

Patents

by Lynne Belluscio

LeRoy is not just Jell-O. There were lots of other things invented in LeRoy. What about the Elcond Dishdryer? It was, a handy countertop device with an ordinary dish rack that sat on a unit that blew air up through the dishes. (We have one in the collection.) It was invented and manufactured by Julius LaRaus in the early 1960s. He also invented a gas incinerator for home use and a humidifier.

Then there is the self leveling book stand that was patented by Donald McPherson in 1892. (We have one of those, also.) McPherson developed the Oatka Tire Changer, which worked like a clamp on the old style tires that had a wire along the inside edge. He patented a woven wire fence and we have the machine that was used to weave the fence. In 1892, he developed a steering mechanism for bicycles and in 1912, a wire device that helped to organize papers in a file drawer.

Two weeks ago, Doug Hill presented us with a model of his grandfather's window screen. It was patented in 1902 by Dr. Merton Skinner who was born in Caledonia in 1873 and was a graduate of Union College in Schenectady and Hahnemann Medical College in Philadelphia. He interned for a year at Genesee Hospital in Rochester.

When he returned to LeRoy, he joined his father's medical practice. About this time, he designed the moveable window screen. The six page patent includes two pages of detailed drawings. According to the patent "This invention relates to window screens, and has for its object to arrange for mounting the screens upon the top and bottom of a window so as to cooperate with the respective sashes to screen the adjacent portions of the window when the sashes are open. It is further more designed to have the screens work up and down with the sash so as to be effectually housed and out of sight when the sashes are closed and also to provide for the convenient disconnection

of the screens from the sashes whenever desired." There are provisions for spring action bolts, locking bolts, spring rollers and lateral stop projections.

Window screens were not available until the Civil War. People had to put up with flies and mosquitoes in the summer. Having worked in the kitchens at Genesee Country Museum for many years, I can attest to the nuisance of flies without window screens. In the morning, the flies would cover the ceiling and during the day, they would descend and swarm on dishes, tables and food. It would be necessary to cover the food with towels and just hope that you didn't mix a couple of flies into the soup. We would make feeble attempts to shoo the flies out. First you close all the windows and open the door and start at one corner of the room and swish a towel around and walk to the door.

Someone gave me a "fly swisher" made out of an old short broomstick with strips of a paper flour sack attached to the end. I have wondered whether it was a one-of-a-kind fly swisher, but I have seen a couple of others. Sometimes people put cheesecloth on the windows but in 1861, an employee of the Gilbert, Bennett and Company which manufactured wire mesh sieves for food came up with the idea of putting the wire mesh on windows. It was painted grey and sold as window screens.

On July 7, 1868, Bayley and McClusky filed a request for a patent for screens for the roof-top

openings on railcars. The roof-top windows were for ventilation, but soot, sparks and cinders came in the open windows and showered the passengers in the seats below. The screens allowed ventilation but prevented the sparks and cinders from coming in the openings.

Later, in 1874, the E.T. Barnum Company of Detroit began selling screens that were sold by the square foot. But apparently all these screens were tacked to the window opening or were set into the window. Dr. Skinner's invention allowed the screens to go up and down with the sash window. It's curious that a medical doctor would be interested in the invention of a window screen, unless

you consider that the installation of screens would be a sanitary improvement. Both flies and mosquitoes carried disease so it made sense that a doctor might come up with the idea of retractable window screens.

Doug wasn't sure if his grandfather had any other patents, but he said that the hardware for the Skinner Screens are on some of the windows in his house. He's also looking for a couple of posters that were used for advertising. I guess the Skinners didn't have to worry about flies on their Jell-O!

