

# Spark Plug Patent Wars

By Rich Street, SPCOA #1055

In the rapidly growing automobile industry of the early twentieth century, great fortunes were being made and lost. The time was also one of fierce competition for the control of the industries and the fortunes involved. In American manufacturing and business, the patent was the key to control. Some of the most famous patent disputes in early auto history included the Selden Patent, the Dyer transmission patent, the Hutchinson horn patent, the Perlman demountable rim patent, and the Canfield spark plug patent.

In 1912, the Canfield case made the national news. A patent originally filed by Mr. Frank W. Canfield of Manistee, Michigan on Aug 6, 1897, was issued October 18, 1898. The patent, number 612,701, provided for air space around the electrode to prevent fouling and to insure a hotter spark. This patent's scope was quite broad, and several companies were licensed by the patentee.

The Association of Licensed Automobile Manufacturers (A.L.A.M.) obtained, then controlled, and eventually sold the patent to A. R. Mosler, with the proviso that members of the association had the right to manufacture and use the license for their own products. But the patent had not previously been tightly controlled, and in the spring of 1912, Mosler finally filed suit against the Auto Supply Company for patent violation. The defendant was considered a minor player in the industry, and the case was actually contested by six different spark plug brands.

On November 11, 1913, Judge E. Henry Lacombe of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Federal Circuit Court of Appeals, decided in favor of A. R. Mosler and Company against the Auto Supply Company. The news said the decision would have an "important and immediate effect upon every spark plug manufacturer and dealer in the country." According to Mosler's attorney in the case, practically every spark plug manufactured or sold in the country was an infringement on the Canfield patent!

The patent still had two years to run and Mosler had put the entire industry on notice that it was going to enforce the patent.

J.H. Lehman of Lehman Manufacturing Company had filed an unrelated patent suit against Mosler earlier, in 1909, and lost. Lehman now fought back. Within two weeks Lehman purportedly had found a patent predating the Canfield patent by two years and covering the same points. Like Lehman's original suit against Mosler this protest, too, slipped away into oblivion.

**...practically every spark plug manufactured or sold in the country was an infringement on the Canfield patent!**

Mosler was now "king of the hill." Everyone was courting him. The December, 1913 newspapers reported almost daily interviews between Mosler and other manufacturers. The infamous Albert Champion of Champion Ignition Company

made his appearance early in that month. It seems that three years previously, Mr. Champion had acknowledged the patent and took out a “perpetual license,” under the terms of which Mr. Mosler was not allowed to give licenses to others without permission. Mosler may have had the spotlight, but Albert Champion controlled things from the sidelines.

Albert Champion not only had power, but he was the one making the quick money. While other companies ceased production and lined up to get a license from Mosler, the A.C. company, which already had a license, was being pushed beyond capacity to fill orders for the entire industry.

Mortimer Dewitt of Jeffery-Dewitt (soon to be bought by Champion Spark Plug Company, owned by the Stranahans) was another manufacturer calling on Mosler for the rights to produce under the patent that December.

The following month, at the Chicago Auto Show in January of 1914, it was announced that a new association was being formed, made up of the Canfield spark plug licensees. The original formation discussion meeting actually took place at the Astor Hotel on January 5, and on January 9 a committee of nine appointed by Mosler met to take up the matter. A public announcement was given on January 10. Then a second organizational meeting was held January 29<sup>th</sup> at the Chicago Auditorium Annex to form the Association of Spark Plug Manufacturers. All present and prospective Canfield licensees were invited. William A. Redding, the attorney who defended the patent case, prepared the draft constitution. In February it was announced that the first secretary of the association was to be J.W. Fisher, the treasurer was to be A. R. Mosler, and the governing executive committee was to be comprised of D. B. Mills, Albert Champion, R. A. Stranahan, E. M. Bedford, and Emil Grossman. Annual meetings were to be held in New York in January.

In April 1922, long after the Canfield patent’s expiration and being king of the hill, A.R. Mosler and Company was put into receivership by Frenchtown Porcelain Company and National Folding Box Company.

Frank W. Canfield, originator of the patent, never made a dollar for himself or his estate from the patent. Frank was the son of millionaire John W. Canfield, a Michigan lumber baron. Frank died in 1898, the same year his patent was issued, so he never got to see all the fuss it created. His millionaire father died a year later. Neither Frank’s son, John Canfield the 2<sup>nd</sup>, nor John Canfield 3<sup>rd</sup>, Frank’s grandson, ever benefited from his efforts.

The patent’s seventeen-year lifespan expired in 1915, but every time an antique auto, tractor, stationary engine, or sparkplug collector sees 1898 stamped on an old spark plug, please smile. You are keeping Frank W. Canfield’s place in auto history alive.

## **Sources**

AUTO PATENT SUITS AFFECT ALL MAKES: Transmission Construction Involved in Dyer Action Brought in Federal Courts.. (1912, March 16). New York Times. P.11.

AUTO SHOW CLOSES; SEE BUSINESS BOOM :Manufacturers Say Exhibition's Success Demonstrates That Prosperity Is on the Way.. (1914, January 11). New York Times. P.S4.

Canfield, F.W.. 1898. Igniter or Sparker for Gas, Oil, or Vapor Engines. U.S. Patent No. 612,701.

CYLINDER NUMBER AGAIN :Local Dealer Says It Is Not Vital Whether There Are Four or Six.. (1914, January 25). New York Times.

INVENTOR OF SPARK PLUG LOST. (1933, August 27). Los Angeles Times. P.F3.

JOHN CANFIELD 2D. (1949, March 6). New York Times.

JOHN CANFIELD'S WILL IS READ. (1899, December 19). Chicago Daily Tribune. P.7.

MOTOR CAR PATENTS UPHeld BY COURT :Judge Hough Sustains the Selden Claims Against Two Automobile Concerns. WHOLE INDUSTRY AFFECTED Patents, Court Says, Cover "Every Modern Car Driven by Petroleum Vapor.". (1909, September 16). New York Times, p. 5.

MUST END RAIL CONTROL :Decision Against Joint Ownership of K. & M. Road Sustained.. (1913, November 12). New York Times, p. 13.

ON THE SPOT. (1913, November 23). The Atlanta Constitution, p. 13.

ON THE SPOT. (1913, December 7). The Atlanta Constitution, p. 12.

SPARK PLUG MAKERS TO MEET :Will Organize Association While Chicago Show Is On. AIMS TO REFORM ABUSES. Dissemination of Information One of the Objects.. (1914, January 25). Chicago Daily Tribune, p. H3.

SPARK PLUG PATENT UPHeld: ALL OTHERS INFRINGEMENTS? (1913, November 12). Chicago Daily Tribune, p. 14.

WINS FIGHT ON PATENT :Perlman's Demountable Rim invention Upheld in Court.. (1915, November 7). New York Times, p. XX6.