Harry, H.J., and Harry J. Smiths everywhere, so identifying the patentee through historical records is difficult. For example, Harry J. Smith was the name of a Canadian-born Mohawk who became a star athlete before launching a successful television and movie career as Jay Silverheels, best known for his portrayals of Tonto, the Lone Ranger's faithful sidekick.
2. International Union of Steam & Operating Engineers advertisement in *The Advocate* [N.Y.], 7/28/1917, pg. 8