

***Just For Openers* January-December 2025 1**

From Bomb Fuses to Corkscrew Combos

Meet Inventor Michael J. La Forte By Don Thornton

During his 40-year career at Vaughan Manufacturing Company, Michael J. La Forte was awarded at least 10 patents with one of his creations being recognized by culinary royalty Julia Child.

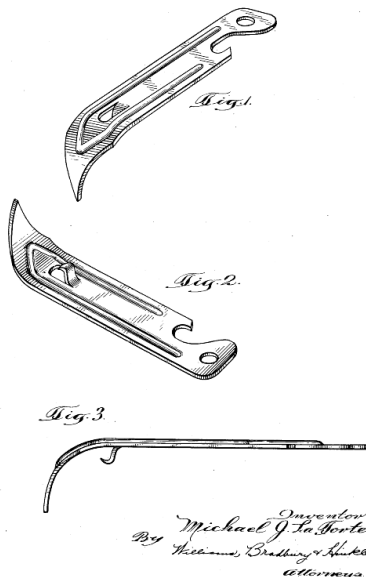
La Forte, who retired from Vaughan in 1985 as executive vice president, began his career there making bomb fuses. Vaughan had turned to wartime manufacturing in 1942, making such fuses for the Army and Navy through 1945.

La Forte had joined the U.S. Army Air Corp. in 1942 and served with its aeronautical engineering group. While stationed in Chicago and working at Vaughan, he was recognized for his design innovation in perfecting bomb fuses used in air raids.

Michael J. La Forte was given a small sidebar in "The King of Novelty Branding Collectibles Harry Lockwood Vaughan," JFO 2025 News. This piece gives a fuller account of his inventive career. (<https://just-for-openers.org/2025-Openers-02.pdf>)

When the war was over, Vaughan went back to making housewares and La Forte stayed on, taking up residence in nearby Park Ridge, Illinois. La Forte's first invention for Vaughan was Design Patent No. 143,327 granted on December 25, 1945 for a sleek church key combo bottle opener.

**Dec. 25, 1945. M. J. LA FORTE Des. 143,327
CAN OPENER
Filed Nov. 16 1944.**



The 4 1/4-inch device was designed for easy branding. One example is marked on the top PABST BLUE RIBBON and VAUGHAN CHICAGO MADE U.S.A. PAT. 143,327 1,996,550 on the bottom side. Vaughan also marked it with its "Quick and Easy" brand name for direct sales.

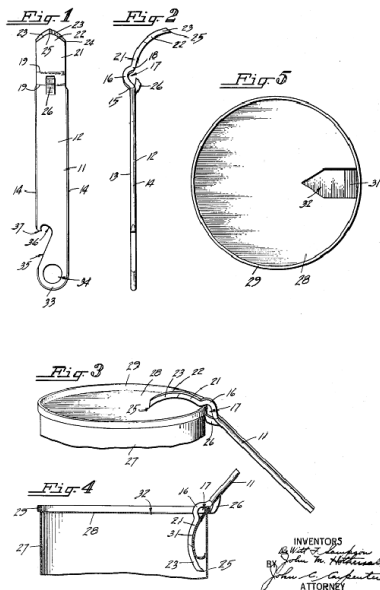


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The second patent number on the opener was awarded to Dewitt F. Sampson of Elmhurst, Illinois and John M. Hothersall of Brooklyn, New York on April 2, 1935. This is considered the first church key for canned beer and other beverages. The two inventors assigned the patent to the American Can Company which in turn licensed Vaughan to manufacture it. (See *Bow To The Church Key JFO News 2025* <https://just-for-openers.org/2025-Openers-09.pdf>).

**April 2, 1935. D. F. SAMPSON ET AL 1,996,550
CONTAINER OPENER
Filed April 13, 1933**



The La Forte and other Vaughan openers were sold extensively for advertising purposes. Brewers and bottlers purchased millions of the items marked with their brand names and used them as premiums.

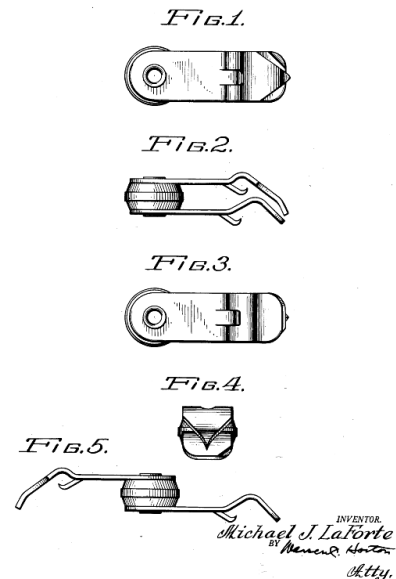
One of La Forte's most popular devices was the "QUAD FOLD," a church key and bottle opener that folded in half. He was granted Design Patent No. 168,053 on October 28, 1952 for the device that grocery store ads in 1953 said retailed for from 25 to 29 cents -- with a key chain.



**"QUAD-FOLD"
4 OPENERS-IN-1
29¢**

Opens canned liquids, crown-capped bottles, vacuum jars, bottle-cap seals. Folds closed for safety . . . key chain attached. Nickel-plated, plastic separator.

**Oct. 28, 1952 M. J. LA FORTE Des. 168,053
FOLDING CAN AND BOTTLE OPENER
Filed April 18, 1952**



The "QUAD FOLD" is 3 1/2-inches long when unfolded, and 2-inches long when folded. It is marked

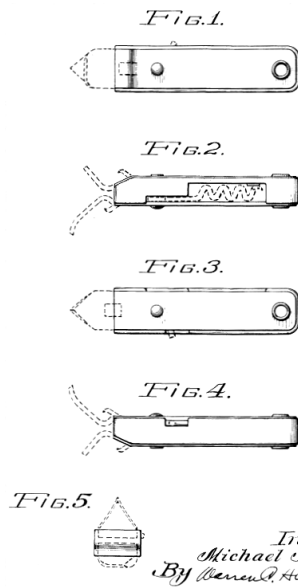
"QUAD FOLD" on the church key head and VAUGHAN U.S.A. around the key chain hold. Some are marked PAT. PEND. It came in a variety of plastic colors and was available for branding.

From Bomb Fuses to Corkscrew Combos

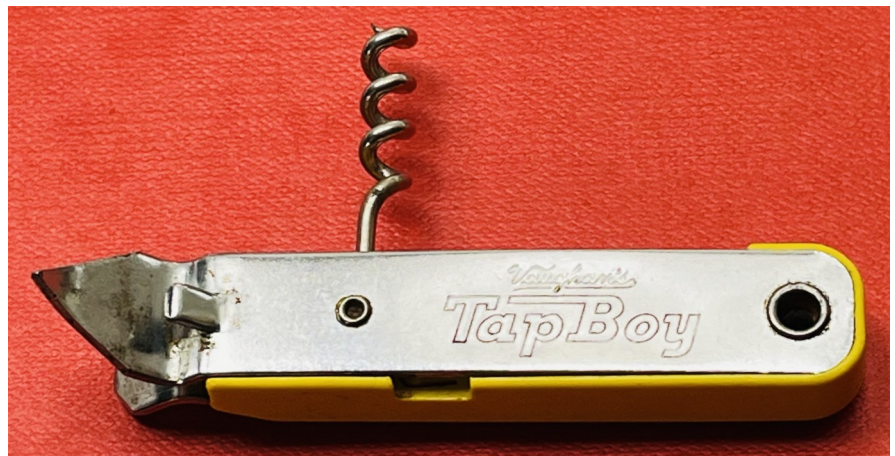
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Next up came another very popular La Forte invention -- the “TAP BOY.” This was a combination church key and bottle opener with a fold out corkscrew. He was awarded Design Patent No. 170,999 on December 1, 1953 for his “bar tool.”

Dec. 1, 1953 M. J. LA FORTE Des. 170,999
BAR TOOL
Filed Jan. 4, 1952

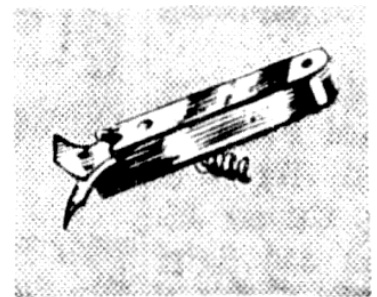


The 4 1/2-inch combination tool is marked PAT. No. 179,999 TAP BOY VAUGHAN-CHICAGO 24, U.S.A. on one side, and VAUGHAN'S TAP BOY on the other. It retailed on sale for 35 cents.



An example of the “TAP BOY” resides in the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. The opener

(Museum ID No. 2001.0253.0196) was a gift from Julia Child from the Julia Child Kitchen, according to the museum.



TAP BOY BOTTLE AND CAN OPENER

35¢

mfr's sugg. list 49c

In addition to church keys and bottle openers, La Forte had several manual, hand-operated can opener patents. He was awarded Patent No. 2,662,280 on December 15, 1953 for what became Vaughan's very successful 4 IN ONE CAN OPENER, and the less successful VANGHAN'S CAN OPENER AND SPOON.

“One object of the invention is to improve the construction of a manual type can opener by providing it with a handle and a guide means cooperating with the opener driving means resiliently to hold the opener on a can after the top of the can has

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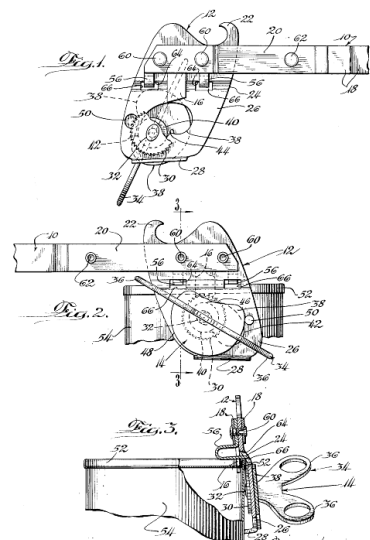
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been sheared so that the opener may be used as a handle in pouring the contents of the can," he said in his patent application.

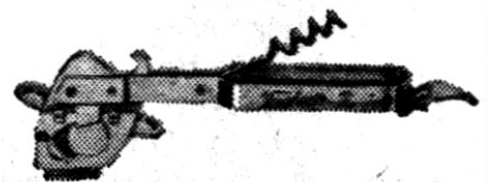
The opener itself is not marked 4 IN ONE, that tag came from its packaging. The combination can opener, bottle opener, corkscrew and church key is just under 7-inches long, with church key extended, and marked VAUGHAN'S MADE IN U.S.A. It should be noted the patent is only for the rotary can opener.



Dec. 15, 1953 M. J. LA FORTE 2,662,280
CAN OPENER
Filed April 27, 1949



Inventor:
Michael J. La Forte
By Hendley, Jackson, O'Leary, & Thompson, Attorneys
Chicago, Ill.



Vaughan's Can Opener

Can opener, bottle opener, corkscrew and canned liquid opener.
(66208)



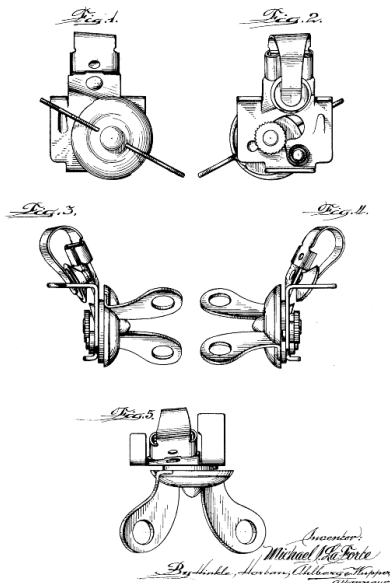
The rare spoon 8-inch model is marked on the back of the **VAUGHAN'S CAN OPENER AND SPOON PAT. 2,662,280.**

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La Forte was awarded Design Patent No. 168,844 on February 17, 1953 and utility Patents Nos. 2,573,030 and 2,573,031 both dated October 30, 1951 for what became the nicknamed “Red Top” hand-operated, portable can opener.

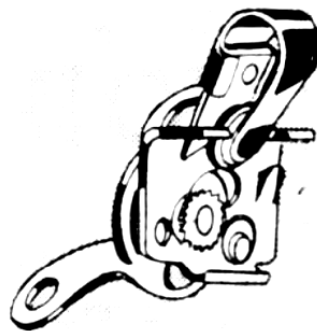
Feb. 17, 1953 M. J. LA FORTE Des. 168,844
CAN OPENER
Filed April 13, 1951



His Patent No. 2,573,031, an astounding 10 page long – probably the longest for any can opener on record -- said that it was designed to prevent the “difficulties” of the then hand-operated openers on the market. His invention, he said, corrected the problems of the awkward initial piercing of the can and subsequent binding of the opener and can.

The just under 2 1/2-inch rotary device has a bright red plastic circular top marked FLEX ROLL and

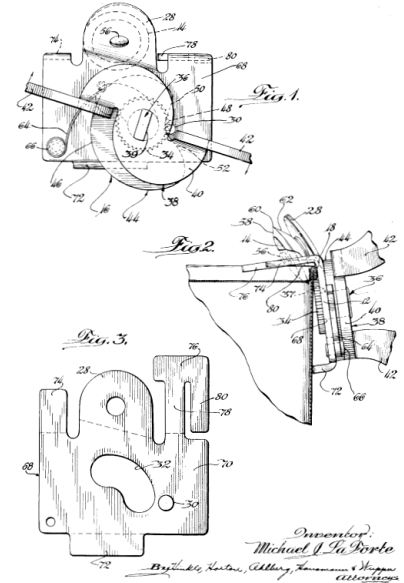
VAUGHAN U.S.A. A metal brace is marked U.S.A. PAT. 2,573,030 2,573,031. One newspaper ad put the retail price at 88 cents,



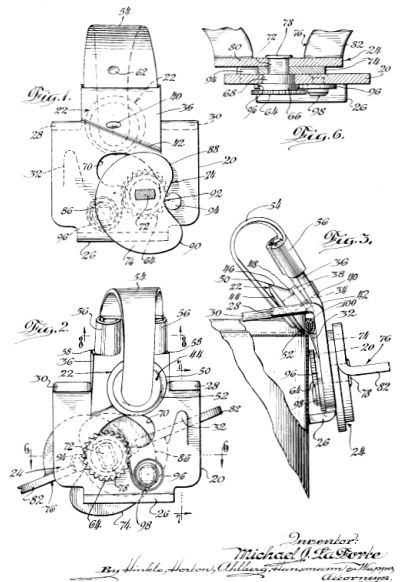
CAN OPENER, Vaughan Flex-Roll. Opens cans so easy, automatic adjusting. Can't slip. 88c

The FLEX ROLL name also was applied to a wall-mount Vaughan can opener based on Le Forte's Design Patent No. 175,557 dated September 13, 1955.

Oct. 30, 1951 M. J. LA FORTE 2,573,030
CAN OPENER
Filed April 3, 1947



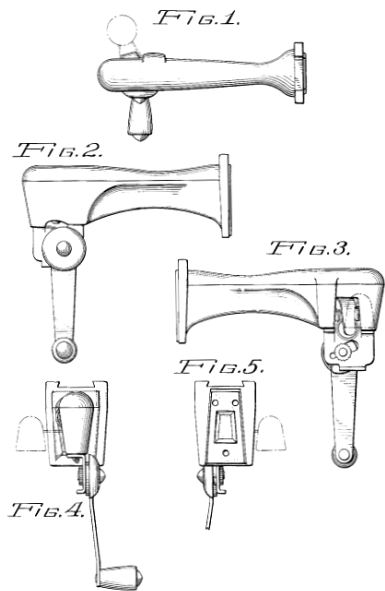
Oct. 30, 1951 M. J. LA FORTE 2,573,031
CAN OPENER
Filed Aug. 26, 1949



From Bomb Fuses to Corkscrew Combos

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Sept. 13, 1955 Michael J. La Forte Des. 175,557
WALL CAN OPENER
Filed May 21, 1954



The wall-mount came in various colors and had a plastic button at the base of the rotary handle similar to the small FLEX ROLL. The wall-mount button is marked FLEX ROLL VAUGHAN U.S.A. CHAMPION. A 1956 newspaper ad boasted: "Adds Grace To Your Kitchen."



NEW! SAFETY ROLL
Can Opener
The World's Best Can Opener

SAVE YOUR FINGERS!
ENJOY kitchen comfort with Vaughan's amazing can opener. A simple turn of the wrist and Safety Roll Jr. cuts the tops "out" of square, round and oval cans with ease. Safety Roll saves your fingers; saves the juices and leaves a safety rolled edge.

Only 10c

Aid to Picnics and Pocketbooks
Vaughan's Safety Roll Jr. is easy on your pocketbook—(10c)—and easy to get. Buy two—one for home use and one to carry in your car for picnic outings and camping trips. Just ask for Vaughan's Safety Roll Jr. Can Opener.

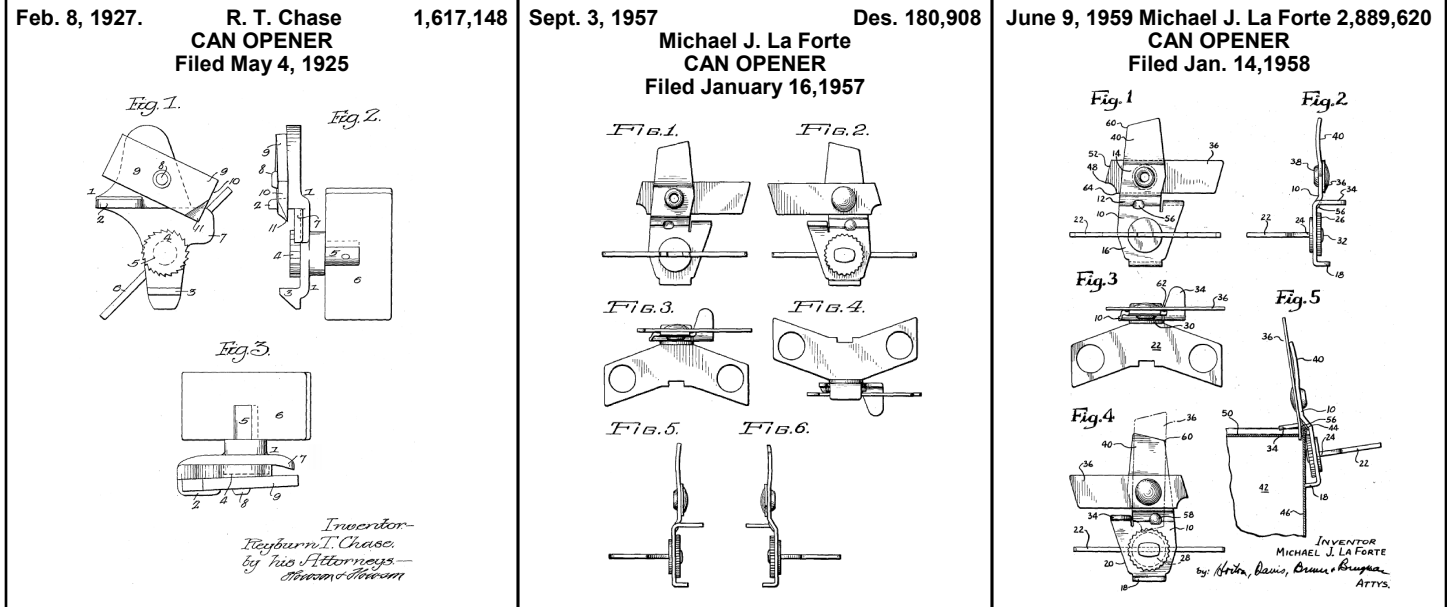
For Sale Everywhere
including all the stores in the Chicago area of THE GREAT ATLANTIC & PACIFIC TEA CO.
Vaughan Novelty Mfg. Co., Inc.
World's Largest Mfr. of Can Openers
3211 Carroll Ave., Chicago, Ill.

La Forte was also responsible for putting the "improved" into VAUGHAN'S SAFETY ROLL JR. can opener. That opener came on the market in the 1930s, based on Reyburn T. Chase's Patent No. 1,617,148 dated February 8, 1927. How a patent of a Salt Lake City, Utah inventor ended up with a Chicago company is not known. (See SIDEBAR below). La Forte was granted Design Patent No. 180,908 on September 3, 1957 and utility Patent No. 2,889,620 dated June 9, 1959 resulting in an "improved manual type can opener."



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The small, 2 1/2-inch Chase opener is marked VAUGHAN'S SAFETY ROLL JR. TRADEMARK CAN OPENER MADE & PAT. IN U.S.A. NO. 1617148 and on the turning handle IF BLADE STICKS WASH IN HOT WATER.

La Forte paid a backhanded tribute to Chase in his patent application, saying Chase's "hand-held opener having a bayonet type blade...has met with great financial success and which has been very satisfactory in use. That opener, however, is improvable both from the point of view of successfulness and ease of operation and of manufacturing cost, and the opener here described represents such an improvement thereover."

The result was VAUGHAN'S IMPROVED SAFETY ROLL JR. In addition to the "improved" name, it was marked PAT'D CHICAGO 24, U.S.A. and on the turning handle FOR SMOOTH OPERATION OIL BEHIND GEAR.



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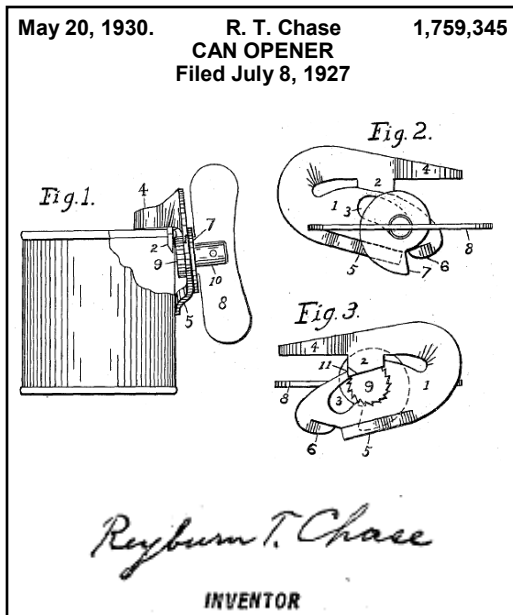
La Forte's 1985 retirement marked the end of Vaughan Manufacturing Company (the "Novelty" in the name had been dropped in 1950). The company had been on the decline since the 1960s due to the introduction and success of screw-open bottle caps and can pull-tabs. By the late 1960s, it was estimated that around 75% of U.S. breweries were using pull-tabs.

La Forte died at the age of 91 from heart disease complications. In his obituary in the *Chicago Tribune* November 12, 2001, his son, Michael Jr., noted the career switch from the military to housewares. "It was a big change from making weapons but my dad really loved that (housewares) business. They clicked."

He also paid this tribute to his father: "My dad was always upbeat. You felt so good when you were around him. He had a lot of wisdom. He was definitely a man worth remembering."

SIDEBAR – Reyburn T. Chase was a dedicated can opener inventor, being granted four opener patents from 1927 to 1939 – two of which successfully made it to the market. His first patent in 1927, which listed his residence as Salt Lake City, was obtained by the Vaughan Manufacturing Company and resulted in the Safety Roll Jr.

Chase had moved to Camden, New Jersey when his third patent was granted in 1930. It also ended up, ironically, in Chicago, at the Reliable Manufacturing Company and resulted in the Gem Can Opener.



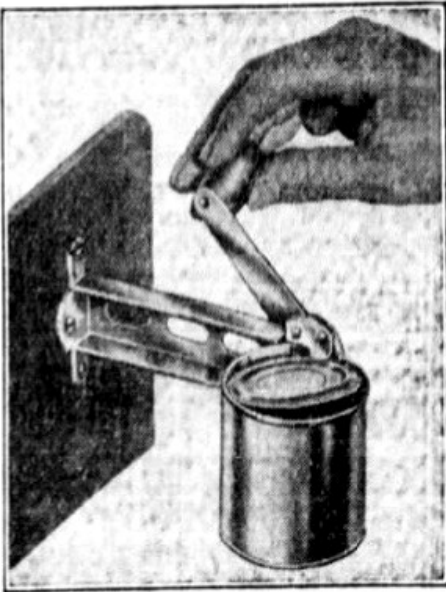
"The object of my invention is to provide a can opener that will be easy to make, easy to use, and that will cut the entire top out of the can so that contents of a solid nature will empty out in bulk; and that will leave the rim on the can so that contents of a liquid nature will not spill while the can is being opened..." Chase said in his patent papers. The palm-size Gem handle is marked GEM CAN OPENER PAT. 5-2-30 1,759,345. MADE BY RELIABLE MFG. CO. CHICAGO U.S.A.



Reliable also offered a wall-mount opener with extending turning handle branded GEM WALL FOLD OPENER and an extended handle model, both marked with the smaller opener's Patent No. 1,759345.

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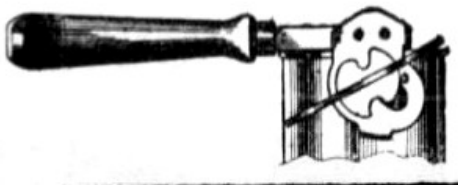
'Gem' Can Opener

Every kitchen needs a Gem Can Opener. Cuts out the entire top of cans quickly, safely and smoothly leaving no sharp, ragged edges to cut hands.

Wall Model 39c

Easy to operate. Real construction. Made of tool steel. Guaranteed.

Hand Model 19c



The *Morning Post* of Camden, described Chase in his obituary August 18, 1938, as a "wealthy inventor and churchman," who died at the age of 61 of a heart ailment. "He had lived in Camden county a number of years during which he invented several household appliances, among them being a can opener, royalties on which are said to have made him independently wealthy." He was a member of Haddonfield Methodist Episcopal Church, the obit said, "and active in its Sunday School work. He was an accomplished musician and was flutist in the church orchestra."

