

WHO'S YER REEL MAKER ?

by Steven K. Vernon

On January 6, 1882, a group of five Hoosiers filed articles of incorporation for the American Reel Company, of Indianapolis. The stated purpose of the company was to manufacture fishing reels and to sell "all products of said Company's own manufacture." The capital stock consisted of sixteen hundred shares with an aggregate value of \$40,000.

The founders, who made up the Board of Directors, were a varied lot. John R. Pearson was a member of the City Council, President of the Police Board, and the Superintendent of Citizens' Gaslight & Coke Co., which he also had helped to establish. He had gained public notoriety by attempting a balloon flight to the Philadelphia Centennial Exposition, only to be forced down in central Ohio. Pearson became the

President of the American Reel Co. The company treasurer was the Mayor of Indianapolis, Daniel W. Grubbs. The third founder, George A. Dickson, was Pearson's brother-in-law and partner in a theatre business. Among his real estate holdings were three opera houses.

The two remaining founders comprised the company "think tank." Warren Ohaver and Taylor O'Bannon had applied for a fishing reel patent on November 14, 1881. On January 31, 1882, less than a month after the incorporation, the patent (no. 253,090) was granted. By 1882, Ohaver, a police Captain in 1878 and now a traveling salesman, was living at 3 Hill St., his fifth address in the previous four years.

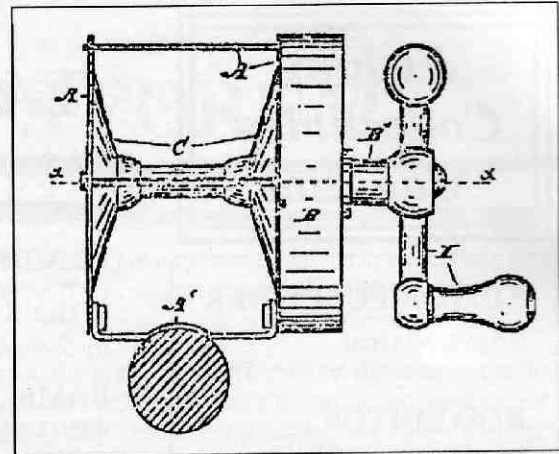


Figure 1: A patent drawing of Ohaver and O'Bannon's reel clearly showing the stamped, one piece "Terry" foot.

During the next two years, he would try his hand at both insurance and real estate. O'Bannon, a saloon keeper, was living at 62 Arch St., his third address in the previous four years. He would eventually enter the patent medicine business before returning to barkeeping. The obvious inference from this information is that Pearson, Grubbs, and Dickson provided the capital for Ohaver and O'Bannon's "ship to come in."

The offices of the new company were housed at 24 E. Washington St., a building called the "Jewel

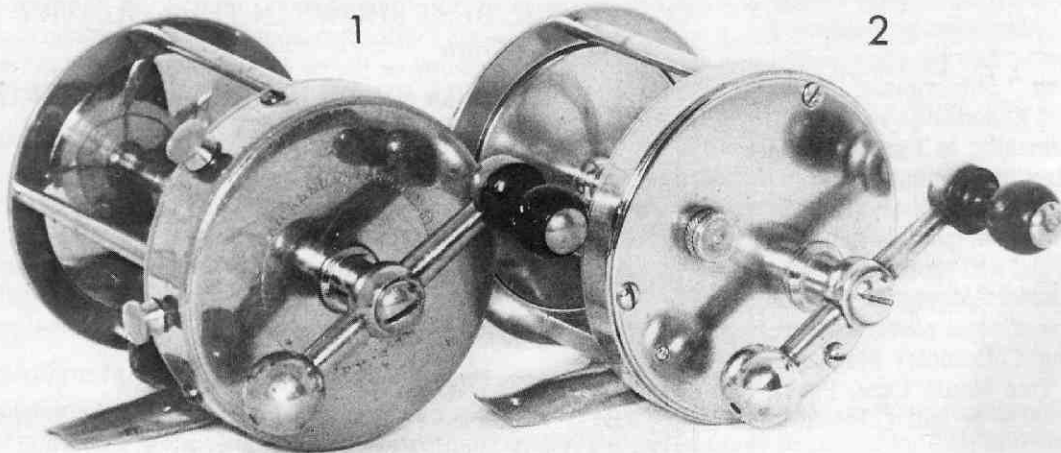


Figure 2: The 10:1 multiplying reel with the American Reel Co. stamp (Reel 1) and Reel 2. Reel 1 has a "Terry" foot.

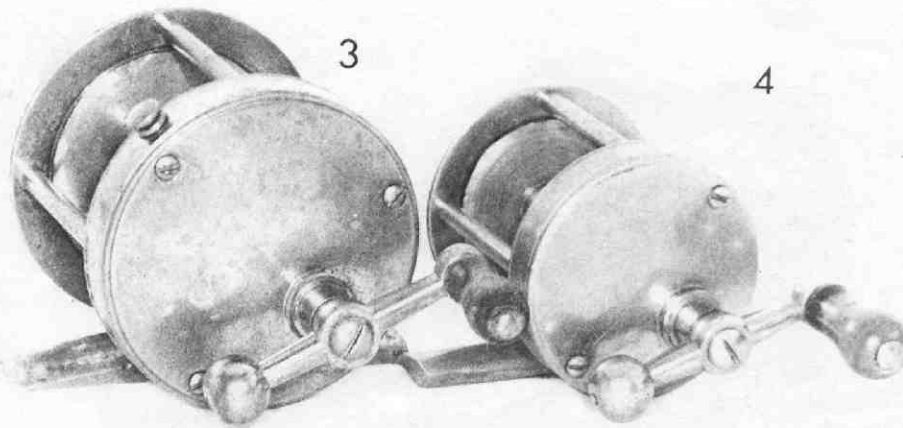


Figure 3: Reels 3 and 4. Note the relatively small crank screws. Reel 4 has a "Terry" foot.

Palace" by its owner, Craft & Co. W. H. "Harry" Craft was born in Belmont County, Ohio, on September 6, 1833. Following a three-year apprenticeship in jewelry and watchmaking, he moved to Indianapolis in November, 1854, and, within five years, established a business in Odd Fellows Hall. After enlisting to serve in the Civil War, he re-established the business, known as Craft & Cutter in 1870, at the Washington Street address. Craft, the Secretary of the American Reel Co. though not a founding partner,

appears to have been responsible for its reel making activities.

It is not clear how extensive those reel making activities were. The company was listed by name in city directories for only two years, disappearing after 1883. In 1886, Craft sold his firm and went into the real estate business. Yet the short-lived company produced at least one reel that bore its name.

Ohaver and O'Bannon's design included a spring-brake, a four-gear drive train, and an alarm bell that was struck by a tiny hammer. The American Reel Co. product incor-

porated the basic features of their design. However, the alarm employed a conventional click-spring engaging a gear, rather than the patent-specified bell. The four-gear train produced a 10.24:1 multiplying ratio, even higher than that of the better know 9:1 Carlton Reel that would appear in 1903. The reel bore the company name and two patent dates: the Ohaver and O'Bannon 1882 date and the Nov. 14, 1871, date of the Silas Terry patent. In fact, a Terry-designed reel foot supported the reel, and the drawings for the 1882 patent clearly show the same

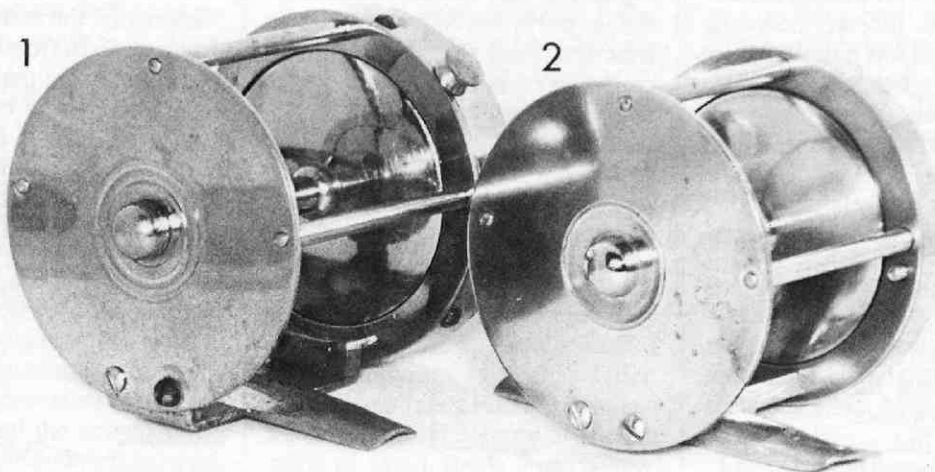


Figure 4: Tailplates of Reels 1 and 2. The right retaining screw on Reel 1 is a replacement.

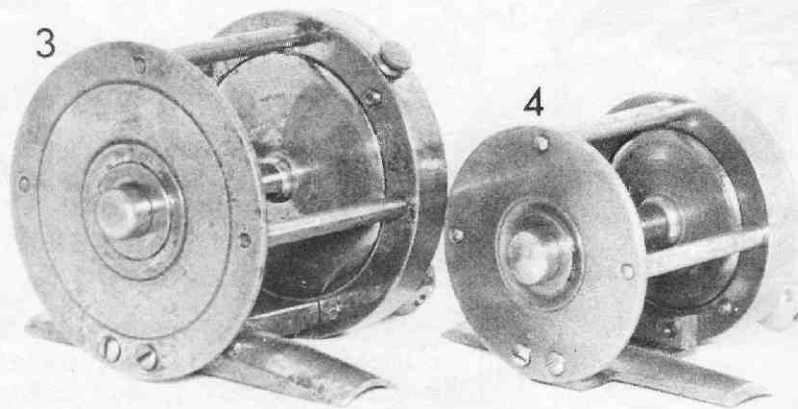


Figure 5: Tailplates of Reels 3 and 4. All four oil caps and the surrounding groove designs are similar.

foot in use. The crank was a ball-handle.

Silas B. Terry son of the pioneer clock maker, Eli Terry, established the Terry Clock Company in Waterbury, Conn., in 1867. It was incorporated two years later. At least as early as 1873, and probably earlier, the company manufactured fishing reels, including "plain, multiplying, click, drag and combination multiplying reels." Terry's 1871 patent described a multiplying reel with a unique housing for the gears and a reel foot that was a single piece of stamped metal with flanges extending upward to receive fastening screws. The reel was designed to be manufactured cheaply. The company continued to produce reels until it declared bankruptcy on May 21, 1880. Today, its single-action ("plain") reels are relatively common collector items.

The sale of the company's entire inventory for \$4050 to H. S. Russell, of Pittsfield, Mass., was recorded on Nov. 2, 1880. Among the inventory was a stock of reel parts that required over five pages to list. Russell and

others re-established the Terry Clock Co. in Pittsfield, where the newspaper, the Sun, on Aug. 11, 1880, announced that the company planned to manufacture reels, in addition to its clocks and steam gauge movements.

What happened to the Terry reel parts is unknown. I have not been able to learn whether or not the Pittsfield firm actually built any fishing reels. A search of early company invoices failed to uncover evidence that either the parts or finished reels were sold. Nevertheless, it is tempting to speculate that at least some of these parts were used by the American Reel Co. They certainly could have been available well before Ohaver and O'Bannon applied for their patent.

Although it seems likely that the American Reel Company produced only one style of reel, I have examined three other unidentified reels that are sufficiently similar to

qualify as possible products of the same manufacturer. The 10x-multiplying reel (Reel 1), 2 1/2-inches in diameter, may be used as a "Rosetta Stone" to implicate the others as related products. Reel 2 is a brass reel, also 2 1/2-inches in diameter, with a crank almost identical to that of Reel 1. It has a conventional one-piece foot and a head cap knob that operates a click. Reel 3 is a 2 5/16-inch-diameter, ball-handle reel with a heavy, one-piece, conventional foot. Reel 4 is a 1 3/4-inch diameter brass reel with a ball-handle and an 1871-dated Terry foot.

Internally, the reels have common features. Each front spool journal is peened over the pinion, which, as a result, can not be removed. Reel 3 has a spring-brake like that in Reel 1; Reels 2 and 4 lack the spring, but each has a hole in the headplate for a brake-pin and a hole where a spring might have been attached. Because it has a four-gear train (48,

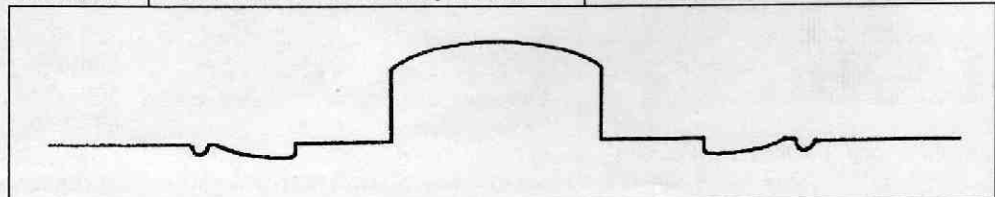


Figure 6: A scale drawing of the cross-section of the decorative grooves on the tailplates.

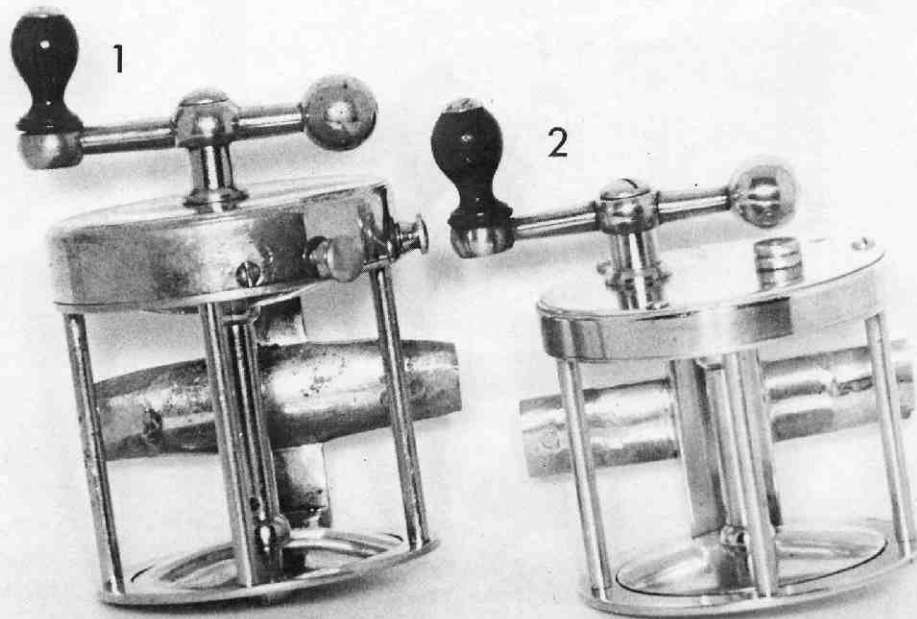


Figure 7: Top views of Reels 1 and 2. The cranks are virtually identical, except the knob on Reel 1 is hard rubber and on Reel 2 it is wood.

15, 48, and 15 teeth), Reel 1's gears are not directly comparable to those in the others. The other three reels have similar trains, however, consisting of brass gears cut with 36 and 18 teeth, 34 and 17 teeth, and 30 and 15 teeth, respectively. In these cases, the gears produce exact 2:1 multiplying ratios and lack "hunting teeth." The main gear shaft-bearings are recessed to provide oil reservoirs.

The reels also have external similarities. All four have a groove cut on each side of the 90 degree angle formed at the junction of the rim and face of the head cap. All employ countersunk screws with slightly domed heads to retain the head cap and reel foot. (The cap of Reel 1 is held by screws through the rim.) The attachments of the spool flanges to the spool shafts appear to be the same, and the holes for the line-ties are on the far left ends of the spool arbors. Undecorated, domed

oil caps protect all four rear spool journals, and the caps are surrounded by decorative grooves that are similar in cross-section. Reels 1 and 3 are plated poorly with nickel.

The cranks are distinguishable from those on more familiar "New York-style" ball-handle reels. The counterweights are relatively large, as are their lathe-centering holes. The shafts emanating from the hubs are thick and sturdy; the shafts holding the knobs on Reels 1, 2, and 3 are significantly longer than the corresponding shafts attached to the counterweights. Therefore, the cranks look unbalanced. The head of the crank-retaining screw, in each case, is noticeably smaller than the corresponding crank-hub. The crank-screw shown on the Reel 1 patent drawings is even smaller. Reel 1 has a fancy rubber knob, and the knob on Reel 2 is similar, though made of wood. Reels 3 and 4 have simple wood knobs similar to those

on the Terry single-action reels. The knob shown in the 1882 patent drawings more closely resembles the simpler knobs. All the reels have similar crank-collars.

These comparisons permit the deduction that all four reels may have been manufactured by the same maker who constructed Reel 1 or may have been assembled with parts supplied by the same manufacturer. Reels 3 and 4 probably are Terry products. The distinctive cranks of Reels 1 and 2 almost certainly were made by the same manufacturer, and Reel 2 also may be a Terry product. It also is possible that the American Reel Co. obtained the patent rights to the Terry design or simply bought previously marked reel feet for their reels. However, the remarkable similarities of the four reels described here suggest otherwise.

I propose the hypothesis that Reel 1, the American Reel Co. product,

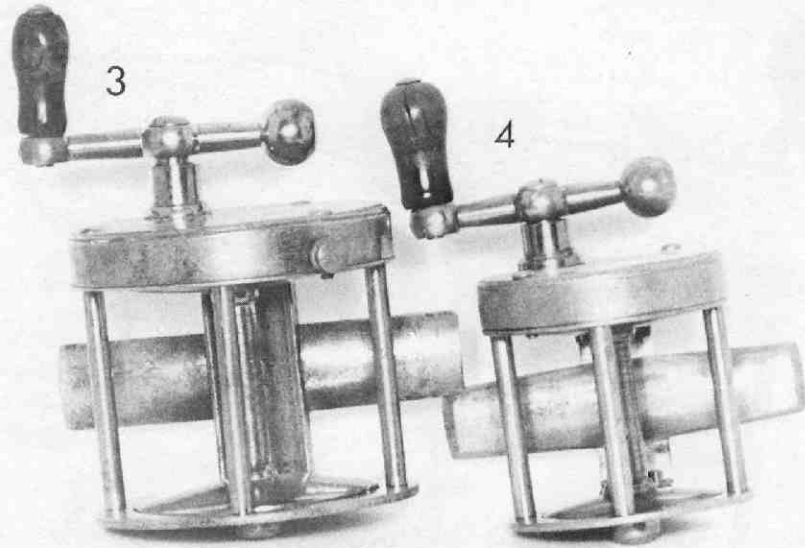


Figure 8: Top views of Reels 3 and 4, showing the similar cranks. The knobs resemble that in the 1882 patent drawing.

either was actually built by the Terry Clock Company or was assembled in Indianapolis from Terry parts. Hopefully, we will discover not only who made these reels but the entire reel making history of the enigmatic companies.

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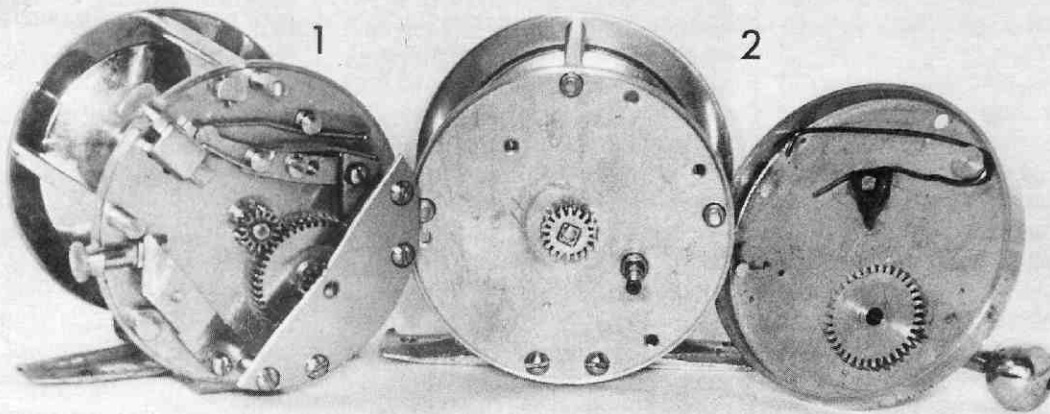


Figure 9: Headplates of Reels 1 and 2. The Reel 2 plate has two extra holes for a spring brake. Reel 4's headplate is similar.

Addendum

Since this article was published in 1989, we have learned a little more about both the American Reel Co. reel and the Terry Clock Co.:

1. The Terry Clock Co. had its factories and headquarters in Pittsfield, Mass., by the time Ohaver and O'Bannon patented their reel. It also had an office in Chicago. The company remained in business until about 1893, and it appears to have made reels until it closed. The Terry firm almost certainly manufactured the reel for the American Reel Co., although the latter may have added and/or assembled some of the internal components.
2. The 10X multiplier was made in at least two sizes.
3. I am still not aware of any of these reels equipped with the patented bell alarm. Nevertheless, I've seen one example, perhaps a prototype, that employed a *planetary* gear system to achieve its 10X multiplying ratio. It was stamped with the inventors' names and "Patent Pending," but there was no "American" marking. That reel, also marked "45" on the headcap, "52" on the headplate, probably was a very early product.



The American Reel Co. reel with the headcap removed to show the click and drag. The 10X multiplying ratio is produced by a conventional train of four spur gears.



The Ohaver and O'Bannon reel lacks the American Reel Co. stamping and has a planetary gear system. It is shown with (right) and without the annular main gear in place.