

Elmer J. Sellers and His Fishing Reel

by

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Dr. Elmer J. Sellers was born on June 18, 1861, in Windsor Castle, Pennsylvania, a town which owed its name to the influence of his father, Mahlon A. Sellers. The younger Sellers served pharmaceutical apprenticeships in Hamburg and Reading after attending Kutztown State Normal School (now Kutztown University). While serving in a series of clerkships, he married Sarah Ann Skelton in 1884, and their first child, Roy Mahlon Sellers, was born on July 26, 1885. The couple's other child, Bertha L. Sellers, was born on July 30, 1890. By that time, "Doc" Sellers had been officially registered to practice pharmacy in 1887 (Pennsylvania license no. 84), the same year he established a drug store at 272 W. Main Street in Kutztown. The store included a soda fountain of Italian marble.

Sellers' drug store became popular as a gathering place for many of the local folk, who spent much of their time in amiable debate. Doc Sellers delighted in assuming the role of Devil's Advocate, wittily prolonging the arguments. The store was more than the Kutztown agora, of course. Like most contemporary druggists, Sellers concocted his own patent medicines, and at least some of his labels featured a portrait of his daughter.

The business prospered. Sarah Ann Sellers was considered a "foremost citizen" of Kutztown when she died of heart failure on May 14, 1908, at the age of forty-four years. Later that year, Sellers moved the store to larger quarters (or added the neighboring property) at 270 W. Main Street. Sometime before 1918, Sellers remarried. His new bride, Mrs. Hedwig Schille, of Brooklyn, and her son joined the Sellers household at 320 W. Main Street, only steps from the drug store.

Sellers' son Roy attended the Philadelphia College of Pharmacy and spent some time as an itinerant pharmaceutical salesman. Cursed with weak health, he gave up sales and turned to farming after his marriage to Nettie Trexler in 1909. He died on Nov. 23, 1918, a victim of the influenza epidemic. It is



Dr. Elmer "Doc" Sellers, as he appeared ca. 1915¹

sadly ironic that the issue of the *Kutztown Patriot* that published his obituary also carried his father's advertisement for various influenza remedies.

During the subsequent decades, Sellers became a genuine "pillar of the community." He was a member of the Chamber of Commerce, a member of several pharmaceutical associations, an elder of St. Paul's Reformed Church, and a member of several fraternal organizations. He also served as president of the Town Council, served as a highway commissioner, and was instrumental in establishing Kutztown Park.

Sellers was blessed with an uncommon talent for invention. Among other accomplishments, he "rigged up a melting pot for the linotype machine of the Kutztown Publishing Company; installed his own telephone line from the store to his home; and even trained his dog 'Tuck' to carry medicine home and to balance his fishing rods."² (Even Tuck seems to have been unusually talented.)

In 1898, Sellers was granted a patent for his most interesting invention—a spring-loaded hitching post



Young Bertha Sellers' portrait graces the label of this E.J. Sellers sarsaparilla bottle. (Courtesy of the Kutztown Area Historical Society)

that was released from its underground housing by a foot-operated latch. A fifteen-page brochure described the invention in depth and featured illustrations of a dapper gentleman raising and lowering the post; the gentleman appears to be Sellers himself. The potential customer was assured that "the introduction of the new disappearing hitching post will eventually clear all pavements from that ancient obstruction known as the old style post."³ Sellers hardly could have foreseen the coming of today's obstruction known as the parking meter. Interestingly, he named himself both as patentee and *manufacturer* of the device.

One example of the hitching post is owned by the Kutztown Area Historical Society. A second, sent by Sellers to Henry Ford, is owned by the Henry Ford Museum in Dearborn, Michigan. Perhaps Sellers was making the case that his hitching post could also be used to secure Ford's Quadricycle at curbside.

Doc Sellers also had several hobbies, including painting, taxidermy, and collecting arrowheads and coins. But his favorite hobby was fishing. As a

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Use Sellers Ancient Cough Remedy. Made up of White Pine
* Wild Cherry, Squills Glycerine, Tar, Etc.

Sellers' Drug Store

Cons. Phone. KUTZTOWN, PA.

Sellers' advertisement in the Kutztown Patriot, Nov. 28, 1918. Like many pharmacists of bygone days, he concocted his own pills and elixirs. His son's obituary was published in the same issue.

member of the Autumn Leaf Club, he fished all over Pennsylvania, primarily for trout, and enjoyed Club excursions to Canada. Locally, he and a neighbor,



Photo from Sellers' brochure showing what may be the inventor lowering the hitching post into its housing. No warnings were posted regarding children standing over the device and raising it. (Courtesy Kutztown Area Historical Society)



The Sellers side-mounted fly reel, made of plated brass. The "spokes" taper slightly and are wider at the distal ends. Loosening the knurled nut at its base allows the handle to be folded down.

Ralph Bard, often fished in spring-fed waters at the Berkleigh Country Club and along the Little Lehigh River. His drug store was well known for its large inventory of fishing equipment. It is not surprising that he applied some of his creativity to building a better reel.

The Sellers reel is a modernized version of the Billingham reel that was patented in 1859. Its two-piece spool is secured on the spool shaft with a screw that provides adjustable drag and represents a major improvement over the Billingham design. The construction of the spool belies the description given in the brochure accompanying the reel, of "twenty semi-circular bars...with their inner ends fastened to the periphery...and the outer ends fastened to a ring..." The halves of the spools I have examined were stamped and formed, then filed and plated. (The Billingham spool was constructed of soldered wire.) In an unusual design, the click wheel remains stationary while the pawl rotates. Although the crank, made of tulip wood, can be folded down, it is held in an upright position by a threaded nut. An agate guide is soldered into the end of a formed bracket that extends from the shaft above the foot. Like the Billingham, the Sellers reel permitted the line to dry quickly and could be carried in the user's pocket. Doc Sellers, seventy-two years old, received a patent for the reel on Feb. 13, 1934.

Because of the complexity of the reel, it might seem unlikely that Sellers could have been making them in some room at the back of his drug store. Nevertheless, interviews with people who knew him provided no evidence whatsoever that he was not personally responsible for their manufacture, just as he had been for his hitching post. In fact, Bertha Sellers is said to have speculated that the family might have become wealthy if Sellers had contracted to have the reel mass-produced. Sellers is known to have been driven by Ralph Bard, on several occasions, to a now-defunct airport in nearby Trexlertown, where a mechanic provided at least some help with reel construction. Whether the mechanic, who actually built airplanes, assisted with prototype reels, manufactured certain parts, or built all the reels is not known. It is conceivable that Sellers constructed his earliest reels as described in his brochure, but employed the stamped and formed spool to avoid having to make eighty "bar" connections per reel. The Sellers Fly Casting "Bas-Kit" Reel was sold for \$10.00, apparently only by Sellers himself. Although it is not known how many were made, one of Sellers' acquaintances estimated



The cover of the package insert that accompanied the Sellers reel. (Courtesy of Bob Wentz.)

that total number as “only about ten.” That estimate is obviously too low. There probably are more than ten examples in collections, and Sellers apparently made enough reels to justify the provision of a special mailing carton for the boxed reels. It is unlikely that such a small production run would have warranted the expensive construction of customized dies for the stamped and formed parts.

Doc Sellers died on Jan. 17, 1941, at the age of seventy-nine years, leaving the store he had run for fifty-four years to the management of his daughter. She reassured Kutztown that “a competent, registered pharmacist will be in charge.”² Sellers’ fly-tying case and materials were left to one of his two grandsons, and his Heddon rod was left to his stepson. Although an inventory of the estate included the “Patent to Fishing Reel,” no other fishing equipment was listed. Because of heavy debt, primarily to store suppliers, the estate was declared insolvent. The final quitclaim of the legatees was not signed until May 22, 1963.

Although we may remain uncertain about why Doc Sellers reinvented the side-mounted reel, we can find solace in the knowledge that “he spread good cheer, advice and sympathy, day in and day out...[and]...tried to make Kutztown a little better for having lived there.”²

Notes

1. *Centennial History*, Historical Committee, Kutztown Centennial Association, Kutztown Publishing Co., 1915
2. *Kutztown Patriot*, Jan. 23, 1941
3. *Hitch To and Be Posted*, advertisement by E.J. Sellers, Kutztown, Pa. (Courtesy of the Kutztown Area Historical Society)

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