

# Just For Openers January-December 2025 1

## Fabulous Key Ring Branding

The Arthur Merrill Story By Don Thornton

The internet auction ad said:

**SIGNED Patented 1908 Margolla Tea Advertising  
Metal Tea Bag Clip UNUSUAL RARE**

At first glance it appears to be an apt description. Margolla Tea was at its peak, a very popular black Ceylon tea distributed by the L.D. Margolis Company of Boston.

The embossed Margolla Tea has fine red paint on the stamped lettering, along with intricately embossed design flourishes. A quality branding or advertising item and obviously some sort of very small clipping device.

But one side of the center piece is marked in tiny type: **PAT. DEC. 1, 1908** ... and the truth comes out. Patent No. 905,731 issued that date is a "key carrying device" invented by Arthur H. Merrill of Hartford, Connecticut.



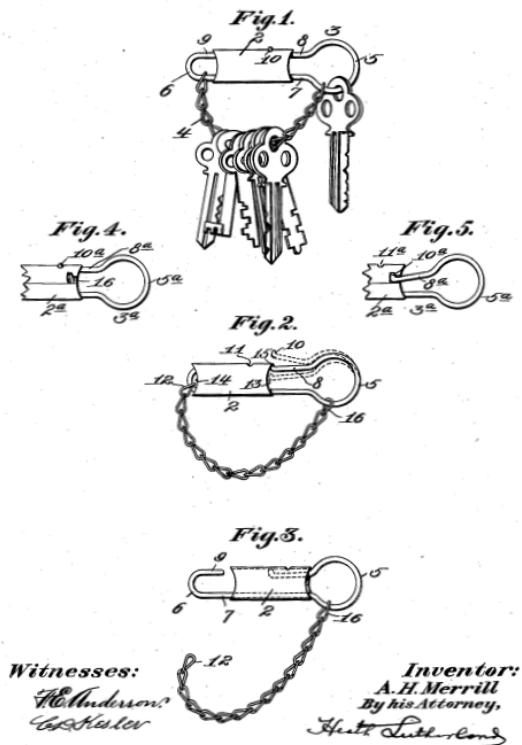
"This invention relates to a key-carrying device" designed "to maintain the keys supported thereby separated; for example there may be one key such as a house door key separated from the remaining keys, by virtue of which this particular key can readily be reached," Merrill said in his patent application.

The 2 1/4-inch long device, with 1-inch rectangular center for scroll designs or branding, is all metal and can be squeezed apart for insertion of keys, the big loop end for the previously mentioned house key, and a key chain for other keys. (Over the years many holders lost their chains, which are easily removed.)

There are two holder models, one with a 1/2-inch wide sleeve and the other with a 3/8-inch wide sleeve. All are marked on one side of the sleeve in tiny type: **PAT DEC. 1, 1908**.



A. H. MERRILL.  
KEY CARRYING DEVICE.  
APPLICATION FILED FEB. 27, 1908.  
905,731. Patented Dec. 1, 1908.



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Merrill was a real estate investor in Long Island when in the 1870s he expanded his business to Connecticut, ending up in Hartford in 1886. At one time he was considered one of the wealthiest landlords in Hartford, where he lived the rest of his life.

He died in 1927 at the age of 76. His obituary in the *Hartford Courant* said an illness of several months resulted in his death and described him as a “well known manufacturer of advertising novelties.”

Over the years he was awarded at least 11 different patents, ranging from a cigar cutter to a water cooler.

He launched the Individual Key Ring Company on Garden Street in Hartford in 1909. The key holder was offered to sales agents for single sales and to companies for advertising branding by the gross.

Newspaper advertisements at the time, including the Philadelphia Inquirer on June 26, 1909, appealed to sales agents, saying “Sample Mailed on Receipt of 10c.”

Those single sale models have a scroll design on the front and back and it is interesting to note that the same model was offered in gold and silver. Company stationary in the 1920s touted the holder, saying: **MADE OF STEEL, NICKLE PLATED**, and in a blurb: **These Key Rings made in Solid Gold and Sterling Silver can be obtained of Chas. Keller Co., 72-73 Nassau St., New York, as we have granted them the sole right to manufacture them of these two metals.**

No price was given.

There is no way to determine the number of companies that purchased the branded models by the hundreds, but two firms, Darling and Swift, ironically related, stand out. Darling & Company was formed in Chicago in the 1890s as a partnership with the Swift meatpacking business.

In a three-year study – actually a collecting spree -- of internet auction sales, **DARLING’S FERTILIZERS** or **DARLING’S POULTRY FEEDS** totaled 22 while the Swift’s Chicago World’s Fair giveaways totaled 41.

These are marked on the top: **SOUVENIER OF VISIT TO HOME OF SWIFT’S** and then **BROOKFIELD SAUSAGE, PREMIER FRANK-FURTS, SLIVERLEAF LARD, PREMIUM HAM** or **PREMIUM BACON**.

Other models dropped the **SOUVENIER** tag and were marked: **SWIFT’S BROOKFIELD BUTTER EGGS & CHEESE**, all marked on the bottom **1933** or **1934 CENTURY OF PROGRESS**.

The branding ranged from financial institutions (**THE CLEVELAND TRUST CO.**) to fraternity



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lodges (symbols of Freemasonry and Moose Lodge). Other branding included small plaques mounted on the sleeve including advertising for toilet tanks, oleo-margarine, “please return to” lost keys, and **GLOBE** meats.

The range of branding is staggering. Other examples, some shortened for space, include: *((maybe in box with smaller type))*

ANDREW RUSSELL FOR STATE AUDITOR (He won and served in Illinois from 1917 through 1925)

CORNELL WOOD BOARD

ASHLAND 63<sup>rd</sup> STATE BANK CHICAGO

ALTOONA ELECTRICAL CO. 114-12 ST.

BOSCH-PEATS WALL PAPERS

COLUMBUS OLEOMARGARINE THE CAPITOL CITY PRODUCTS

CORNELL WOOD BOARD WALLS AND CEILINGS

DR. DINGWELL LIMITED JEWELERS WINNEPEG

E. A. BURKE & CO., INVESTMENT BANKER

FABRIC FIRE HOSE CO. NEW YORK

50c REWARD IF FOUND & RETURNED TO CONREY-DAVIS MFG. CO.

FINDER RETURN TO SANDAHL CIGAR CO. GREAT FALLS, MONT.

GOOD CLOTHES MADE TO ORDER M. BORN & CO.

HOTEL IROQUOIS, BUFFALO, N.Y.

HOTEL SEVIER STAG WILMINGOTN, DE.

LIBBY'S

JOHN C. CHAMBERS BELT DRESSING

LELAND PARKER HOTEL EUROPEAN MINOT N.D.

MARGOLLA TEA

Masonic symbol square

MASS MUTUAL LIFE INSURANCE CO. SPRINGFIELD, MASS.

MUTUAL BENEFIT LIFE INSURANCE CO. OF NEWARK, N.J.

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NYE JENKS & CO. GRAIN MINNEAPOLIS  
PANAMA 1915  
PLANKINTON' GLOBEQUALITY PRODUCTS  
PLEASE RETURN TO FIRST NATIONAL BANK VAULTS DETROIT  
PROTEX SHIRT COVERS  
RAY H. BENNETT LUMBER CO. INC. NORTH TONAWANDA N.Y.  
RETURN TO HUDSON AND THOMSON INSURANCE  
RETURN TO OAK PARK TRUST & SAVINGS BANK OAK PARK, ILLINOIS  
REWARD RETURN TO HAZLETON MACHINERY AND SUPPLY CO. HAZLETON, PA.  
SHEET METAL AND SUPPLY CO. LANCASTER, PA.  
SWIFT'S BROOKFIELD BUTTER EEGS & CHEESE  
SIDE WEIGHT HORSE SHOE CO. HARTFORD, CONN.  
SWIFT'S PREMIUM HAM  
TAGGANT BAKING COMPANY, INDIANAPOLIS  
THE AMERICAN DRUGGIST FIRE INSURANCE COMPANY CINCINNATI, O.  
THE CLEVELAND TRUST CO  
THE MURRAY CO. BOSTON FRUITS & SYRUPS  
THE TRAVELERS INSURANCE COMPANY I AM INSURED  
VITRO NO TROUBLE (toilet tank)  
WALK-OVER BOOT SHOP PORTLAND

Merrill also had an earlier key ring/letter opener patent, which he said had "a wire loop flattened on its sides to receive an advertisement." Its most novel feature was a flat metal arm used to separate a special key from the others, which when swung open "may be utilized for a variety of purposes, for instance, in severing paper or other material."

Very few of these rings survive today. One of those that does is marked on one side: **AETNA LIFE INSURANCE COMPANY HARTFORD, CONN.** and on the other side: **LIFE ACCIDENT HEALTH AND LIABILITY INSURANCE.**

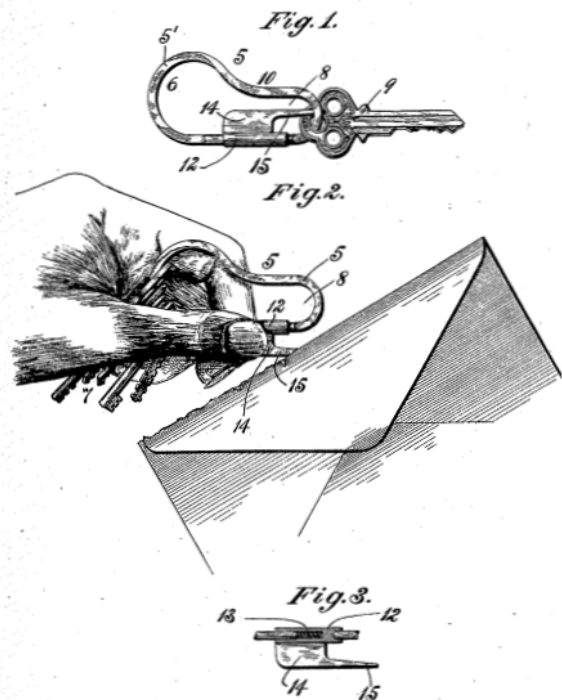


From the Collection of John Powell

No. 870,686.

PATENTED NOV. 12, 1907.

A. H. MERRILL.  
KEY RING.  
APPLICATION FILED FEB. 21, 1906.



Witnesses:

*S. S. Grotta.*  
*F. C. Anderson.*

Inventor:  
*Arthur H. Merrill*  
By his Attorney,  
*Wm. F. Blomquist*

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From the Collection of John Powell



Opener (above) may not be a Merrill patent.

In addition to key rings, Merrill patented in 1913 what he called an “Article of Adornment,” a sheet metal bottle cap lifter and combo tool.

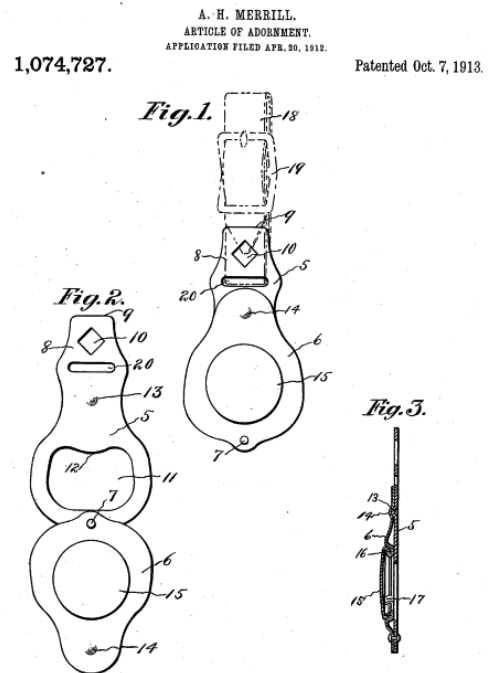
“This invention relates to an article of adornment, and the same can be advantageously employed in a variety of ways; for example as a watch fob, a locket, a pendant, or something of a similar nature,” Merrill said in his patent application.

The 2 ½-inch device has two parts, a backside with opener, screw driver and a square hole “which is adapted to receive the valve-stem ordinarily present on an automobile gas tank.”

The second part is round, held by a pin and able to swing open to allow use of the tools, or swing closed to hide, or adorn the combo tool.



The swing top was designed for branding. The top, the patent said, has “a circular opening (as shown in the drawing) to removably receive some suitable ornamental member such for instance as the disk which may bear on its face a photograph of a presidential candidate or any other picture or any suitable matter.” One example was branded: **DRINK “GOLD TOP” BOTTLED BEER.**

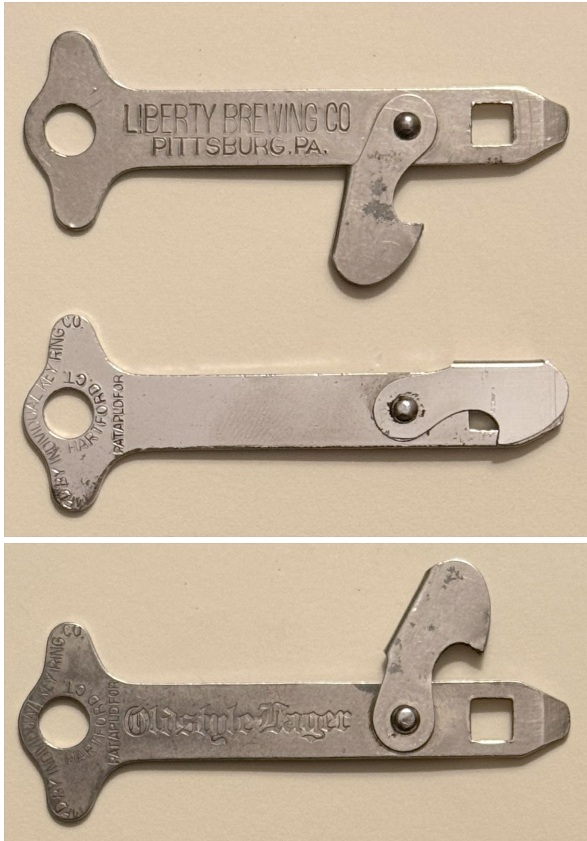


Witnesses:  
J. Elliott  
L. Merkel.

Inventor:  
Arthur H. Merrill  
By his Attorneys,  
Sutherland & Hudson.

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Merrill also had a bottle opener patent in 1912 for a “compound tool” or combination bottle opener, screw driver and “square hole” wrench which can be “conveniently carried in the pocket.”

One example was branded: **LIBERTY BREWING CO. PITTSBURGH, PA. / OLD STYLE LAGER MFD BY INDIVIDUAL KEY RING CO. HARTFORD CT.**, but in a strange twist, part of it did. Merrill put the drop down opener on top of his 1913 patent and offered it for branding (bottom left.)

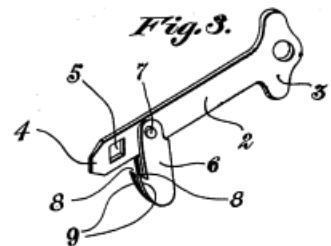
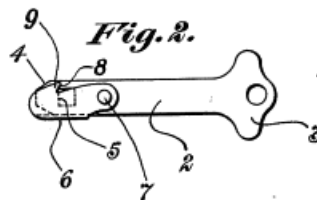
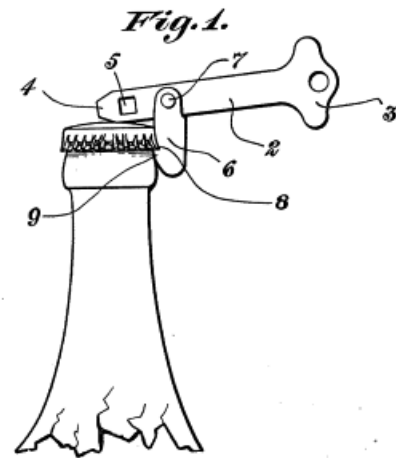
Apparently to cover all bases, Merrill marked the back of the device: **PATENTED OCT. 8, 12 OCT. 7, 13.**



1,040,564.

A. H. MERRILL.  
COMPOUND TOOL.  
APPLICATION FILED DEC. 19, 1910.

Patented Oct. 8, 1912.



Witnesses:

L. L. Markel  
M. B. Miner

Inventor:  
A. H. Merrill

By his Attorneys,  
Sutherland & Hudson