

Elijah McCoy

McCoy, Elijah



Record Information

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Date: b. 1844–d. 1929

Description:

Elijah H. McCoy, an inventor who is best-known for his automatic lubricator of 1872, is also responsible for the phrase, "the real McCoy," meaning the real thing. McCoy acquired about fifty-seven patents throughout his life, mostly for different types of lubricators, but also for a folding ironing board and a lawn sprinkler. Although he was successful, McCoy experienced discrimination because of his race; many executives refused to buy his inventions or to request him as a consultant.

Elijah McCoy invented a simple but inspired automatic lubricating device that revolutionized the railroad and machine industries.

As escaped slaves, McCoy's parents had managed to find freedom in Canada by way of the Underground Railroad, an escape route composed of secret hideaways and helpers aiding former slaves who sought safety in the North. **Elijah McCoy** was born in Colchester, Ontario, Canada, on May 2 in either 1843 or 1844. His parents, George McCoy and the former Mildred Goins, at first found the going tough in their newly adopted country. Things changed, however, after George served as an enlisted soldier in the Canadian Army. As reward for his exceptional services in battle, upon honorable discharge he received 160 acres of farmland. George was an excellent farmer and the family's fortunes quickly improved. One of 12 children, Elijah worked on the farm and attended school until his parents felt safe enough from bounty hunters to venture back to the United States, settling in Ypsilanti, Michigan, a few miles west of Detroit. Elijah had always shown a keen understanding of machinery, so the family took advantage of connections made in Canada to arrange an apprenticeship for him in mechanical engineering in Edinburgh, Scotland.

On his return to the United States young McCoy soon found, like many other blacks, that even a good education in a trade was of little value when it came to finding work in white-dominated businesses and industries. Although he was a certified mechanical engineer, the best job he could find was work as a locomotive fireman—

shoveling coal into the firebox that fed the coal-burning steam locomotive engines used by railroads at the time.

The work was both backbreaking and boring, and although it occasionally offered advantages to whites who could slowly work their way up to driving the big locomotives, few black men ever found themselves given that opportunity. McCoy needed something to keep his mind active, so he carefully studied engines and other machines and how they worked.

Besides shoveling coal into the mouth of the hot, hungry firebox, the fireman's job entailed keeping the engine oiled to keep it running smoothly, limit wear and tear on its parts, and prevent overheating due to friction. During every run, a locomotive had to make frequent stops for oiling, at which point, the fireman would jump off with an oilcan in hand and lubricate all of the engine's moving parts. Without constant lubrication, the heavy machinery parts would grind away against each other, requiring frequent repair and replacement. It was obvious to the railroads that a better system was needed, but so far no one had come up with one.

To exercise his mind and reduce the boredom of his job, McCoy started trying to picture ways to solve the problem. The trick, he saw, was to get a steady and regulated supply of oil into the moving parts of the engine without having to stop the train. McCoy began to give form to some of his ideas in a small machine shop in his home in Ypsilanti.

By 1872, he had patented his new system under the title, "Improvement in Lubricators for Steam Engines." The idea was wonderfully simple but elegant: a lubricating cup consisting of a piston set inside an oil-filled container. Driven by steam from the engine, the piston forced oil under pressure down special channels to the engine's moving parts.

At first some railroad companies refused to have anything to do with a device invented by a black man, no matter how useful it might be. However, the "McCoy Lubricator" proved so successful that any company that decided not to use it soon found itself in danger of economic collapse.

McCoy continued to improve his lubricators and began adapting them to work with machines and engines outside the railroad industry. Before long, McCoy Lubricators were being used in applications ranging from ocean liners to factories.

Although hundreds of companies profited by his invention, McCoy never became a rich man. He received more than 70 patents in his lifetime, but he was often forced to sell them away to finance time and material for further improvements on the lubricators and other new inventions. By the end of his life, only a few patents remained in his name.

In 1920, along with a group of financial backers, **Elijah McCoy**, at about age 77, formed the **Elijah McCoy** Manufacturing Company in Detroit, Michigan. The name McCoy was proudly stamped on all the company's lubricators, which by then were being used not only in the United States but around the world.

According to some lexicographers, the expression "the real McCoy" (meaning the genuine article) originated when inferior imitations of McCoy's lubricating cup caused concerned buyers to inquire, "Is this the real McCoy?" However, that is only one of several possible origins of the expression. The phrase "the real Mackay," used in the mid- to late 1800s to advertise a Scottish whiskey, may be the oldest and most likely source. Word experts William and Mary Morris contend that "Kid McCoy" Selby, a welterweight world boxing champion, coined the expression to distinguish himself from other boxers who imitated his style—at about the same time that the McCoy Lubricator became widely used. Wherever the expression originated, though, it undoubtedly was also applied by railroaders to **Elijah McCoy**'s innovative device.

Elijah McCoy died on October 10, 1929. In recent years, his accomplishments have become celebrated, and in May 2001, he was one of 10 honorees inducted into the National Inventors Hall of Fame, located in Akron, Ohio.

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