

The John Sommer Faucet Company

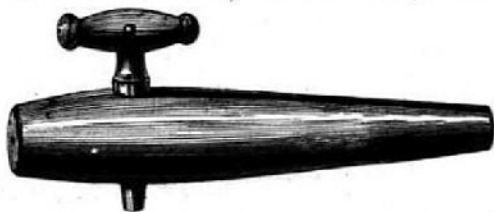
Steven K. Vernon and Roger Schulz

John Sommer was nineteen-years-old when he arrived in Cuyahoga County, Ohio, from Germany in 1848. He married Elizabeth Metzner in 1854, and John, Jr., was born in 1858. At some point, the family moved to Newark, New Jersey, where John opened a business manufacturing cork-lined wooden faucets. Following a short-lived partnership—John & Henry Sommer—after the Civil War, the business grew. (Henry may have been a cousin.) According to one source,¹ Sommer was very successful in creating a demand for his product and had twenty-five employees by 1874. By the 1880s, the company was producing a wide variety of wooden products.

John, Jr., joined the business, which was renamed John Sommer's Son about 1884, when John, Sr., was in his mid-fifties. Junior expanded the product line, which would include fishing reels. The earliest advertisement we have found for the company's reels was published in 1894, but they probably had been making them earlier. The company also advertised that it manufactured brass goods.

In November, 1908, the company was incorporated by the Sommers and their wives as the John Sommer Faucet Company, with capitalization of \$50,000, "to manufacture wooden faucets and specialties in woodenware." Fishing reels continued to be among the specialties. The company purchased a manufacturing plant in Washington, New Jersey.

JOHN SOMMER,
Manufacturer of all kinds
WOODEN FAUCETS,



METALLIC KEY, Maplewood polished with Leather Lining. LIGNUMVITÆ
KEY, Maplewood with Leather Lining. CORK-LINED Maplewood,
ROSEWOOD polished, RED CEDAR, CHERRY & BUTTERNUT.

WOODEN WARE, CORK PLUNGERS,
Mallets, Potato Mashers, Rolling Pins,
LADLE AND OTHER HANDLES,
EXTENSIONS, AIR VENTS, ETC.
Also a Variety of Wood Turning by Machines.

OFFICE & FACTORY,
8, 10 & 12 Pearl Street, NEWARK, N. J.

The factory in Washington was destroyed by fire in 1916, but the Sommers quickly rebuilt. They continued to advertise fishing reels until at least 1920, and the firm was included among reel manufacturers in the *Hendricks Commercial Register of the United States* as late as 1925. The company continued in business, and John Sommer, III, took over after his father's death in 1933. It survived at least into the 1960s, perhaps into the 1970s.

The Sommer companies made fishing reels for over thirty years, but we doubt that any of them were marked with the Sommer name. Nevertheless, it does not require a giant leap of faith to assume that they were wooden reels, most likely the side-mounted bank-fishing reels so popular around the turn of the twentieth century. Such reels were inexpensive and easy to use, lacking mechanical doodads that could get out of order.

**THIS IS THE TIME TO BUY
CLOTH LINE AND
FISH LINE REELS.**

**WRITE FOR PRICES TO
JOHN SOMMER'S SON,
355-365 Central Ave., Newark, N. J.**

"NOTICE."

**Silver, Nickel Platers
and Brass Goods Mfrs.**

MATERIAL FOR DRYING PURPOSES!

**WRITE FOR PRICES TO
JOHN SOMMER'S SON,
355-365 Central Ave., Newark, N. J.**

John Sommer's ad in an 1882 Newark directory. In 1884, John Sommer's Son ran virtually the same ad.

These advertisements in late-1894 issues of The Iron Age show that John Sommer's Son was making reels and brass goods.

J. FISHING REELS.

Abbey & Imbrie, 18 Vesey St., New York.
T. H. Chubb Rod Co., Post Mills, Vt.
Andrew B. Hendryx & Co., New Haven, Conn.
B. C. Millam & Son, Frankfort, Ky.
John Sommer's Sons, Newark, N. J.
W. H. Talbot, Nevada, Mo.
Edward Vom Hofe, 97 Fulton St., New York.
Yawman & Erbe Mfg. Co., Rochester, N. Y.

Reels, Fishing—

Andrew B. Hendryx Co., New Haven, Ct.
John Sommer's Son, Newark, N. J.

Reels, Fishing—

Benjamin-Sellar Mfg. Co., 557-559 West
Quincy St., Chicago, Ill.
Andrew B. Hendryx Co., New Haven, Ct.
Benjamin-Sellar Mfg. Co., 557-559 West
Quincy St., Chicago, Ill.
John Sommer Faucet Co., Newark, N. J.
South Bend Bait Co., South Bend, Ind.

Sommer company inclusion in lists of fishing reel manufacturers. (Top) Seeger & Guernsey's Cyclopædia of the Manufactures and Products of the United States, 1899 (Middle) The Iron Age, 1904 (Bottom) The Iron Age, 1911. The listings should dispel any notion that the company's "fish-line reels" were merely line dryers.

Today, the best-known examples of side-mounted, wooden cod reels are the "Good Luck" reels sold by A.F. Meisselbach & Bro. According to Phil White, they "appeared around 1890," and the earliest reels had brass, diamond-shaped plates to which the knobs were fastened.² Some of the plates were stamped with a patent date of November 3, 1891, referring to a Meisselbach patent claiming a brake-adjusting screw with a central set-screw that bore against the reel's spool journal.

The Meisselbachs' more widely-known patent of 1897 related "to a means for applying ball-bearings to the opposite sides of the wooden spool which is employed for large fish-reels." One claim included two cones, one adjustable, on the supporting shaft on the sides of the wooden spool to act as drag surfaces. Another described the crank-plate as having extensions that "curved inwardly toward the center of the reel." The S-shaped plate would become a salient feature of "Good Luck" wooden reels, with or without ball bearings.

There were many other wooden reels on the market, of course. In our experience, reels with brass support plates, usually with S-shapes, are seen most commonly. The ends of the plates do not all curve inwardly, as the Good Luck plates do. The plates vary in thickness, and the reels' clamping hardware varies widely. Some reels have ball bearings, and the knobs



Various Meisselbach wooden reels. (Top) Reels with early diamond-shaped support plates. The reel on the left is marked with the 1891 patent date. (Bottom left) A probable Meisselbach reel with the 1891 adjusting knob. The support bracket ends do not turn toward the center and may predate the 1897 patent. (Bottom right) A "Good Luck" reel with the ball bearings and support plate described in the 1897 patent.

vary in shape. These reels are sometimes branded by different retailers either with decals or by stamping. Brand examples include "Surf Queen," "Otter," "Gold Seal," "Gold Star," "Big Chief," "Chas. Lehmann," "Frostco," and many other names. There are also reels with straight support brackets, sometimes carrying a "J. Gliebe" brand.

Although reels with S-shaped support plates may be common today, the most common alternatives to Good Luck reels that we have seen in old catalogs were relatively plain reels without support brackets.



An ad for an early version of a "Good Luck" reel in an 1899 Cornwall & Jespersen catalog. The same drawing was used in an 1896 Edward Vom Hofe catalog, before the 1897 Meisselbach patent was granted.

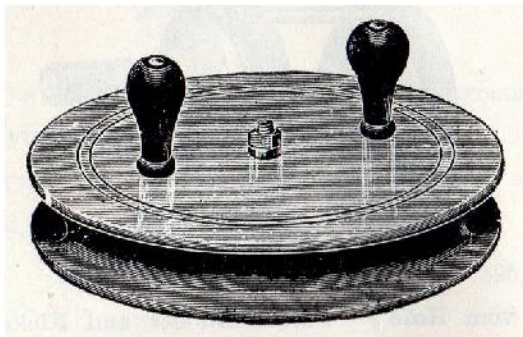


An "Otter" reel with an S-shaped support bracket. The brand was owned by H.J. Frost & Company.

Depending on the retailer, these reels sometimes also had brand names such as "Pipe reels" (New York Sporting Goods Co.), "Empire City" and "Angler" (Abbey & Imbrie).

There were other wooden reels on the market, some whose origins are easily identified. For example, Gustav Ritter reels usually were marked with a patent date. Others have specialized machinery installed within the wooden spools, such as reels by Harry J. Smith, Paul Berner, or Joseph Konigsberg and multipliers such as the "Auto Reel."³ Sometimes, a wood reel may be tentatively identified by its hardware; one example is illustrated here.

We believe that the majority of the side-mounted wooden reels in our collections were manufactured by the Sommer companies. Their location in Newark made them ideal candidates to produce the Good Luck reels for the Meisselbachs, and it seems that they entered the reel business at roughly the time that the Meisselbach wood reels first appeared. Although the



A drawing of a plain wood reel in the No. 61 catalog of the Robert Ogilvy Company. The very same illustration appeared in catalogs from Abbey & Imbrie and New York Sporting Goods Company.



A plain "Empire City" reel sold by Abbey & Imbrie.

Sommer companies specialized in making wood products, they also were "brass goods mfrs." It would be no surprise to learn that machinists might prefer to outsource the manufacture of wooden spools, perhaps even entire reels. Their frequent listings in trade journals as fishing reel manufacturers suggest that the Sommer companies made entire reels, not merely supplying wood spools to other companies.



We believe the wood reel shown here was sold by H.J. Frost & Company because its hardware is similar to that of the Senate Fibre Reel advertised by Frost in 1908.

9464— Reels (Fishing)

Estes, E. B. & Sons, 74 Warren. New York
Sommer, John Faucet Co., Newark, N. J.

12262— Reels (Fishing)

Bogert & Hopper, Inc. (Wood), 67 Barclay, New York
See adv index at end of book
Estes E. B. & Sons, 364 5th av. New York. *See adv index at end of book*
Sommer John Faucet Co., 30 Morris av, Newark, N. J.

Selected entries from the lists of reel manufacturers in Hendricks Commercial Register. (Top) 23rd edition, 1914. The Bogert and Estes companies were both listed as manufacturers of wooden fishing rods. (Bottom) 33rd edition, 1925.

The Sommer Faucet Co. was still making reels when the Meisselbach firm was sold in 1917. Subsequently, Yale Metal Products advertised themselves as manufacturers of Good Luck wood reels,⁴ and Yale decals are affixed to many Good Luck-like reels. Similarly, Cozzone decals appear on many such reels. John Cozzone's companies were also located in Newark. He "apparently" bought the tooling and rights to the Meisselbach Good Luck reels.⁵ The hardware on the Cozzone reels varied, with some support plates turning toward the reel hubs and others not doing so. Further, the hubs were rounded smoothly and lacked the angular hubs of the Meisselbach reels. By this time, the 1897 Meisselbach patent had expired.

The Sommer companies may well have made plain reels without support plates. Catalog listings for such reels often accompanied listings for Good Luck reels.

The 1925 edition of *Hendricks Commercial Register of the United States*⁶ listed eighteen companies as manufacturers of fishing reels. The John Sommer Faucet Company was included. However, the inclusion of two other companies complicates our speculation. Bogert & Hopper, Inc., of New York City, was said to have been making wood reels. E.B. Estes & Sons, also in New York City, was, perhaps, the country's largest producer of turned-wood products. Both of the New York firms were making wooden fishing rods at least as early as 1911, and the Estes company was making reels by 1914. We have not determined when either company began to make reels, but we feel comfortable in speculating that they both became reelmaking competitors of Sommer Faucet.

We believe that the circumstantial evidence we have presented is sufficient to identify The Sommer companies as major manufacturers of wooden side-mounted reels. In summary:

1. The Sommer companies, which specialized in making wood products but also made brass goods, made fishing reels for over thirty years, from at least the early 1890s to the mid-1920s. It is likely that their reels were wooden, and the company's reelmaking period corresponds roughly with a period in which wooden side-mount reels were popular in the U.S.

2. The Sommer companies may have produced the well-known Good Luck wooden reels that were sold by the Meisselbach company until it was moved to Ohio. It is understandable that a company employing primarily machinists and reelsmiths might look elsewhere for help in producing wooden products, and the Sommer companies were practically neighbors in Newark. For that matter, it is even conceivable that the idea of mass-producing wooden reels was introduced to the Meisselbachs by the Sommers.

3. The plain, non-Good Luck reels we described above were offered in catalogs at least as early as 1900. Therefore, we may also theorize that the Sommer companies produced them as cheaper alternatives to the Good Luck reels. It is possible, of course, that they were made by the Bogert and/or the Estes companies, but we have no evidence that either firm was making reels that early.

We hope that further research will confirm our theory about the Sommer companies' role as manufacturers of Good Luck and other side-mounted wooden reels. We also hope that this article will prompt other reel historians to investigate the origins of these once hugely popular, now hugely neglected, fishing reels.

Notes

1. Ford, William F., *The Industrial Interests of Newark, N.J.* New York: Van Arsdale & Co., 1874, pg. 175
2. White, Phil, *More Meisselbach & Meisselbach-Catucci Fishing Reels.* Nampa, Idaho: Lakeshore Press, 2006, pp. 103-108
3. Vernon, S.K., *Antique Fishing Reels.* Havertown, Pa.: Stue Publ. Co., 2018, pp. 129, 236, 273, 295, 301
4. *Ibid.*, pg. 316
5. White, P., "John A. Cozzone...and His Reels." *The Reel News*, Vol. 8, No. 4, Winter, 1998, pg. 4
6. S.E. Hendricks Co., Inc., New York, N.Y. and Chicago, Ill., 1925