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Roots o'Reels XVI. Veeder Reader Reels

Steven K. Vernon

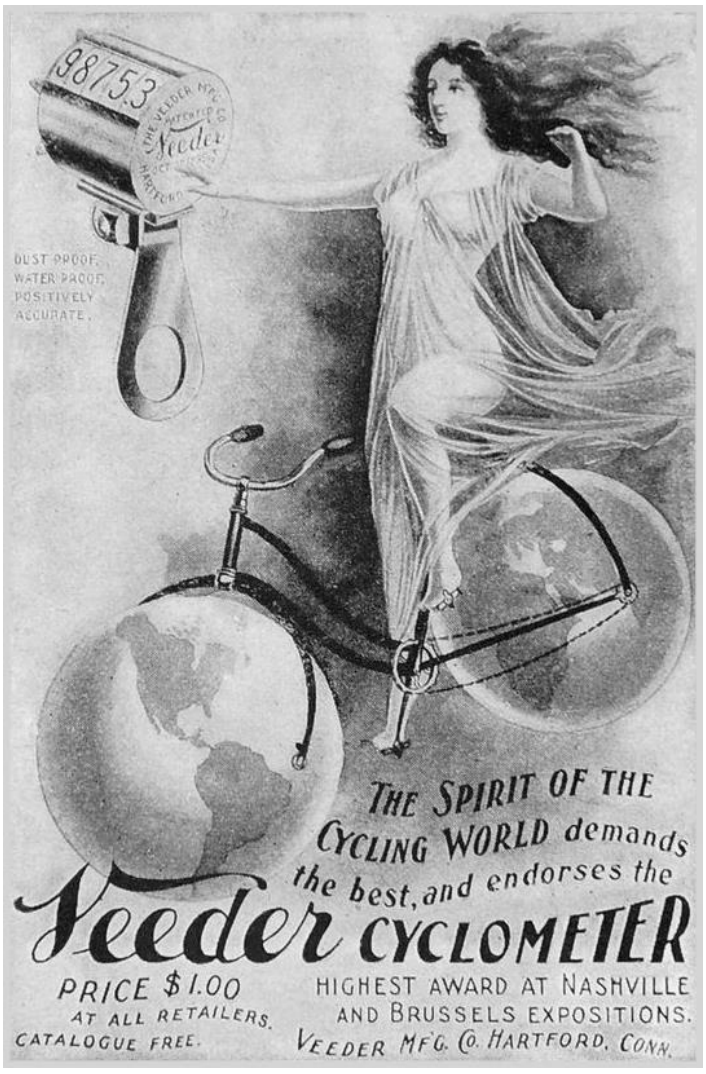
(This article is part of a series about inventions that were adapted for use in fishing reels.)

When I'm going a-fishing, Dear Reader,
I'll be seeking some big bottom-feeder.
So I hope my deep lure
Looks like *entrée du jour*,
And my reel will, of course, have a Veeder.
-Anonymous

In late 1880, at the ripe old age of eighteen years, Curtis Hussey Veeder applied for two patents for bicycle seats. Both were granted during the following year. Veeder had been born in 1862 in Pennsylvania, the son of a peripatetic mining engineer, who moved his family from Allegheny, Pa., to Pittsburgh, then to Plattsburgh, N.Y., by 1870. It was there that Curtis, showing an early interest in all things mechanical, built and rode a high-wheeler bicycle equipped with one of his seats. Before he earned a mechanical engineering degree at Lehigh University in 1886, he built several other bicycle-related items, a number of electrical items, and some camera shutters. He also sold his seat patents to the Pope Manufacturing Company, which introduced Columbia bicycles and would become a leading U.S. bike manufacturer within a few years.

After graduation, Veeder worked as a draftsman, employed first by Pope, then by a mining company in Michigan. He came back East in 1889 to work for the Thompson-Houston Co. in Lynn, Mass. During this period, he designed a wide variety of electrical items, including a locomotive and a commercial rotor used by General Electric in a power plant. In 1894, he went to work as a draftsman for the Hartford Cycle Co. in Hartford, Conn.

In 1895, Veeder patented a cyclometer, which could record the distance a bicycle traveled, and, with several associates, established Veeder Manufacturing Co. in Hartford to manufacture the device. Two years later, the company moved into its new state-of-the-art factory, whose machinery was all run with electricity and whose walls consisted mostly of glass, sections of which could be opened for summer ventilation. The company grew rapidly, expanding its product line to include dozens of inventions by Veeder and his employees. By 1909, the company advertised that it



An ad for a Veeder cyclometer, featuring a sleep-cycling damsel in distressed tresses.

was producing cyclometers, odometers, tachometers, tachodometers, counters, and die castings. The instruments were used for bicycles, horse-drawn vehicles, motorcycles, automobiles, machinery, elevators and, later, new-fangled motion picture

A single-action combo bearing a Veeder line counter. One inset shows the drag-adjusting knob and the line counter on the back of the reel. The other shows the Veeder mark on the counter, whose case is identical to those used on some Veeder cyclometers.

equipment, ticket-dispensing machines—virtually any machine that required counting.

In 1928, Veeder Manufacturing merged with C.J. Root Co., which also manufactured counting and measuring devices, to form Veeder-Root, incorporated in Hartford. New advertisements proclaimed that the company's products "count everything on earth." During the 1930s, the company continued to widen its array of measuring devices and entered the petroleum field, hitting the jackpot with its mechanical gasoline pump computers. Having been merged with and bought by several other corporations in subsequent decades, Veeder-Root exists today as a division of Danaher Controls and advertises itself as "the world's most experienced, trusted name in fuel management."

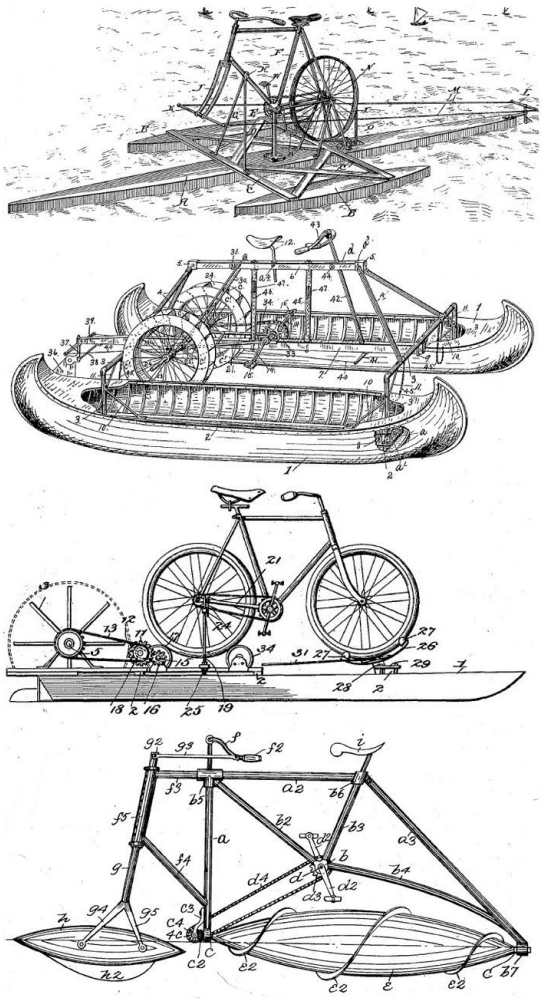
Curtis Veeder remained with Veeder-Root as a director, also serving as parks commissioner in Hartford. He died two days after Christmas, 1943, a month shy of his eighty-second birthday and holder of ninety-five American patents, according to one obituary.

Two views of a multiplying combo bearing a Veeder line counter. The raised-pillar reel has a star drag. (Photos courtesy of James O'Brien)

How is Veeder's name relevant to ORCAns? His cyclometer was adapted for use as a line counter on fishing reels.

At least two types of reels bear counters marked with the Veeder Mfg. Co. name; both are narrow-spool trolling reels mounted on rod butts. One of these rod/reel combinations, apparently made for deep freshwater use, includes a six-inch-diameter, single-action reel, with a line counter and drag-adjustment nut mounted on the narrow cradle. The owner was probably expected to provide his own rod to insert into the clamp at the front of the combo, which came in a canvas bag just long enough for it.

The second combo uses a casting to frame a raised-pillar, seven-inch-diameter multiplying reel that is attached to the rod butt. The line counter, marked with the cyclometer patent date, is mounted on the headplate, and the reel is equipped with a star drag and freespool clutch. A thumb-lever operates a brake. This combo also came in a canvas bag and included a second, interchangeable spool.



Several of the many bicycle boats patented from the 1890s until the 1920s.

The manufacturer(s) and production dates of the reels remain unknown. ORCAn Ed Pritchard informed me of an example of the multiplier combo that was engraved with “Built by Chrysler Motors for K.T. Keller.” Keller served as vice-president, president, and board chairman of Chrysler from 1926 to 1956. Mr. Pritchard has “seen a few of these reels.”

The Chrysler inscription clearly suggests that the auto company did, indeed, make the multiplying combo. Nevertheless, it’s difficult to explain why it would have made a number of them. It may be even more difficult to attribute the manufacture of the single-action combo to Chrysler. Therefore, we should consider the possibility that the Veeder company manufactured at least one of the combos. As the combos are unmarked, except for the Veeder name on the line counters, we may not learn with certainty who made the reels until someone discovers advertisements for them or finds other marked examples.

In case you remain skeptical that a manufacturer specializing in bicycle accessories might decide to adapt one for fishing, please see the accompanying illustration of so-called bicycle boats, all patented during Veeder’s heyday, all obviously usable as trolling platforms.

Fellow ORCAns and I would certainly appreciate any further information on any reels equipped with Veeder line counters.

I’m very grateful to Ed Pritchard for sharing his knowledge and providing advice and suggestions.