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Bow To The Church Key Sampson, Hothersall & Footnotes By Don Thornton

Dewitt F. Sampson teamed up with American Can Company colleague John M. Hothersall in the early 1930s to make beer drinking history.

Sampson, of Elmhurst, Illinois, and Hothersall, of Brooklyn, New York, were granted nearly twin Patent Nos. 1,996,550 and 1,996,551 on April 2, 1935 for a "container opener" that is considered America's first can punch opener or "church key."

April 2, 1935.

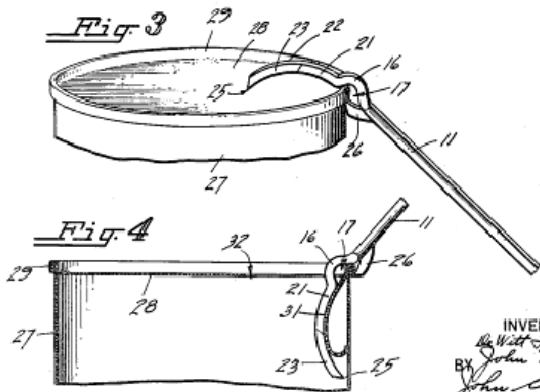
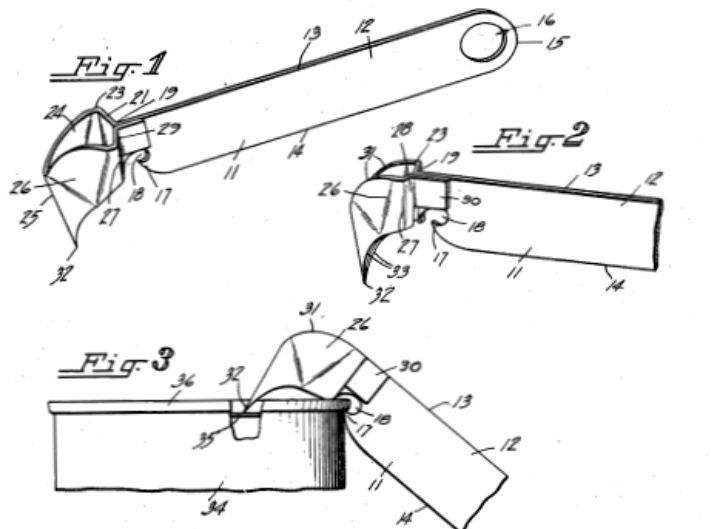
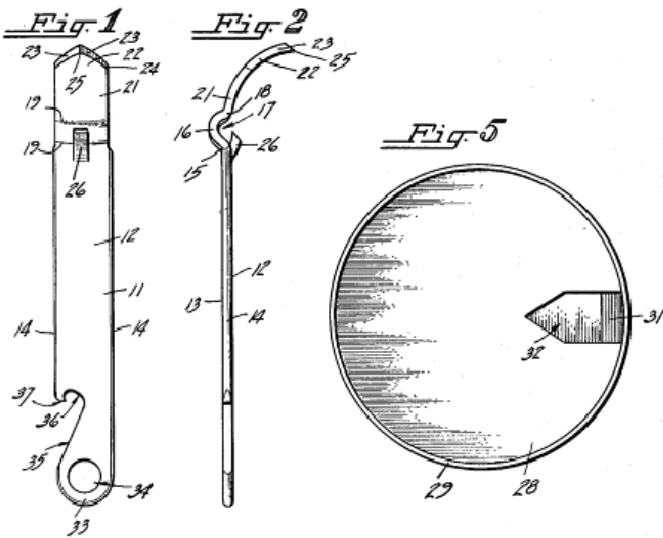
D. F. SAMPSON ET AL
CONTAINER OPENER
Filed April 13, 1933

1,996,550

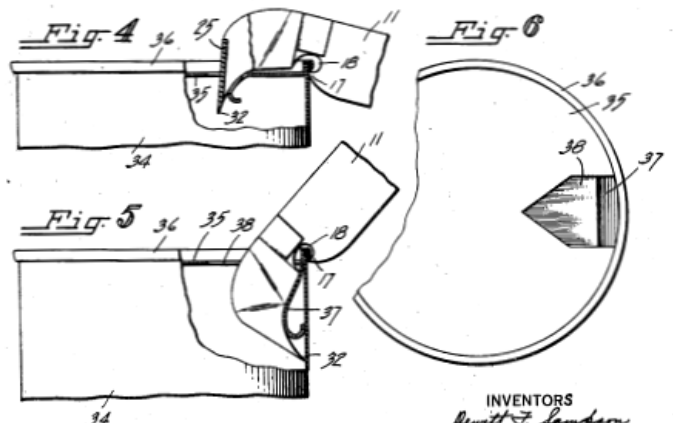
April 2, 1935.

D. F. SAMPSON ET AL
CONTAINER OPENER
Filed June 20, 1933

1,996,551



INVENTORS
Dewitt F. Sampson
John M. Hothersall
BY John C. Carpenter
ATTORNEY



INVENTORS
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"The principal object of the invention is to provide a container opener which at one stroke or turning movement produces a substantial pouring opening in a wall of a container through which the contents, be they fluid or granular, may be readily dispensed," the first patent application said.

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The second patent made the same claim, but said its opener employed “an enlarged, hollow or open cutting head” compared to the first patent’s flat curved head. The second patent fizzled, but is noted here to keep the record straight.

Examples of some of the first and very successful church keys are just under 5-inches long and marked: QUICK & EASY OPENER. PATS. PEND. CANCO MADE IN U.S.A. AMERICAN CAN CO.; QUICK & EASY OPENER. PATENT 1996550 CANCO MADE IN U.S.A. AMERICAN CAN CO.; FOR BEER IN CANS MARKED CANCO KEGLINED PATENT 1996550 TRADE MARK AM CAN CO. (CANCO was the trademark for American Can.)



The importance of the church key* cannot be understated. It ruled the roost from the 1930s through much of the 1960s, when the pop-top beer can took over. And all that time all the church keys patented and manufactured followed the basic “punch” design of Sampson and Hothersall.**

Sampson, a graduate in chemistry from Iowa State University and Harvard Business School, went to work for American Can Company*** in 1928 and rose to the position of chief of research and development during his 33-year career. The two opener patents he assigned to American Can were his only inventions.

Hothersall joined American Can in 1901 and was an assistant manager when he retired 39 years later. The two

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opener patents were among the more than several hundred patents he was awarded over the years for household devices and containers, nearly all assigned to American Can.

Sampson and Hothersall figured out how to get the beer out of the then new flat top can – first produced by American Can. And Hothersall also played a crucial role in developing that can and its sealing process. American Can perfected the pressurized can with a special sealant dubbed Keglined,**** partnered with the Gottfried Krueger Brewing Company***** and canned beer made its debut in Richmond, Virginia, in 1935.

Krueger quickly jumped on its own bandwagon, producing a brochure touting the fact it was “the first brewery in the world to pack beer and ale in cans.” It also gave directions on how to use its “Quick & Easy” opener.



Yes
**KRUEGER
BEER**
in
CANS
now

The Talk of The Nation

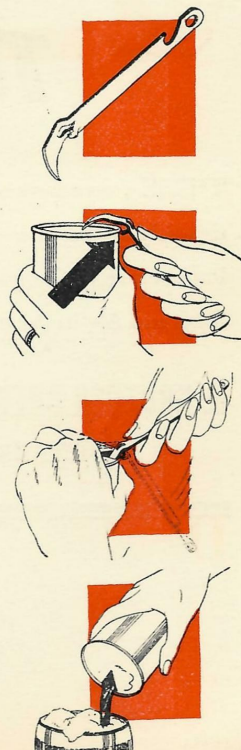
HOW TO SERVE AND OPEN CANS

BE sure to ask your dealer for a “Quick and Easy” opener—no other opener will do.

TO open can, hook opener under rim of can as shown. Be sure contents is cold and do not shake before opening.

PLACE the can on a solid surface, then place hand over opener on top of can. Lift opener quickly—straight up. One firm stroke cuts complete opening.

REMOVE opener and pour. To serve an appetizing glass of Beer or Ale wash glasses in clear cold water and salt. Never use soap.



Hothersall died at his Brooklyn home in 1943 at the age of 67. His obituary in the *New York Times* said he “was known particularly as an inventor and held 400 patents on various devices, many of which added to the convenience of the American home.” His obit in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* said he “was instrumental in designing a tin container for beer, a can that is widely used, and fiber milk containers.”

Dewitt “Dewey” Sampson retired from American Can Company in 1961 and joined the staff at California State Polytechnic University in San Luis Obispo to organize a food processing curriculum. He served as head of the food safety department through the 1960s. His obituary in the *San Luis Obispo Tribune* said he was a former American Can chemist who died in a San Luis Obispo hospital in 1979 at the age of 73.

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Sadly, the published obituaries for both Hothersall and Sampson did not mention their “church key” invention.

How these two men teamed up is not known. What is known is that the vast majority of the dozens and dozens of patents***** granted to Hothersall were related to tin cans and other containers, ranging from the design of the can to sealing tops, to the machines to manufacturer them. Sampson was a department boss whose only patents were the two for the church key.

April 2, 1935.

D. F. SAMPSON ET AL

1,996,550

CONTAINER OPENER

Filed April 13, 1933

UNITED STATES PATENT OFFICE

1,996,550

CONTAINER OPENER

Dewitt F. Sampson, Elmhurst, Ill., and John M. Hothersall, Brooklyn, N. Y., assignors to American Can Company, New York, N. Y., a corporation of New Jersey

Application April 13, 1933, Serial No. 665,906

Bow To The Church Key **Sampson, Hothersall & Footnotes By Don Thornton**

All of which poses the question: Why did Sampson's name come first on the patent documents? The answer: More than likely company politics. However, it's obvious it should have been Hothersall. It's important because when there are two or more inventors, the name of who is considered the main inventor is listed on the first sheet of the patent followed by "ET AL." The other inventor or inventors are listed on the next page of text, which could be considered the back of the bus.

FAITHFUL FOOTNOTES:

1* If you were born in the 1950s or later you are very likely not familiar with the phrase "church key," or even what it is. Most experts on such matters agree it is an American phrase but how did the name come about?

There are two theories:

--The cutting end of the beer can opener resembles the heads of large keys traditionally used to lock and unlock church doors.

--It came about to poke fun at religion. Drinking beer is considered by many, but not all, not to be a church-like experience.

2** Sampson and Hothersall applied for their successful church key patent April 13, 1933 and production was under way with "patent pending" status until it was granted in 1935. American Can Company licensed the patent to the Vaughan Novelty Company of Chicago, helping it live up to its advertisement boast of "World's Largest Manufacturer of Can and Bottle Openers." (See JFO News 2025 *The King of Novelty Branding Collectibles*, Harry Lockwood Vaughan.)

3*** The American Can Company, trademark CANCO, was created in 1901 as a trust with the merging of dozens of competing container companies around the country. In the late 1930s, it was considered one of the largest beer can manufacturers in the world. The company went out of business in 1996, selling its cans and food packaging services to Triangle Industries for \$570 million.

4**** American Can developed a liquid, fast drying vinyl-like sealant it branded Keglined in 1933. Keglined was applied inside the beer can to preserve the beer from taking on a metal taste from the tin. The application was done with a machine invented by longtime American Can employee John H. Murch, of East Orange, New Jersey. He applied for a patent in 1933 and it was granted January 28, 1935, Patent No. 2,028,798.

5***** At the age of 16, Gottfried Krueger immigrated from Germany to the U.S. to help his uncle at his brewery in Newark, New Jersey. Sixteen years later, the two established the Gottfried Krueger Brewing Company, which continued in business until 1961. Interesting fact: Krueger, 1837-1926, in later life left the brewery for the bench. For 11 years he was a lay judge of the New Jersey Court of Errors and Appeals, which later became the New Jersey Supreme Court.

6***** Over the years, Hothersall concentrated his inventive genius on tin cans, but occasionally branched out. For example, he was granted patents for a shoe polish tin (1915), a working man's lunch box (1919), a fiber milk carton container (1937) and a rotary can opener (1943). He also had an astounding 17 design patents for a "talcum power box," all with different tops.