

## Sylvanus Meek and the America Company

By Ron Gast

The mystery of who Sylvanus Meek was and what was his involvement with his father B. F. Meek and later with the America Company has always been of interest to me. My interest started over 30 years ago when I was fortunate to acquire an America-Meek No. 22. The beauty and workmanship in the reel made the reel a favorite of mine. I also got interested in the America Company ball bearing reels. Of course, back then reel collecting was in its infancy and not much was known about reel makers or their history. Henshall's "Book of the Black Bass" gave us our first insight into these early makers. But, Sylvanus Meek was not mentioned and was still a mystery.

It wasn't until about 25 years ago when Stewart and Vernon published their "Fishing Reel Makers of Kentucky" book that the first information about Sylvanus was available. Unfortunately by then, in what I now call a "weak moment", I had already sold the No. 22 to a fellow reel collector from Kentucky. Fortunately, however, at the ORCA Convention in Frankfort a couple of years ago my friend and fellow collector sold it back to me. Have you ever had that happen to you before? Anyway, the purpose of this article is to expand on the knowledge we have about Sylvanus and with the America Company.

The saga starts out with Sylvanus being born on February 6, 1870 in Frankfort, Kentucky. He was the son of Benjamin Franklin Meek and Mary Ellen Meek. B.F. Meek was 54 when Sylvanus was born. Sylvanus was the youngest of six brothers and two sisters. As it turns out, only one of Sylvanus's brothers, Pitman, would also be involved in the reel making business with his father. Pitman was 24 years older than Sylvanus. His oldest sister was Nellie Meek and she was 12 years older than him. She married Richard Church in 1882 and became Nellie M. Church. She ends up being important in Sylvanus's life and shows up in the early US Census and City Directories as boarding him.

A little history of how and when B.F. Meek started his reel manufacture business in Louisville, Kentucky is appropriate at this time. It was first reported in the Frankfort Roundabout newspaper that B.F. Meek sold his Watchmakers business in Frankfort, Kentucky to Samuel Ayers on September 30, 1882. It was then reported that B.F. Meek secured rooms on the corner of 5<sup>th</sup> and Jefferson in Louisville, Kentucky on October 21, 1882 and then purchased a residence at 839 7<sup>th</sup> Street on January 27, 1883. A Frankfort Roundabout newspaper reporter visited the workplace on 405 5<sup>th</sup> Street and noted in an article published on February 2, 1883 that the room had machinery and lathes in place to start the manufacture of the Meek "Improved Fishing Reel." Mr. Meek was not there at the time, but Pitman told the reporter that they already had orders to fill and planned to start manufacture in March of this year. And so, the manufacture of the B.F. Meek reel started in 1883. The "Improved Fishing Reel" incorporated Meek's new spiral cut gear design.

Sylvanus does not show up in the Louisville City Directory until a few years later. The Directory typically shows the person's name, occupation and residence address. Sylvanus first appears in the 1886 Louisville City Directory. He would have been 16 years old and would have been employed. His occupation is shown as "Engraver for B.F. Meek". It will remain that way for the next 3 years. His residence was the same as his father's and brothers Pitman, Paul and Cloudas at 839 7<sup>th</sup> Street. Pitman's occupation is shown as "Reel Maker for B.F. Meek." The other two siblings are not shown as reel makers in the Louisville Directory that year. Cloudas Meek's occupation is shown as "Clerk at Queen Insurance Co" and not associated with his father's business. Paul is listed as "Clerk at Engineers Department at the L&N Railroad."

In 1889, the Louisville City Directory shows Sylvanus's occupation as a "Reel Maker" for the first time. His occupation in the Directories will remain that way until 1898. This means by this time, Sylvanus had at least 9 years of experience making reels under his father's and brother's supervision. Neither Paul nor Cloudas are shown as reel makers during this time.

Sylvanus's brother Pitman is shown as a "Reel Maker" from 1883 up until 1896 when he dies at the age of 50. Also at this time, B.F. Meek was 80 and Sylvanus was 26. I'm sure Mr. Meek had envisioned that Pitman would take over the business one day with the help of Sylvanus. The loss of Pitman at such an early age and his own declining ability to be a reel maker must have weighed heavily on Mr. Meek. Two years later, he sold the business to Sutcliffe, Carter and O'Conner. It was reported in the Owingsville Outlook newspaper that on December 12, 1898 that the three new owners filed Articles of Incorporation with the State of Kentucky for B.F. Meek & Sons.

In the 1898 Louisville City Directories, B.F. Meek and Sylvanus are still shown as "Reel Makers." Since the Directory was put out before the sale of the company to Sutcliffe, et al, this would be expected. In the 1899 Directory, B.F. Meek is shown as "Retired" and Sylvanus as a "Clerk." There was obviously some time span between when the information for the City Directory was gathered and when it was published. It makes sense that Sylvanus hung around in Louisville for awhile during the transition of the B.F. Meek & Sons Company to the new owners. It doesn't appear to be too long, however.

The October 22, 1898 Frankfort Roundabout newspaper reported that B.F. Meek and his wife Mary had returned to Frankfort. And the November 26, 1898 Frankfort Roundabout newspaper reported that Sylvanus had also returned to Frankfort. The article goes on to say that Sylvanus "has established a fishing reel manufactory in one of the rooms of the Todd building on St. Clair Street." The article further goes on to state that "he will make a first-class reel, which he proposes to call the ELKHORN." To my knowledge, no examples of the ELKHORN have been found to date. Stewart's and Vernon's book mentions that an impression stamp with ELKHORN and S MEEK is in a reel collection, but not a reel made by him with this stamp.

One of the things that confused me early on during my research into the history of Sylvanus Meek was that sometimes he was referred to as Sylvester. After studying the documents and newspaper articles about him and having discussions with other reel collectors, we have come to the conclusion that Sylvanus was his given name. Sylvanus appears on all formal documents like the US Census and City Directories. Newspaper articles by those that knew him and his family referred to him as Sylvester. It appears that Sylvester was his nickname used by his friends. Sylvanus solved the problem of which name to use by simply marking "SYL MEEK" on the one reel found with his name and by using "S MEEK" on the impression stamp mentioned above in Stewart's and Vernon's book.

The 1900 Frankfort, KY US Census shows that the Meek family was back together again. Sylvanus was now 30 years old. He along with his father and mother, B.F. Meek and Mary, were living with his sister Nellie Meek Church and her husband Richard Church. Mr. Meek's and Sylvanus's occupations are still shown as "Reel Makers." It would only be one year until Sylvanus and Nellie would lose their father on June 23, 1901.

So what happened to Sylvanus and where did he find employment in 1900? At this time both John Milam and Clarence Gayle were making reels in Frankfort according to the Frankfort 1900 US Census. Either could have employed him since he already had reel-making experience. In an America Company catalog, it gives us some insight into his interim employment after B.F. Meek & Sons and before he went to work for the America Company. It says that he found employment in Frankfort with Geo. Gayle & Son and in Owenton, KY with Frank Fullilove. Owenton, KY is about 35 miles north of Frankfort. The relations with these two companies did not last very long. About this time we do know that America Company was getting ready to start a reel making business. Sylvanus would eventually make his way to Rockford, IL and the America Company.

The evolution of the America reels starts with William S. Sutton applying for a fishing reel patent on August 27, 1900 and it being granted on February 18, 1902. He also received a Canadian patent for the same design on May 5, 1903. The two main features of the patent were a quick take-apart feature and the use of ball bearings for the spool shaft and the drive gear. Sutton was no stranger to mechanical devices. The 1902 Rockford, IL City Directory lists him and his company W.S. Sutton & Co. as providers of "Hardware Specialties." Hardware Specialties usually refers to a company that can make doors, gates, locks and anything mechanical in nature. Mr. Sutton was aware of the benefits of ball bearings in reducing friction and envisioned they would be a good selling point for a fishing reel.

Precision ball bearings had only been around for a short while. In 1883 Fredrich Fischer designed the ball grinder for his company Fischers Aktien-Gesellschaft, commonly referred to as FAG. For the first time this machine allowed steel balls to be ground to a round state of great accuracy, and it could handle large volumes of balls. With this innovation in precision grinding, Fischer laid the foundation for the rolling element bearing industry. In 1896 he opened the Schweinfurt factory which produced 10 million balls a week, showing the great need for

precision bearings. The rolling element bearing was the innovation needed to propel many industries to great success including the bicycle, the automobile, and eventually the fishing reel.

In the 1902 Rockford City Directory there is also a company by the name of America Heating Company. It was being run by Fred K. Houston. The company made furnaces and hot water heaters. The next year, Fred will become a partner in the newly formed America Company. Fred's business was not the kind of company you would expect to get involved with fishing reels or other hardware. It was a business opportunity for him, however.

Enter William James Henry Strong. He was an 1893 Harvard School graduate. His occupation is listed in the 1900 US Census as an "Elocutionist." He and Fred Houston formed a partnership and named the new company the America Company. Mr. Strong is listed in the 1903 Rockford, IL City Directory as the President of the Company and Mr. Houston is the Secretary/Treasurer. Mr. Sutton, who patented the ball bearing reel design, is also listed in the Directory as the Superintendent of the America Company. Their product listing is "Manufacturers of Hardware Specialties." Mr. Houston still maintained operations of his America Heating Company at the same time.

The first America Company reel ads start showing up in 1904. A 60 yard and an 80 yard model are offered and cost \$6. These are the No. 1 and No. 2 ball bearing reels. The ads also tout that they "have secured the services of Sylvanus Meek and are ready to receive orders for high grade America-Meek handmade reels." This implies that they did not stock America-Meek reels and only made them as a special order.

The America-Meek Reels brochure states that "The America Co. announces that it has full and exclusive right to the name Sylvanus Meek either in whole or in part upon its product. Reels made by Sylvanus Meek under America patents will usually be stamped AMERICA-MEEK while his other reels will usually be stamped SYLVANUS MEEK." Per the agreement, it looks like Sylvanus had possibly already made some reels under his own name and could make more if he liked. It being stated that America Company had exclusive rights, means that there was a contract between the company and Sylvanus defining their agreement. I would speculate that the agreement required that only Sylvanus could make the America-Meek reels. There must have been some other agreements that were included that affected the reel business for a new reel company would later be spun off from the America Company.

The America-Meek reels that Sylvanus was now making for the America Company were expensive. They cost from \$35 to \$70 depending on specifications. Specifications for a reel could range from trout to tarpon size. The America-Meek reels found to date are marked a No. 22 and a No. 26. The No. 22 is similar in size to a regular B.F. Meek No. 3. The No. 26 is comparable in size to a B.F. Meek No. 7 reel. I doubt very many were made. As a matter of fact, the America-Meek reel was dropped from the America Company ads in 1905. That means the

America-Meek reels were only made for about one year. There seems to have been a falling out between Sylvanus and the America Company.

More insight of what was happening in the America Company can be seen in a News Section of the August 10, 1904 issue of "HARDWARE" Magazine. It shows "The Rockford Reel Company, with capital stock of \$2,500, has been incorporated to manufacture fishing reels and tackle. Incorporators are ... all directors of America Company of Rockford, manufacturers of America and America-Meek reels and it's their intention in forming the new company, to make fishing tackle and low price reels not permitted under the terms of the America Company's papers." The America Company's papers referred to must have involved the Sylvanus agreements. The only magazine ad I've found for "Rockford Reels" was a couple of years later than the above News. The ad is in a September, 1906 issue of Outing. It shows the reels having pivot bearings and spiral gears. The costs were \$3.00 and \$3.50.

It's interesting to note that Sylvanus was never listed in the Rockford City Directories. This supports the thought that he was only there for a short period time and probably between late 1903 and part of 1904. He was back in Frankfort, KY in July 23, 1904 based on a Frankfort Roundabout newspaper reporting that he was visiting with his sister Nellie Church. He was still staying with her on August 13, 1904 when he frightened away a burglar from the house according to a newspaper report. Sylvanus is listed in the 1905-1906 Frankfort City Directory as a resident and his occupation as "Fishing Reel Maker."

In 1905, the America-Meek reel was no longer listed in the America Company magazine ads. A new pivot bearing reel was added to the America line of reels as the No. 12. It had the take down feature, but not the ball bearings. Later that year, the No. 32 was added to the reel line. It was an aluminum and German silver reel with take down feature and ball bearings. In 1905, the America Company also added two more options for their reels. These were the Micrometer Drag and the Automatic Level Winder. Price for the basic No. 32 was \$12.50 and for the No. 12 was \$5. The No. 2 was still available, but the No 1 was no longer listed. The No. 32 and No. 2 became the No. 32A and No. 2A if the Automatic Level Winder was added.

The Micrometer Drag and Automatic Level Winder options that could be added to any America or America-Meek reel were invented by Harry H. Richardson. He received 3 patents for these devices and assigned them to the America Company of Rockford, IL. The patent dates were July 25, 1905, April 17, 1906 and June 26, 1906. The unique feature of the level wind mechanism was that it could be disengaged from the drive gear by simply folding down the line guide. This was intended to make casting easier.

The last half of 1905 saw a lot of business activity for America Company. The August 3, 1905 issue of "THE IRON AGE" magazine reported that "America Company is taking steps to increase its capital stock from \$50,000 to \$100,000." Later that year in the November 30 issue of the magazine, it is reported that "The citizens of Momence, IL have taken \$25,000 of stock in

America Company and have given a site for a factory which will make numerous articles including Odell typewriters, sewing machines, fishing reels, flatirons, convertible trucks, etc.” The Odell Typewriters and Pixie sewing machines were new product lines which were just added. The Pixie sewing machine was a hand cranked device based on a December 5, 1905 Patent by H.W. Hadley and assigned to the America Company. Both machines were cheaply made and were sold inexpensively.

The December 21, 1905 issue of “THE IRON AGE” magazine reported that “The America Company, Rockford, IL, is moving to Momence, IL, where a factory building 50 x 134 feet and costing \$13,500 is being erected...The America Company manufactures fishing reels, flat irons, night shooting lights, stovepipe anchors, wrenches, self-sharpening horseshoe toe calks, Odell typewriters and sewing machines.” This sounds to me like a lot of product being made in a rather small manufacturing area. Moving a manufacturing facility while the company is adding product lines and ramping up production seems like a big risk. The city of Momence is located about 150 miles from Rockford. This would have been a big deal to move the America Company at this time.

It appears as though the Superintendent of the America Company also moved from Rockford to Momence. William Sutton is no longer listed in the Rockford City Directory in 1906 through 1908. He reappears in the Rockford City Directory in 1909 and employed by his former employer the American Heating Company. At this time Fred Houston is still running the company and Sutton is listed as the Superintendent.

America Company continued to advertise its fishing reel line in 1906 for their new address in Momence, IL. Their magazine ads now only list the America No. 2 and No. 32 reels. “Rockford Reels” were also available. The America-Meek reel is not listed. The other thing that we see America Company doing this year is advertising for new business. The July 14, 1906 SCIENTIFIC AMERICAN magazine and the July 22, 1906 THE SALT LAKE HERALD newspaper have an ad that reads “Let us be your factory. Hardware specialties manufactured under contract, models developed. We are specialists in patent articles...America Company, Momence, IL.” It appears that the America Company was having a cash flow problem.

Late 1906 appears to be the beginning of the end for the America Company. On November 22, 1906 The Ashton, IL Gazette Newspaper reported that “Walter C. Libby of Danville has been appointed receiver of the America Company of Momence, which manufactures typewriters and sewing machines. Lack of working capital forced voluntary bankruptcy. The assets are listed at \$250,000.” The May edition of MODERN MACHINERY reported similar news. The article said “The assets of the America Company, manufacturers of hardware specialties, located in Momence, IL, including excellent factory building, site, equipment, all machinery and tools that go to make up a perfectly equipped manufactory for hardware specialties and novelties worth not less than \$30,000; stock, material, office equipment and letter patents for Odell typewriter, America and Rockford fishing reels, Pixie sewing machine ... must be sold. Bids on entire assets

or any part of them are solicited.” This was less than a year after the company moved to Momence, IL. I’m sure the citizens of Momence that put up the \$25,000 to get them to move there were very upset.

Meanwhile, Sylvanus Meek was back in Frankfort, KY. The 1908 Frankfort City Directory lists his occupation as being in the “tobacco business.” This could mean a number of different job types. The 1910 US Census for Frankfort lists Sylvanus’s occupation as “Reel Maker for a Reel Factory”. In the same Census, both John Milam and Clarence Gayle are also listed the same way. He could have worked for either one. We don’t know. One would assume it was Milam’s company since he had worked for them before.

In the Frankfort City Directories between 1914 and 1928 and the 1930 US Census in Frankfort, KY, Sylvanus’s occupation is listed as an engineer and machinist at the Hoge-Montgomery Shoe Factory. Hoge-Montgomery was the largest shoe manufacturer south of the Ohio River at that time producing about 7,200 pairs of shoes a day. In 1932, Sylvanus is listed as the Caretaker for the Hoge-Montgomery Clubhouse. Thereafter, he is listed as a border and unemployed.

Sylvanus Meek died on May 24, 1950 in Frankfort, KY at the age of 80. His Death Certificate lists his name as “SYLVESTER MEEK.” The info for the cert must have been made out by a friend.

#### SOURCES

All of the events and dates included in this article were obtained through the use of <http://ancestry.com>, <https://books.google.com> and <http://www.elephind.com>. Also used in this article was information from the book “Fishing Reel Makers of Kentucky” by Frank Stewart and Steve Vernon and from America Company catalogs and ads. With the above two internet sources, it’s amazing how much information about someone or some company that you can discover.

#### ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank in alphabetical order the following people that provided me information: Doug Carpenter, Peter Heid, Don Kleier and Steve Vernon.



**AMERICA REELS** Full Ball-Bearing  
Take-Down

Something new. Unique. Wonderful. Spin sixty seconds. Take-Down is simple, positive, convenient. Finely made. An extra German silver spool, a wrench and a bag with each reel. Sizes 60 and 80 yards. Delivered free on receipt of \$6. AMERICA Special Cases and AMERICA Perfect Reel Oil also in stock. AMERICA-MEEK Hand-Made Reels to Order. **AMERICA CO., 662 Race St., Rockford, Ill.**

September 1904 Outing Magazine – “America-Meek” Reels Included



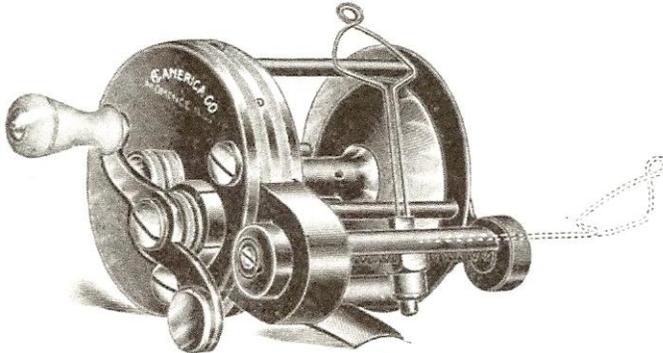
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Nothing "frenzied" about AMERICA REELS.  
The newest and most perfect line of reels, mechanically, ever offered to the public.

TAKE-DOWN, full ball or pivot bearing.  
MICROMETER DRAG, wonderful. AUTOMATIC LEVEL WINDER, ball-bearing, throw-out, entirely new, perfection. Goose-neck click, Felt lubricated, Velvet cushion bearings. ALUMINUM and GERMAN SILVER REELS. 1905 Models. GOLD STANDARD.  
Write for catalog.

**AMERICA CO., 670 Race St., Rockford, Ill.**

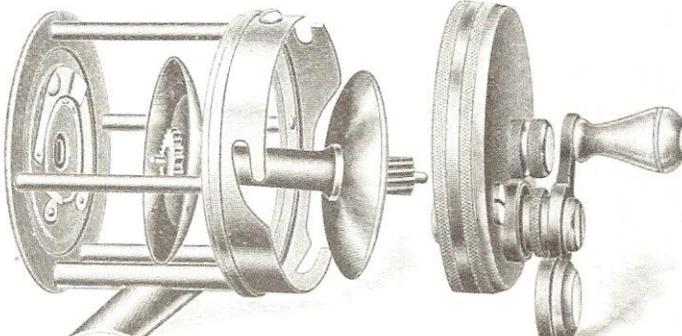
February 1905 Hardware Dealers' Magazine – "America-Meek" Reels Not Included



"AMERICAN" LEVEL WINDER REEL

April 1906 Iron Age Magazine

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IF YOU DO NOT BUY  
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**The best and newest reels upon the market. Original and only Take-Downs, full Ball-Bearing. Micrometer Drag. Throw-out Automatic Lever Winder. Perfect mechanically. Once used, always used.**

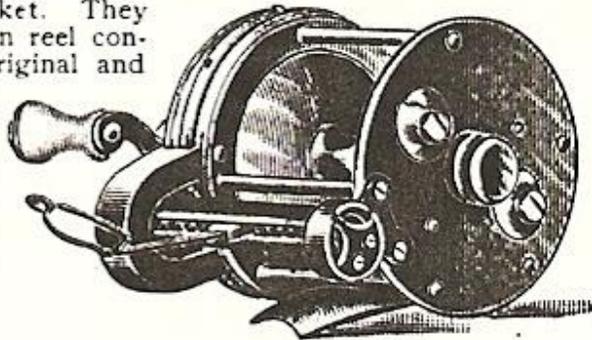
**AMERICA COMPANY, 91 North St., Momence, Ill.**

April 1906 Hardware Dealers' Magazine

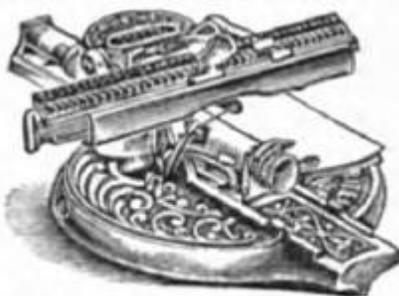
**YOU MAKE A MISTAKE IF YOU DO NOT USE AMERICA REELS**

The only **new** reels on the market. They represent the greatest advance in reel construction in 25 years. The original and only "TAKE DOWN." Full-ball-bearing Micrometer drag. Patent throwout automatic Level Winder. **Rockford Reels** pivot bearing spiral gear \$3.00 and \$3.50. Ask your dealer but don't take a substitute. We will ship direct.

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September 1906 Outing Magazine.



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Improved \$7.50 No. 5**

In every way a practical typewriter for the small merchant or for personal correspondence. Sent express prepaid on receipt of **\$7.50** or sold on the installment plan for **\$8.25**—\$2.25 down, \$1.00 a month thereafter.

Agents wanted. **AMERICA CO., 967 A North St., Momence, Ill.**

July 1906 Machinists Monthly