

## Spring Fever in Kentucky

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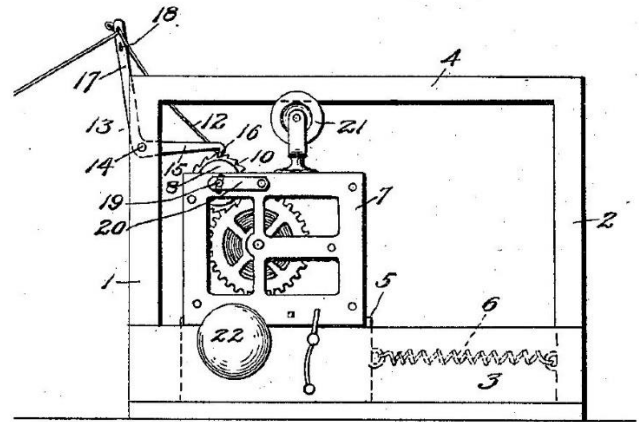
Most collectors realize that our worship of the early Kentucky reelmakers is based mostly on our admiration for their automatic reels. Once the Kentuckians were able to cure their obsession with using quill springs in their reels, they realized that metal springs could be used for more than just interrupting the naps of dozing anglers. Metal springs could be used to wind up the line, thereby obviating that “vexatious and wearisome” chore of cranking.

The Eureka! moment was provided in 1883 by James Bryan, Guthrie, Ky., who invented a reel in a box that was clamped to a railing or gunwale. When a fish struck, two large clock-springs were released so they could yank in the hapless prey “without the aid or presence of the fisherman,” whose sleep remained undisturbed.

It was Granville Medley who really got the ball rolling when he patented his first of three automatic reels almost a decade later. He probably was concerned that taking up slack line was costing him too much time when he would rather have been extracting his patients’ teeth. With partners, the inventor established the Medley Reel Company in Hopkinsville, Ky., to produce the reel, which, unlike Bryan’s, was meant to be mounted on a fishing rod. The reel would be manufactured, not in Kentucky, but by a company in St. Louis, Missouri.<sup>1</sup>

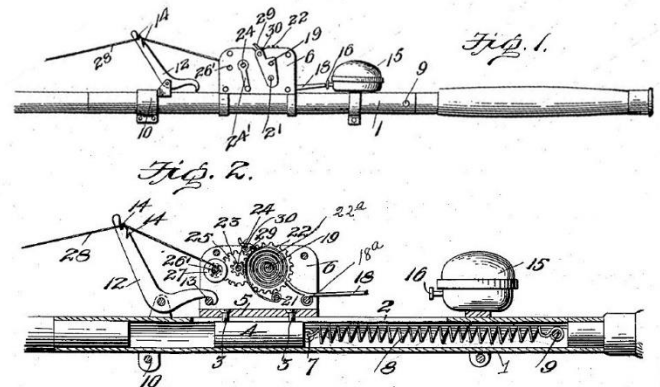
Other Kentuckians would invent more automatic reels over the years, but this story is about two men who actually manufactured reels in Louisville. In 1899, George Cook, of that city, invented another reel in a box that could haul in a fish automatically. It was equipped with a bell alarm and was patented in the U.S. and Canada. He offered the Canadian patent for sale as soon as it was granted.<sup>2</sup> In September, 1900, he received a U.S. patent for another automatic reel. An improvement of the earlier reel, this one was meant to be mounted on a rod.

Cook was an African-American. We know this because the publishers of city directories identified persons of color by adding an italicized “C” after their names. According to the few records I could find, Cook was born in 1857. He first appeared in Louisville directories in 1896 as a porter and was listed as such in 1899.



Patent drawing of Cook’s first automatic reel. When a fish strikes, the reel is released, slides backward, triggers the bell alarm, and winds in the fish.

In 1899, James Deally and B.F. Meek & Sons were the only reel manufacturers named in a classified Louisville directory. The following year, three additional names were added to the list: Blue Grass Reel Works, George Cook, and Peter Ufer. Cook’s working address was 1110 Churchill; Ufer’s was 534 E. Jefferson. Cook filed articles of incorporation for the Cook Automatic Fishing Reel & Camp Supply Mfg. Co., with capitalization of \$5000.<sup>3</sup> The 1901 directory included Cook and Ufer again as reel manufacturers, but only Ufer was so listed in 1902, the last year his name appeared as a manufacturer. Cook returned to work as a porter but would open a confectionery shop and a restaurant later in the decade.



Patent drawings of Cook’s rod-mounted automatic reel. Fig. 1 shows the positions of the components after a fish has struck.

**Fishing Reel Mnfrs.**  
 Blue Grass Reel Wks 258 W Main  
**COOK GEORGE**  
 1110 Churchill  
**DEALLY JAMES**  
 1809½ W Jefferson  
 Meek B F & Sons 52, 515 4th  
**UFER PETER**  
 534 E Jefferson

*Louisville reelmakers listed in Caron's Louisville Commercial Directory for the Year 1900.*

Peter Ufer was born in Prussia in 1841 and arrived in the U.S. in 1880. He was employed at a couple of firms as a carver and a cob pipemaker, but he also ran his own business as a wood turner and pattern maker until 1890, when he opened a gunsmith shop. Following his two or three years as a reelmaker, during which period he continued his gunsmithing, he returned to gunsmithing full time.

It is reasonable to conclude that George Cook established his reelmaking business to produce one or

both of his automatic reels. I would theorize that he collaborated with Peter Ufer in the venture. It seems too coincidental that Ufer would have opened and closed his own reelmaking business independently at the same time. Unsurprisingly, the enterprise was not a resounding success. It could not have been helped by negative opinions of automatic reels published by such authorities as Ben Milam, who wrote: "Then there is the automatic reel...a sportsman ...could never use and enjoy this style of reel."<sup>4</sup>

Although Cook's invention of two automatic reels has been reported widely over the last century, his manufacturing has not. But we can confidently add his and Ufer's names to an ever-growing list of Kentucky reelmakers.

If any lucky collector has an example of a Cook reel, I would greatly appreciate a chance to see it.

#### Notes

1. *Daily Kentuckian* [Hopkinsville], April 29, 1898, pg. 3
2. *Courier Journal* [Louisville], July 9, 1899, pg. 8
3. *House Furnishing Review*, January, 1900, pg. 155 and *Hardware*, February 10, 1900, pg. 46
4. B.C. Milam, "Reels—Their Use and Abuse" in *American Game Fishes*, G.O. Shields, ed. Chicago and New York: Rand, McNally & Co., 1892, pg. 544