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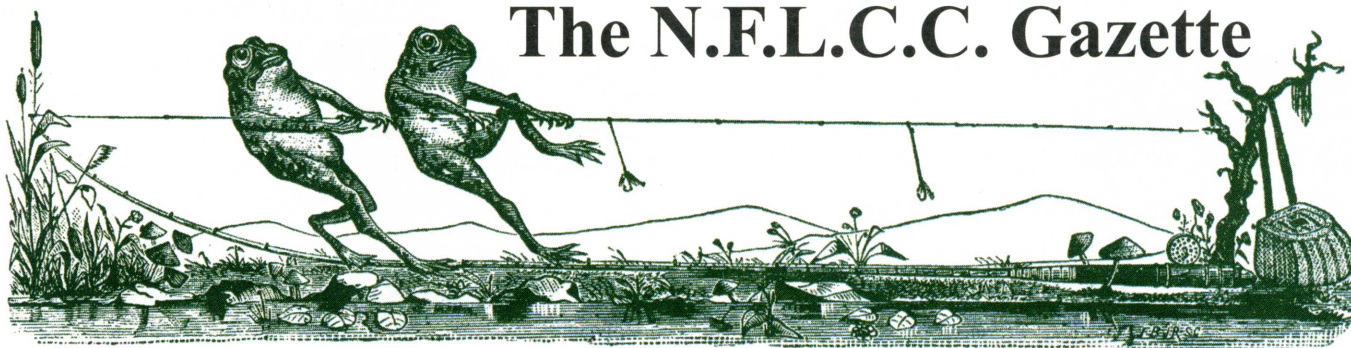
December, 2015

The Johnson fish hook – does the patent drawing tell the full story?

William B. Krohn



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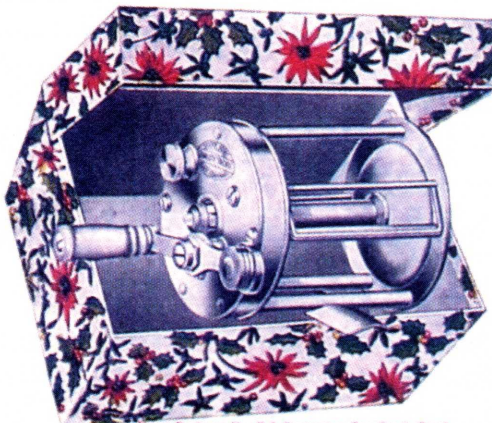
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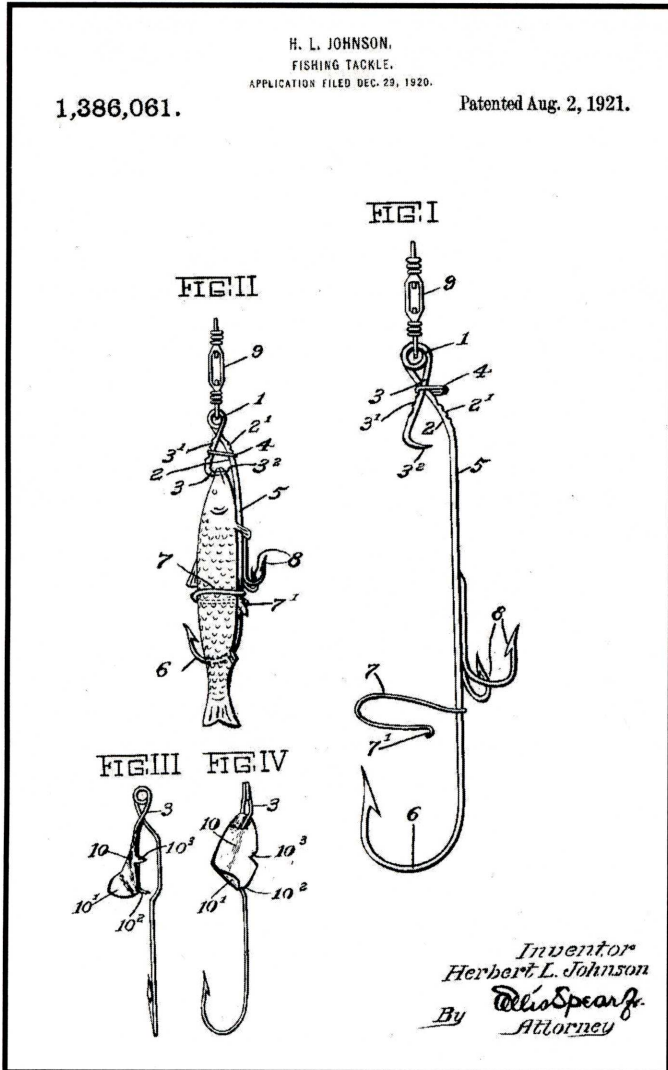
The First Publication Devoted Exclusively To Tackle Collecting and Angling History

The Johnson Fish Hook –

Does the Patent Drawing Tell the Full Story?

By William B. Krohn

On 21 August 1921, Herbert L. Johnson of Yarmouth, Maine received U.S. Patent No. 3,386,061 for a fish hook with a spike (i.e., “spring pin”) at the front end to secure various kinds of live bait. The 4 drawings accompanying his patent application show 2 hooks without a spinner, and a Johnson Hook from 2 angles with a half-blade spinner mounted at the front end:



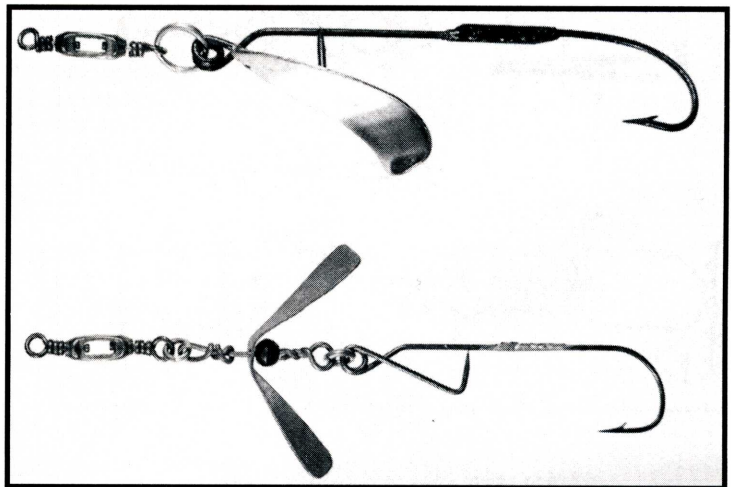
The drawing that accompanied the patent application submitted by Herbert L. Johnson. (US Patent Office)

Page 129 of Jeff Kieny’s (2008) *Patented Hooks, Harnesses, and Baited-Holders* – *Identification and Value Guide with Collections* reproduces the Johnson Hook patent drawings along with a photograph of two Johnson Hook Spin-

ners (Fig. 2). But are these spinners the only fishing lures produced under Johnson’s patent? I think not, but before presenting my argument, we need to start at the beginning.

Herbert Lawrence Johnson was born around 1889 in Gorham, Maine. At age 12 he lived in Gorham with his parents and 3 siblings. As an adult on 17 July 1912, he married Lizzie M. Choadman in Westbrook, Maine. The couple resided in Yarmouth where Herbert taught school and Lizzie was a musician. (In addition to the hook patent, Johnson also received Patent No. 1,435,926 in November 1922 for a finger grip on a violin bow.) Around 1940, with no children and still living in Yarmouth, the couple opened a gift store. The Johnsons continued to run their gift shop for many years, until around the time Herbert died in April of 1969. At the time of death, Herbert L. Johnson was 81 years of age.

I found no evidence that Johnson ever made, or sold, his patented fish hooks. His patent application, however, clearly assigned the rights for the hook to “George F. Lowell of Freeport, Maine.” So who was Lowell? Perhaps more to the point, what role did Lowell play in producing products based on Johnson’s patent?

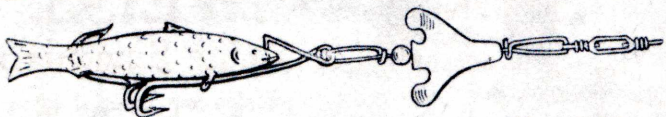


Two Johnson Hook Spinners (unmarked) as shown in photographs from page 129 of Kieny’s *Patented Hooks, Harnesses & Bait Holders* (2008), (also see p. 320). Kieny considered these as “tough-rare”. (courtesy of Jeff Kieny)

(continued on page 17)

George F. Lowell was from Kingfield, in western Maine, and spent his adult life as a jeweler and optician in Freeport, on the Maine coast. He was born in 1872, the son of William and Georgiana Lowell. By examining business directories, I found that Lowell had a jewelry store in Freeport from around 1909 until his death in 1925. Directories from 1920 and earlier list Lowell only as a “jeweler and optician.” Between 1921 and 1924, the directories state: “Geo. F. Lowell, watches, jewelry, sporting goods and optician.” Unfortunately, the kinds of “sporting goods” sold by Lowell were not specified. An important clue, however, was found in advertisements published in national sporting journals.

In March 1921, the Kismet Manufacturing Company of Freeport, Maine published the same advertisement in both *The American Angler* and *Forest and Stream* (Fig. 3). The advertisement states that a patent for the Kismet Casting Hook has been “applied for.” Note that the advertisement’s publication date of March 1921 fits squarely into the eight-month window when Johnson’s patent application was still pending (i.e., applied for on 29 Dec. 1920 and received on 2 Aug. 1921). Note also that the advertisement emphasizes the hook, calling the product “A New Natural Bait Holder.” The basic point underlying Johnson’s patent application was that his invention, a hook with a spring pin at the front, is consistent with Lowell’s claim of a new holder for natural baits. Furthermore, Lowell’s lure was named the Kismet Casting Hook (Fig. 4), not the Kismet Spinner, emphasizing the hook and not the triangular-shaped metal spinner(s).



Oh, By Gingo, Boys: This is like “Abe Lincoln’s Rat Hole.” It is worth looking into.

A NEW NATURAL BAIT HOLDER

Eventually you will buy one, why not now? Made in Size 2/0 and 3/0. Gold or Nickel Spinner. 75c each, 2 for \$1.50. Post paid. Money back if not satisfactory.

KISMET MFG. CO.
Pat. applied for. **FREEPORT, ME.**

Fig. 3: This advertisement for the Kismet Casting Hook was published in March 1921 both in *The American Angler* and *Forest and Stream*. Although unmarked, it is so distinctive that even if found off the card, it is readily identifiable.



Fig. 4: Examples of the one- and two-bladed Kismet Casting Hooks on cards. The Kismet bait was made with one or two spinners, and it also came with gold or nickel-plated blades and in two hook sizes. (author’s collection)

Finally, and perhaps most convincing, the Kismet’s hook is strikingly similar to the hooks on the Johnson Hook with spinners. (See photographs on pages 129 and 320 of Kieny [2008], and Fig. 5 below.)

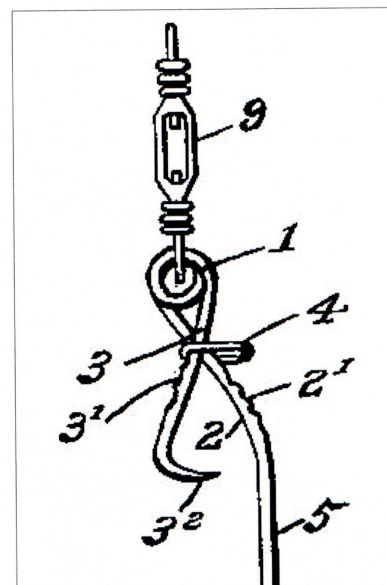


Fig. 5a: close-up of front end of the hooks of a Johnson Spinner Hook as shown on the patent drawing. (US Patent Office)

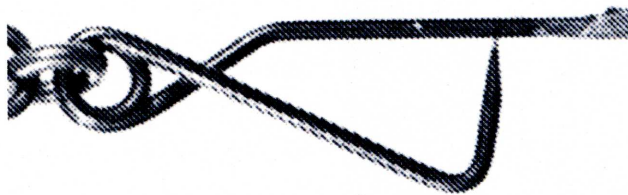


Fig 5b: photo of the Johnson Fish Hook, from page 129 of Kieny’s *Patented Hooks, Harnesses & Bait Holders*.

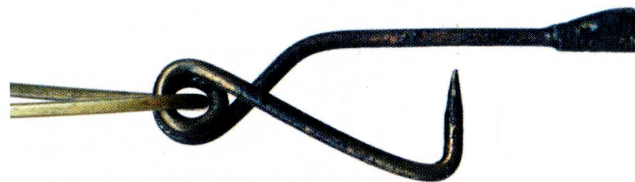


Fig 5c: photo of the Kismet Casting Hook. (author’s collection)

Unfortunately, I was unable to find documents directly linking George F. Lowell and the Kismet Manufacturing Company. (This company was not registered with the State of Maine.) However, to the best of my knowledge, the Kismet Casting Hook was the only fishing lure made in Freeport during the 1920s. Thus, I believe that George F. Lowell was the founder and owner of Freeport's Kismet Manufacturing Company, and that the "sporting goods" sold by Lowell probably included the Johnson Fish Hook and the Kismet Casting Hook. (I have never located a Johnson Harness Hook; i.e., Figs. I and II in the patent drawing.) In short, I believe that Johnson's Patent No. 1,386,061 should be associated not only with the Johnson Fish Hooks shown in the patent drawings, but also with the Kismet Casting Hook.

George F. Lowell died on 19 May 1925 when only 53 years old. Thus, Lowell had only approximately four years to make and sell the Kismet Casting Hook. Despite this relatively short production period, Kismet Casting Hooks are far more common than are Johnson Fish Hooks. Perhaps the latter were experimental and thus relatively few were made where the Kismet bait was Lowell's commercial version of Johnson's patent. Without new evidence, however, this point remains speculation.

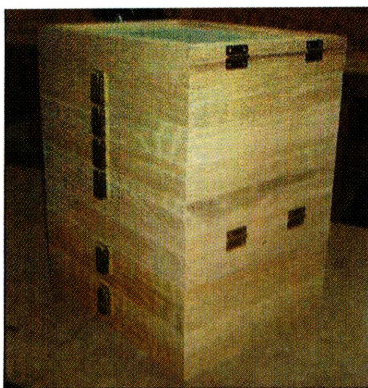
While I do not have indisputable evidence that Kismet Casting Hook resulted from Johnson's U.S. Patent No. 1,386,061, there is strong evidence

this was the case. After all, Johnson assigned his patent to Lowell (this is so stated on the patent papers), the Kismet Manufacturing Company was located in Freeport (so stated on card for the Kismet bait) where Lowell resided and worked (according to numerous sources), and Lowell sold "sporting goods" (so stated in a number of period business directories). Even without a direct link George F. Lowell and the Kismet Manufacturing Company, I argue that the available facts clearly point to Lowell as the maker of the Kismet Casting Hook. However, readers must judge for themselves the facts presented.

Should anyone discover documents refuting or supporting my preliminary conclusion (e.g.; a Kismet Manufacturing Co. letterhead with G. F. Lowell's name at the top [or a different name; negative evidence], a carded Kismet Casting Hook mailed in a Lowell Jewelry Store envelope), please contact the author. Digging into the past without complete documentations is always a tricky endeavor, but nevertheless a worthy journey if we are to undercover even fragments of the histories of the people behind the lures we all find intriguing enough to collect.

I thank Dan Leroux, Ron Goddard, and Jeff Knapp for helping me locate Kismet Casting Hooks and other materials used in this article. Useful reviews of a draft of this article were provided by Jeff Kieny and Ellen Conant Krohn.

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