



University of Maine

From the Selected Works of William B. Krohn

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Murray's Aluminum Minnow – Maine's answer to England's phantom minnow.

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The National Fishing Lure Collectors Club

MAGAZINE

The First Functional "Realistic" / They Radiate / Feature Lure #49

19th Century Lure Find / Fly Rod Lures of the Wright & McGill Company, Part III

Murray's Aluminum Minnow / The Bonafide Aluminum Minnow / Along Came a Spider

Volume 25, No 1

Murray's Aluminum Minnow

Maine's Answer to England's Phantom Minnow



The lures shown above were commonly used throughout New England and eastern Canada in the late 1880s through early 1900s (from F.M. Johnson's *Forest, Lake, and River: The Fishes of New England & Eastern Canada* [1902, vol. 2, p. 328]). (Author's collection).

The types of artificial fishing lures - flies excluded - commonly used in the northern parts of eastern North America at the turn of the century are illustrated in volume 2 of Frank M. Johnson's monumental book, *Forest, Lake, and River: The Fishes of New England & Eastern Canada*. Of the six lures shown, all are spinners except for one, an artificial minnow tucked between two spinners at the bottom of the illustration. My research, consistent with Johnson, has also shown that spinners were the most commonly used class of non-fly lures fished in northern New England during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. There were a few notable exceptions to this preferred use of spinners, namely the Stanley Aluminum Smelt and the subject of this article - Murray's (a.k.a., Murry) Aluminum Minnow.

The genesis of Murray's metal minnow is clearly tied to the history of the artificial minnow. Artificial minnows have been around for hundreds of years as documented in Robert E. Guist's book, *300 Years of Phantom & Devon Minnows: A Historic Guide*. Guist's book also documents that during the past three centuries, Phantom Minnows were most commonly made from high quality silk although the skins of sea snakes, fishes (e.g., sole), and mammals (e.g., porpoise) were also used. Perhaps the most unusual material used to make early artificial minnows came from birds, very small birds. In I. E. B. Cox's book published in London, *Facts and Useful Hints Related to Fishing and Shooting*, the second paragraph of page 2 describes how to make an artificial minnow:

Artificial Minnow. - Let a model be cut of cork or wood, and covered with the skin from the throat of a humming-bird, one to imitate the back of the fish from the ruby-throated, and another for the underside or belly from an emerald or silvery skin [humming-bird]. A metallic tail could be added to make the fish spin, and lead to sink it to a proper depth; it could also be varnished to prevent any injury to the feathers.

In addition to being fragile and tedious to prepare for mounting on a carved form, hummingbird skins were difficult to obtain in any quantity. Using the skins of a very small bird as a key component of the English artificial minnow soon gave way to another, more available and durable material - ribbon silk. Ribbon silk not only came in a variety of colors to imitate fish scales, but it could be rolled and formed into cylinders resembling a fish's body, thus eliminating the need for a cork or wood form. The best known of these early, English artificial minnows that was widely used in the U.S.A. was the Phantom Minnow.

PORTLAND, MAINE

Best Quality Imported Phantom Minnows

Phantom.

Nos.	3	4	5	6	7
Length,	2½	2½	3½	3½	4½
Blue or Brown,	.45	.45	.45	.50	.60
Silver,	.50	.50	.50	.60	.70
White Bait,	.50	.50	.50	.60	.70

The Famed Silk Phantom Minnows

With Swivel. Warranted not to crack or peel

Made of best quality heavy ribbon silk, thoroughly waterproof. Colors ground in oil, will not wash off or fade. Made in Trout, Blue Back, Silver, Enaka and White Bait. Packed 1 in box, ½ dozen in carton.

Nos.	3	4	5	6	7
Length,	3	3½	3½	4	4½
Blue or Brown,	.30	.30	.30	.35	.40
Silver or White Bait,	.30	.30	.30	.35	.40

This illustration is from page 77 of a T. B. Davis Fishing Tackle Catalog No. 41 published around 1910. Phantom Minnows imported from England were widely available in northern New England from the late 1800s through early 1900s. (Author's collection.).

BAITS, FLIES, and LURES for Maine Waters

Salmon

For early fishing as soon as the ice leaves and for the following week or two

Salmon Flies

These flies have a long shank hook and a bunch of worms is used with the fly. They are fished as wet flies; no bait, when fly fishing only is permitted

Salmon Baits

For later fishing

Trout Baits

For early fishing. Trout will take worms more readily than salmon

Smelt on Single Hooks
Archer Spinners with smelt
Cupsuptic Baits with smelt
Phantoms
Rangeley Spinners with smelt
Nature Baits

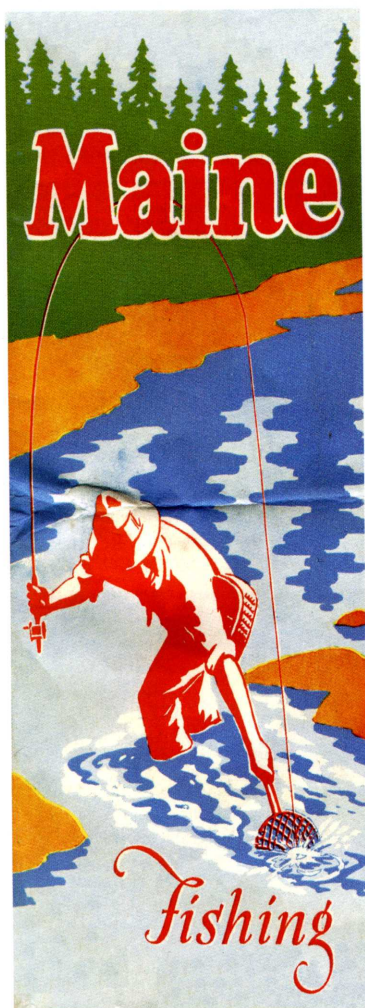
Maine Lake Trolling Flies

Parmachenee Belle
Silver Doctor
Durham Ranger
Jock Scott
Dusty Miller
Thunder & Lightning
Mitchell

Cupsuptic Baits with worms
Rangeley Spinners with worms
Other similar bait which law permits

Smelt on Single Hook
Archer Spinner
Cupsuptic Baits with worms
Phantoms
Rangeley Spinner with worms

Phantom minnows (red arrows) were one of the relatively few fishing lures consistently recommended in the 1920s and 1930s by the State of Maine's Development Commission. (Author's collection.)



William R. Murray when 22 years of age in 1892 (Top) when he lived in Randolph, Maine; and at 60 years of age in 1930 (Bottom) while living in Auburn, Maine. The second photograph was taken only three years before Murray died. (Courtesy of Jim Murray).

This lure was produced by a number of foreign companies and by the late 1800s was imported in large quantities into the U.S.

Portland, Maine was a major distribution center for outdoor sporting goods, serving much of northern New England and eastern Canada, from the 1870s through the early 1900s. Four wholesale/retail houses handling large volumes of fishing tackle were located within a few blocks of each other in downtown Portland. These companies were: T. B. Davis Arms Company (established in 1874), Edwards & Walker Company (1876), and John P. Lovell Arms Company (established in Boston in 1840, came to Portland in 1894; and in 1900, organized under Iver Johnson Arms & Cycles Works), and the Sportsman's Supply Company. This later company started its operations in the 1920s around the that time Iver Johnson ceased it's doing business in Portland. Slightly earlier, in 1920, John P. Lovell also stopped operating in Maine. Excepting the Sportsman's Supply Company, these companies regularly issued catalogs advertising their inventories, including specialized catalogs detailing their fishing tackle. By examining these trade catalogs, we can establish the availability of imported Phantom Minnow to the anglers of northern New England.

The 1896 Catalog of John P. Lovell Arms Co. included a drawing of a Phantom Minnow along with details about variants, sizes, and prices. The Edwards and Walker Catalog published circa 1908 devoted page 53 entirely to Phantom Minnows made by Wm. Bartleet & Sons, boldly stating that these minnows were the "Best English Artificial Minnows." Tackle catalog No. 41 of the T. B. Davis Arms Company, circa 1910, included two large drawings of imported Phantom Minnows "Made of the best quality heavy ribbon silk, thoroughly waterproof." They were made in a variety of colors and patterns including trout, blue back, silver, enaka (most likely silver with a painted striped pattern) and white bait. The T. B. Davis Arms Co. Fishing Tackle Catalog No. 45, published in 1927, shows only one illustration of an English Phantom Minnow, whereas their catalog of circa 1930 devotes all of page 53 to Phantom Minnows and English Wagtails. The Edwards & Walker sporting goods catalog of circa 1930 included only a small drawings of the standard Phantom Minnow (p. 34).

While the above information clearly shows that the English Phantom Minnow was readily available to early New England anglers well past the turn of the century, the questions still remains: Was this imported bait widely used? As documented above, Portland's major sporting goods companies imported a variety English Phantom Minnows for more than four decades, demonstrating a strong, long-term demand for these lures. Also, there is limited photographic evidence that the minnow was specially used for landlocked salmon fishing. Finally, and most convincingly, "Phantoms" were recommended for decades by Maine's Development Commission in their list of "Baits, Flies, and Lures for Maine Waters."

Today, silk Phantom Minnows in tackle boxes from the early 1900s are commonly found with missing tails and dented bodies. Ribbon silk was relatively fragile and incapable of withstanding multiple strikes from a toothy game fish. To a penny-wise Yankee, an item that could be used a few times was worth much less than an item that could be used multiple times. One obvious way to make a more durable artificial minnow would be to make the body from a material harder than ribbon silk. The 1919 Rice & Miller Company Catalog (a sporting goods dealer in Bangor, Maine) shows Wagtails made with the "Highest Quality Rubber" (page 463), and the Edwards & Walker catalog of circa 1930 has a drawing of a Swallowtail Phantom Minnow made of rubber (p. 33). With time, however, these early rubbers dried, hardened, and became brittle. Another solution to the problem of making a stronger artificial minnow was to use aluminum, a metal that was relatively easy to cut and shape. By the mid-1890s, Henry O. Stanley of Dixfield, Maine was producing and selling two fishing lures fashioned from aluminum sheets: the State Of Maine Spinner, designed to spin a dead minnow; and the Stanley Aluminum Smelt, designed to imitate a live smelt or minnow. Thus, the potential usefulness of aluminum for making fishing lures would be known to New England anglers and lure makers.

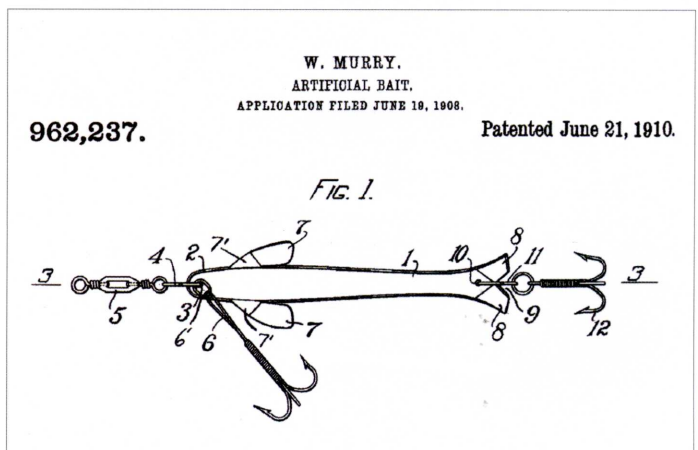
William Richard Murray was apparently one of these aluminum devotees, but before describing his artificial minnow, let's first briefly look at the life of this man. The following biographical sketch came mostly from an article authored by William's oldest son, Richard William Murray. This article, entitled "Boyhood Memories of Randolph on Kennebec" appeared on the front page of the *Lewiston [Maine] Journal Magazine* Section on 1 February 1969. According to this article, William Murray was born in Orono, Maine in 1870. His parents, Joseph and Josephine Murray, emigrated from Canada to Maine a few years before their son's birth. In 1876, when "Will" was only six years old, the Murrays left Orono, Maine to start a new life almost 100 miles south in Randolph, Maine. Here, on the east bank of the Kennebec River, two generations of Murrays lived and prospered for five decades. Joseph farmed and worked as a carpenter as he and his wife raised their nine children. William and his siblings attended a local school located a quarter of a mile from their Randolph home. Later, William attended high school in Gardiner, a small town across from Randolph on the west side of the Kennebec River. The Kennebec provided excellent bass and perch fishing in the summer, and smelt fishing through the ice in late winter. Like most of the boys from Randolph at the time, William, his siblings, and friends spent many hours swimming and fishing in their home river.

In the winter, William harvested ice on the Kennebec River from the time he was 16 until he was 21 years old. This ice was stored in giant buildings that lined the lower Kennebec River, and in an era before electric refrigeration, was shipped to cities and towns along the eastern seaboard of the U.S. Realizing the dangers of ice cutting,

William became an apprentice in a Gardiner shoe factory eventually becoming a "trimmer" (i.e., a person who cut leather for shoes and boots). On 6 February 1893, William and Mary Hartry were married in Gardiner. Mary, called Minnie by family and friends, was born in Ireland. The couple soon set up housekeeping in Randolph, near William's parents. Here their family quickly grew with the

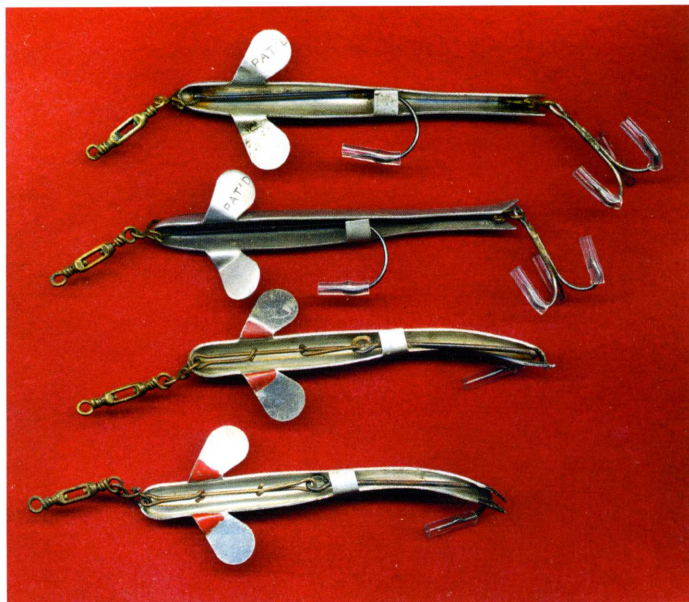


The photo above shows that both anglers were using artificial minnows behind a spoon and a set of spinners as baits. (Author's collection).



The upper third of the page-sized drawing of Murray's Aluminum Minnow that accompanied William Murray's patent application (note spelling of the inventor's last name, no "a"). (U.S. Patent Office web site).

additions of a daughter and two sons (who eventually also made and sold fishing lures). In 1901, William and Mary moved approximately 30 miles west to Auburn, Maine. At the time, Auburn was called "Shoe Town" as this small city was home to dozens of shoe making factories. Anyone willing to work hard could find a manufacturing job,



Bottom views of Murray's Aluminum Minnow. The upper two baits, with the stamping on the left fin, are the original Murrays made in Auburn, Maine whereas the two lower lures without the stamping are believed to have been made later by H. A. Whitmore & Company of Boston, Massachusetts. (Author's collection).



Top views of Murray's Aluminum Minnow. This lure comes in a wide variety of colors and patterns making it a challenging and fun lure to collect. (Author's collection).

so at 31 years of age, William left Randolph and moved his family to Auburn. Here he spent his adult working life working in the shoe industry, initially as a trimmer and later as a clerk. The making and selling of the Aluminum Minnow was an ancillary job, something he did after a full day of work, or on weekends and holidays. In addition to using his spare time to make and sell his lure, William was also an avid angler. He also smoked, and in 1933 William Murray died of esophageal cancer when in his sixty-third year.

C. H. Morse, also an Auburn resident, was making his Lake Auburn Trolling Spoons of copper and brass at the same time William Murray established his home in Auburn. Copper and brass are relatively difficult metals to bend into a form resembling a fish body. Murray would have known this and at some point thought of using aluminum to make a reality of his vision of a durable, metal artificial minnow. On 19 June 1908, some seven years after moving to Auburn, he filed an application to patent "certain new and useful Improvements in [an] Artificial Bait." Key among the improvements he claimed for his aluminum lure was that it had "a channel-shaped body having a quadrispherical head at its forward end and oppositely disposed means to impart to it a spinning tendency." Because aluminum can be bent to form the channel, and re-bent at the tail so as to cause the lure to spin when pulled through the water, Murray had solved the problem of fashioning a hard, durable body with the action needed to attract fish. Murray's application stated that his minnow's "motions are irregular, approximating the darting, hesitating, agitated movement of a small fish endeavoring to make its escape." On 21 June 1910, he received his patent.

Initially, William Murray apparently sold his aluminum minnow on his own, but later used at least wholesaler, the Sportsman's Supply Company. A few years after William died his two sons – Richard William (1897-1969) and John Lee (1899-1963) – started the Murray Bait Company in Auburn. Murray Bait Company made and sold Murray's Aluminum Minnow for less than two decades. Harold G. Parker of J. Lee Murray and Company – successor to the Murray Bait Company – responded to a request for a supply of Murray's Aluminum Minnow. Parker's letter of 1 October 1957 stated that "We regret to say that the aluminum minnow has been out of production with us for many years. The dies for the same were purchased by H. A. Whitmore & Co., Inc. 301 Congress St., Boston. Possible they can supply the lure." The catalog for J. Lee Murray and Company, published circa 1950, makes no mention of the Murray Aluminum Minnow.

The Murray Aluminum Minnow comes in one size, an aluminum body that is 3 5/8 inches from the tip of the nose to the end of the tail. Today, collectors can find two versions of this lure. The first version has the lower left fin stamped "PAT'D" (= "patented"; the bottom of page 272 in Arlan Carter's book, *19th Century Fishing Lures: A Collector's Guide to U.S. Lures Manufactured Prior to 1901*,

mistook this to mean patent pending), whereas the second version looks identical but lacks the stamping. Could the first version be the original Murray whereas the second version was made and sold by H. A. Whitmore & Company? While additional research is needed, I've noticed a tendency for most of the stamped Murray's to have a treble hook at the tail and a single hook in the middle whereas the unstamped version usually is rigged with a single tail hook or single hooks in both the tail and middle positions. In addition, the unstamped lures tend to have more of a bend in the tail end than the stamped versions. Note that I wrote "tended to," because I have seen a few examples of the single hook, bent tail version of this lure with a "PAT'D" stamped on the underside of the left fin.

Murray's Aluminum Minnows can be found unpainted; with just the fins painted a bright red; and with a variety of patterns painted on the lure's back. No two hand-painted Murray's look exactly alike, making collecting a variety of these lure both a challenge and fun.

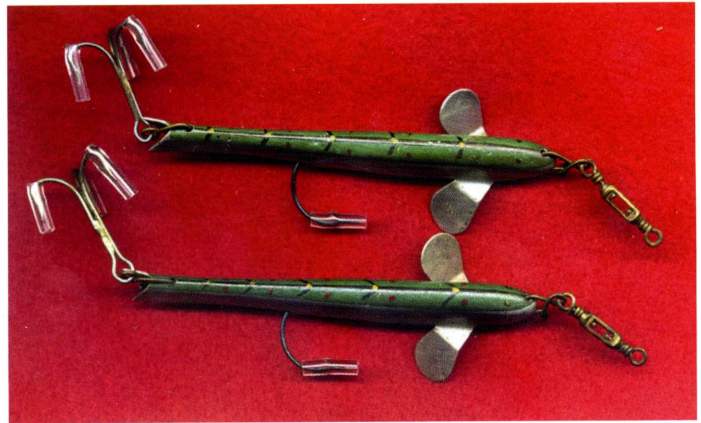
I do not know exactly when Murray's Aluminum Minnows ceased to be made. However, the above information (especially that the J. Lee Murray and Company catalog did not include the lure) indicates that by the early 1950s Murray's Aluminum Minnow was unavailable to the general public.

Aluminum has a few disadvantages as a metal from which to fashion fishing lures. First, it's light and when pulled through the water tends to rise to the surface if not weighted. Also, it is soft enough that adjustments made to the fins, or tail, can be undone if the lure is accidentally dropped on a hard surface or stepped on. To make an even stronger, heavier metal artificial bait, Pflueger produced the Breakless Devon Minnow. As stated in on page 66 of Pflueger's 1931 tackle catalog, this artificial minnow was "All Metal Connections – No Gut or Gimp to Give Way." On page 67 of this same catalog, just right of the Breakless Devon, Pflueger still advertised their patented Famed Phantom Minnow made of "extra strong waterproofed ribbed cloth." While the Phantom Minnow is essentially unused in U.S.A, today, according to Guist's book cited earlier, this lure is still used in England. Like art, some fishing lures have a loyal following that stays faithful through time. And for the collector of metal baits, Murray's Aluminum Minnow fits a unique niche, a niche that was the transition from soft bodied artificial minnow to the new era of hard bodied, metal lures designed to imitate living minnows. 🐟

I thank Ron Goddard, Joel Gushee, Dan Leroux, Lloyd Lindholm and Jim Murray for providing information and materials used in this article. Jim Murray deserves an extra special acknowledgement for sharing photographs of, and information about, his grandfather - William Murray. Ellen Krohn and Jim Murray provided useful comments on an earlier version of this article.



Some of Murray's Aluminum Minnows were sold in boxes; such boxes, in the author's experience, are exceedingly rare. Note that this lure can be found with either a box or barrel swivel. (Courtesy of Ron Goddard).



Because Murray's Aluminum Minnow was hand-painted, lures are not identical even when painted in the same pattern. Murray's Aluminum Minnow is 3 5/8 inches from the tip of the nose to the end of the tail. (Top lure, author's collection; bottom, courtesy of Dan Leroux).



The top row shows two English Phantom Minnows made of ribbon silk, the middle row shows two Murray's Aluminum Minnows, and the bottom lure is Pflueger's all-metal Breakless Devon Minnow. (Author's collection).