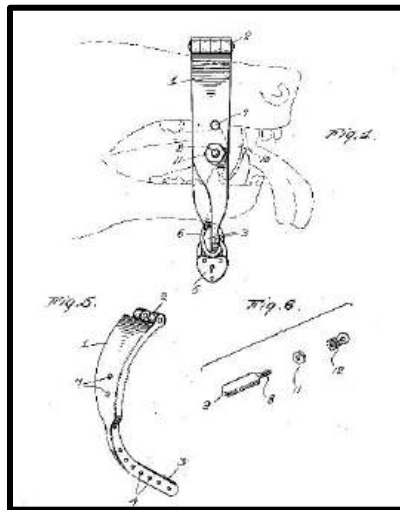


This Week in Saratoga County History

Ballston Spa's Strange Inventions

Submitted by Timothy Starr October 23, 2024

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Streever Dog Muzzle

Ballston Spa has always been proud of its industrious and enterprising citizens. The wealthiest and most successful individuals such as George West, Isaiah Blood, and Nicholas Low receive the most attention, but there are many others who have been immortalized in local histories, documents, and speeches. In his centennial address of 1907, village president Irving Wiswall summarized (and somewhat exaggerated) the accomplishments of some of the most famous residents:

“The first paper bags were made in this village, and the first paper collars and cuffs were made by L. M. Crane, who lived here, his mill being located about two miles north of the village. The telegraph instrument in universal use today and which supplemented the original Morse machines, was the invention of our townsman, Samuel F. Day, who also discovered the method of telegraphing with safety during thunderstorms. The first machine for making paper bags was invented in our village, and the first machine for combining paper with cloth was the invention of one of the proprietors of the Glen Paper Collar Company. The first household clothes-wringers were made in West Milton and sold in Ballston Spa.”

Although the inventions listed above were important in their day, not all to come out of Ballston Spa were famous, or even very useful.

Minard Cooper invented a “new and improved mode of closing doors with or without the use of a catch” in 1852. It consisted of a bar and roller mounted on the inside wall which exerted pressure upon an open door that would force it to close. While the mechanism design seems sound, it would be rather unsightly in one’s living room. There also appears to be a danger of people inadvertently hanging themselves if they walked through the door too quickly.

Theodore Lipshuts and Daniel Jones invented a “Self-Acting Battery for Scaring Crows” in 1859. As the patent letter detailed, it consisted of a “battery with a number of chambers in connection with a gun barrel in such a manner that one of its chambers after the other is made to go off by its own action, and without the aid of a man, at regular intervals, and that by these reports, crows and other injurious animals are scared away.” Its lack of commercial success is not surprising considering the potential for injury if tampered with by curious children. It would also seem inconvenient to neighbors within a mile radius to hear gunfire at all hours of the day and night.

Ivy Howell was one of Ballston Spa’s few female inventors before the Great Depression. She held two patents: a corset in 1917 (“designed for use by stout women for supporting their abdomen and to provide an absorbent shield”), and a directional sign, patented in 1920. The sign consisted of a disk with the words “Universal Comfort Service” surrounding a smaller circle with the words “Women” and “Men,” which apparently were supposed to guide people to the appropriate restroom.

The focus of many Ballston Spa inventors from 1850 to 1950 related to industrial patents more than any other class of invention. These were by far the most successful, since many were put to practical use in the tool, paper, and textile factories for the production of goods.

However, many inventions were simply impractical. In 1870, Frank Whalen tried to take advantage of the popularity of heating and cooking stoves by developing a new detachable caster leg. As detailed in his patent letter, “This invention relates to combining caster-legs with the main or supporting legs of a stove, in such a manner that the main legs can be removed, so that the stove can be rolled around from place to place.”

It is unclear how often it would be necessary to move a stove, and the photos that accompany the patent cast doubts as to the strength of the caster mechanism. Moving a stove around in this manner would likely create deep gouges in any type of wood flooring.

Reuben Garrett patented one of the village's few toy inventions in 1876. It was titled "Improvement in Combined Tops and Whirligigs," and was claimed to "furnish an improved toy for children, which shall be so constructed that it may be used as a top or whirligig, as may be desired." It was a simple idea, having a loose pin, a forked handle, the top (or head that everything balanced upon), and a wind-up cord. Garrett was a prominent farmer in the town of Ballston who became a census taker for the 1900 census.

Charles Heaton patented an improvement in medical compounds in 1879. He claimed it was "a remedy and method for the cure of corns and bunions...consisting in a compound of ammonia, alcohol, and honey, and tincture of cardamom."

There were hundreds of patents filed in the nineteenth century that consisted of home remedies for curing all sorts of ailments. Curiously, this was the only "cure" patented in Ballston. Considering the emphasis on health-related matters during the mineral spring water era of Ballston, one would assume that there would be other homemade recipes on file.

Frederick Streever established the F. S. Streever Construction Company, which was one of the few businesses to survive the Great Depression, operating into the 1940s. He was also part owner of the Hides-Franklin Spring. In 1936 he patented "an improvement in muzzles, particularly for dogs, to provide a device which will positively prevent the animal from biting, seizing, or tearing but which will interfere in no way with eating or drinking." One would wonder what type of dogs Mr. Streever had around him that would require a semi-permanent muzzle that would allow them to eat and drink without attacking and biting visitors.

Perhaps Ballston's most ghoulish patent was developed by Henry Mabbitt Crippen of Bloodville in 1906. His embalming catheter patent letter contained such descriptions as "[previous catheters] have the disadvantage that in the use thereof the hands of the operator frequently become covered with blood and other matter from the arteries due to the necessity of handling the flexible member of the structure to guide the same [into and out of the body]." With Halloween upon us, perhaps this is the best example to conclude an article on strange inventions.