

Old Lawn Mower History by the Patent Number

Jim Ricci

<http://reellawnmower.com/>

So much has changed since I first started looking for old lawn mower patents and trademarks 20-plus years ago as I began research for my recently published book, *“Hand, Horse and Motor: The Development of the Lawn Mower Industry in the United States.”* One thing that has not changed is the professional level of help delivered by library staff, no matter the institution.

Although I initially wanted to learn about only one lawn mower company, my area of interest quickly expanded to include all the companies that made lawn mowers in the United States during the time period from the mid-1850s to the early 1940s.

The use of patent and trademark information took on added historical importance due to a dearth of lawn mower company advertising, brochures, catalogs, and ephemera.

My reasons for using the USPTO resources were twofold: firstly, to learn of the existence of, new to me, companies and, secondly, to record the range of patents and potential models associated with each inventor and company. Through this system of research, the origins of the lawn mower industry could begin to be charted.

In the mid 1990s, UMass Amherst held most of the printed patent index and gazette books. The few missing books were located in the nearby collections of Springfield, Massachusetts, Public Library and New York State Library in Albany.

Early on, a trip to the Patent Office and Trademark Offices in Crystal City, Alexandria, Virginia, was helpful. Arriving with a notebook of lists and charts in hand, I was fully prepared to search for patents. Luckily, I was directed to patent specialist Patti Young. After listening to me, she said something to the effect of, “Put all those books away, and I will show you how to do proper patent searching.” After the Patent Office, my next stop was the completely different world of Trademarks getting to use the computerized X-search to uncover dead trademarks.

When I started researching, I needed to learn what questions to ask and how to ask them to fill in the missing pieces of history. Organization became important so as not to waste time, which led to the development of a chart on which to record pertinent patent information in a consistent manner. Even though not efficient, for me it was less confusing to focus on one patentee and related company through a particular time span, even though this meant going back to the same books dozens of times over the years of research.

The lack of the never-printed Inventor Index to patents for the time period from 1790 to 1873 was frustrating, but with suggestions from the librarians, alternative sources were located. The lack of filing dates on patents up into the 1870s was and is still frustrating.

Although all the patents were available on microfilm, viewing was much easier when they became available on CD-ROM.

In September 2006, I started using Kevin Webb's short-lived www.allpatents.org for online searches of pre-1976 patents. However, by December 2006, it was all over for them as Google had launched their patent search system.

Since the lawn mower was developed in England in 1830, use of the European Patent Office Espacenet website helped locate patents filed by American inventors in the United Kingdom. The only problem was that their listings only go as far back as 1895. To bridge the patent gap between 1830 and 1895, I purchased the CD-ROM entitled, "A Cradle of Inventions; British Patents from 1617 to 1895."

It has been interesting to be researching during this time period of so much change from printed books to electronic files. The system just kept getting better.

I realize that there are more avenues of research such as patent transfers, but it was time to call it quits and get the book out. This finally happened in the Spring of 2016.