

JOSHUA LOW AND THE INVENTIONS OF AN OHIO WHISKEY MAN

By Jack Sullivan
Special to the Ohio Swirl

There is an old adage that "necessity is the mother of invention." My thought, rather, is that Ohio is the mother of invention. Thomas Edison and the Wright Brothers come particularly to mind, but the Buckeye state teemed with individuals bent on making improvements in all manner of things. Among them was Joshua Low who sold liquor in Steubenville to make a living but whose lifelong passion was inventing.

It appears that Low's first invention was a "thill coupling," (Fig. 1) that he patented in 1873 when he was 28 years old. For those not familiar with the term, a thill is one of two long shafts, usually of wood, between which a horse is hitched. The coupling is important because it should be fastened easily; hold steady as the buggy or cart is being drawn along, and then is released with similar ease. The image here (Fig. 2) shows a horse with a thill secured with a coupling.

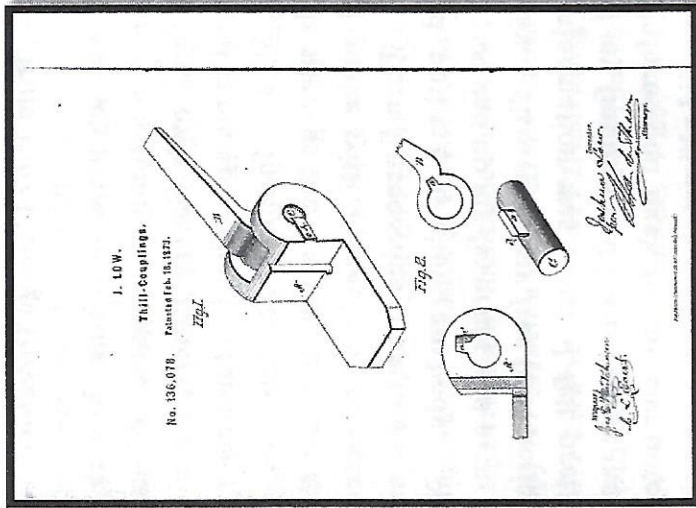


Figure 1

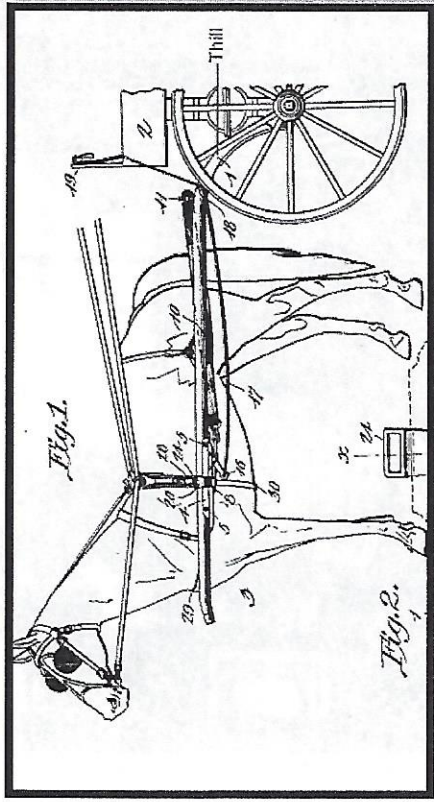


Figure 2

Born in 1845 in the town of Paris, Washington County, Pennsylvania, Low had migrated the short ten miles over the Ohio River to Steubenville as a young man. He dated the founding of his wholesale liquor house to 1865, a time when he was only 20, a dubious claim that suggests that he bought an existing business, perhaps after working there for a time. The 1870 census recorded him working as a "clerk." In a later census his occupation was "liquor dealer" as noted here on a medal shot glass (Fig. 3). According to local business directories the "J. Low" company, was located initially on Steubenville's Market Street (Fig. 4).



Figure 3

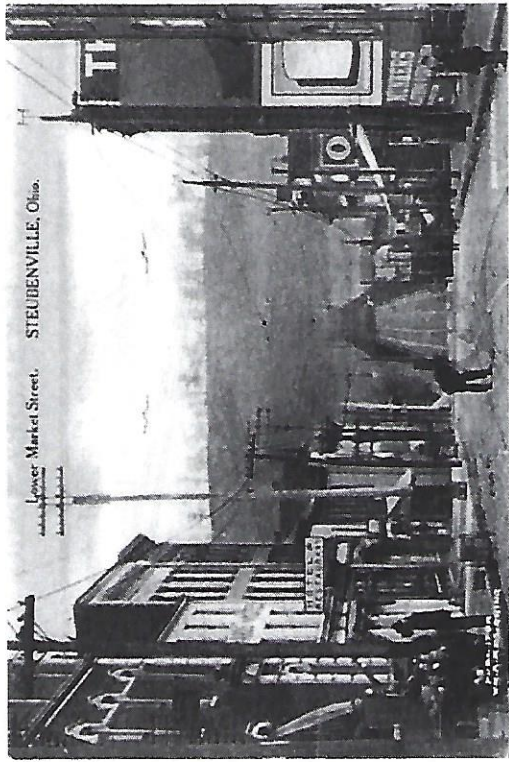


Figure 4

Low's decision to sell rather than dispense whiskey over the bar appears to have been a strategic one. Steubenville directories at the time listed only three liquor houses but some six dozen saloons, all of them needing regular restocking of spirits. Joshua supplied them and retail customers in cobalt decorated ceramic jugs (Fig. 5), featuring one proprietary brand he called "66." He advertised vigorously in the local press (Fig. 6).



Figure 5

The need to sell whiskey could not, however, deter Joseph from his passion for inventing. Although no evidence exists that his "thill coupling" ever saw commercial fulfillment, he turned

his attention to coupling railroad cars. His invention, he claimed could automatically join two cars firmly simply by pushing them together (Fig. 7). Once again, no proof exists that this innovation ever saw actual production.

Perhaps discouraged in the coupling field, Low next turned his inventing fever to an area of where his knowledge was more personal — coaxing liquid out of a barrel and into a jug or bottle (Fig. 8). Years of tediously siphoning whiskey and wine out of barrels and into wholesale or retail portions had initiated a desire on Low's part to

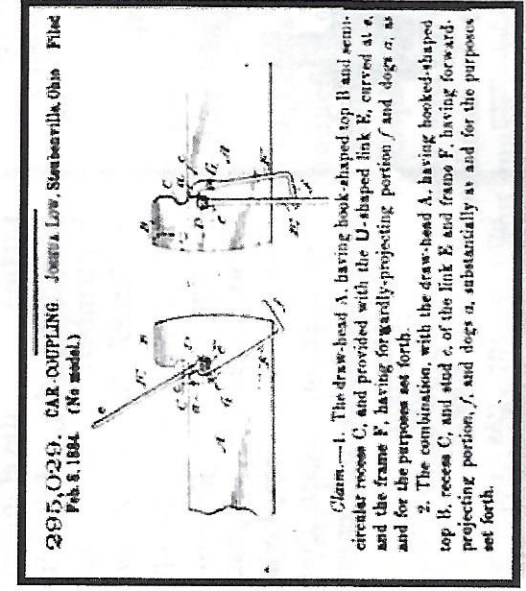


Figure 6

provide a means whereby the liquid could be drawn off at a point higher than the tank or cask. It consisted of two rather than the standard single tube. By blowing into

the smaller one, he contended that liquid would be forced into the larger one and the flow would continue until the container was empty.

Having patented this invention in January 1885, Low continued to work on the problem of emptying barrels (Fig. 9). His improved dual siphons needed to be stabilized in place if they were to work right, he suggested. This required a specialized kind of siphon cork made of rubber to hold each

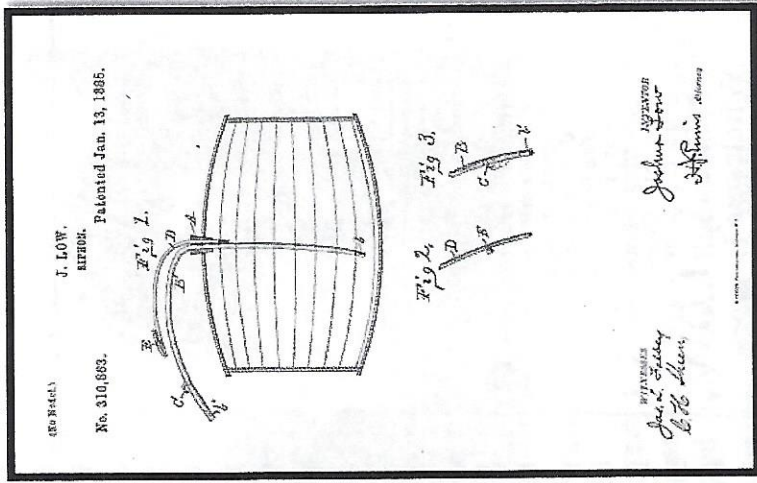


Figure 8

tube in place. With this further development, patented the following September, he had perfected "a device...that will meet the general demands of the trade..." While Low himself obviously was employing this invention, again there is no evidence of general manufacture.

Low's last patented invention was an "electric ignitor for gas engines." (Fig. 10). Patented in 1894 just as the automobile age

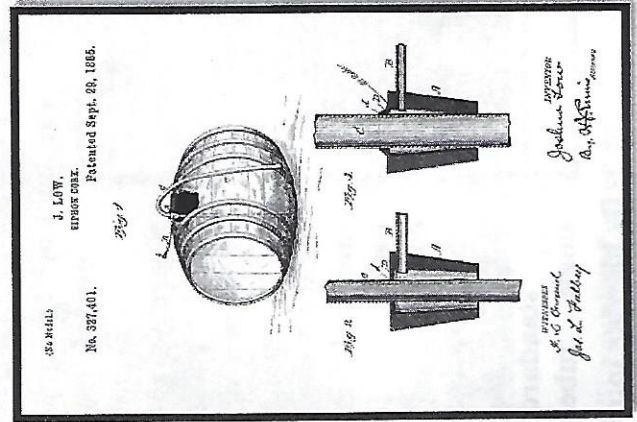


Figure 9

was dawning, he and his partner may have had in mind a way of starting an engine without the need for cranking to obtain a spark.

One wonders about the attitude of Joshua's wife about his incessant tinkering. He had married Elizabeth Mohr, a German immigrant, when he was 22 years old and she was 21. They would go on to have a family of nine children, five girls and four boys. In addition to the amount of time Low was spending on his "novelties," as he sometimes called them, obtaining a patent could be expensive. Even if the inventor did not provide a three-dimensional

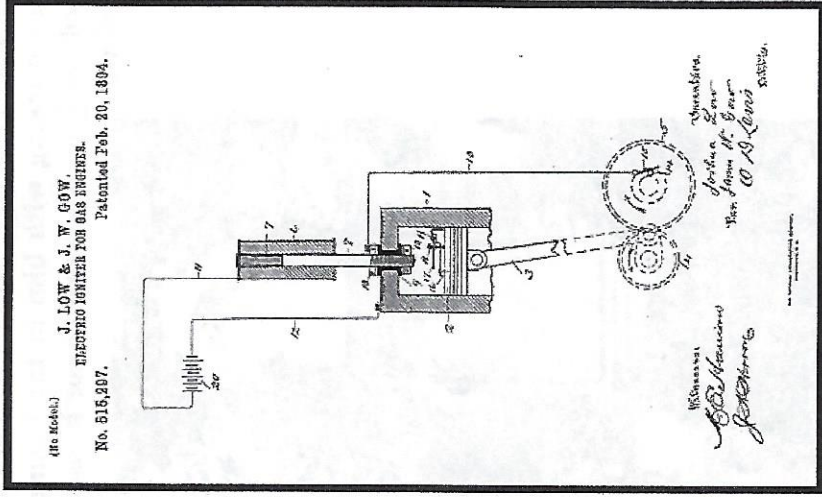


Figure 10

model, an artist had to be hired to provide a suitable drawing and usually the inventor had to hire a lawyer to handle the paperwork. No evidence exists that any of Low's inventions actually were put into commercial production or that even that he was able to sell the rights. Nevertheless, the Steubenville whiskey dealer deserves no disparagement. Whether his inventions were commercially successful or not, Low was firmly within the rich tradition of the Ohio workshop tinkerer, passionate about making something that would improve an existing mechanism or process.

Joshua Low developed heart trouble during his late 50s and died in December 1903 at the age of 58. His joint gravestone with Elizabeth is shown here (Fig. 11). After his death his elder sons who had been working with him in the business took over and the piloted the Low wholesale liquor house in Steubenville until shut down by Prohibition.

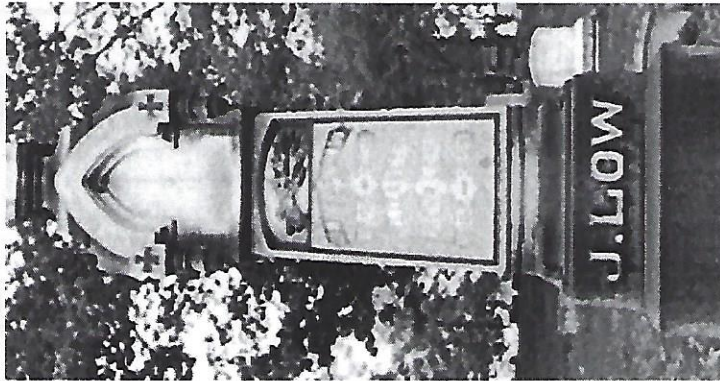


Figure 11

List of Illustrations:

- Fig. 1: Drawing of "thill" coupling
- Fig. 2: Horse in thill
- Fig. 3: Low metal shot cup
- Fig. 4: Lower Market St Steubenville
- Fig. 5: Low ceramic jug
- Fig. 6: Low ad 1900
- Fig. 7: Drawing of train coupling
- Fig. 8: Drawing of barrel syphon #1
- Fig. 9: Drawing of barrel syphon #2
- Fig. 10: Drawing of gas igniter
- Fig. 11: Joshua Low gravestone