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THE FASCINATING SKELETON FLY REELS MADE BY SANDS, TORONTO

By Paul Manuel, November 6, 2015

Collectors of vintage fishing tackle in Canada and the northern United States often come across simply constructed, single-action raised-pillar skeleton fly reels marked MFG BY SANDS TORONTO; however, there seems to be very little known about these reels or the company that made them. Also frequently found are vintage fisherman spring scales marked SANDS TOOLS TORONTO. This article will explore SANDS and their fly reels and scales.

DATING THE SANDS REELS

Searching high and low on the web, it seems that in the past there were only two public attempts to date these reels. The earliest reference is on the website of the defunct Granville Island Sport Fishing Museum¹. They show a picture of a Sands fly reel, describing it as a "Plate wind reel with external pillars. Sands of Toronto. Circa 1920's." Contradicting this date assertion is a remark posted in 2011 on the ORCA-Online.org website where it was stated: "The mid 50's is closer to the mark, given the materials, machining in any samples I have observed."²

Now that time and effort has been invested to obtain and carefully study several *different* examples of the SANDS reels, as discussed later in this article, and after researching what we can find out about the likely maker, it seems the mid 1950's assertion posted on ORCA is closer but is based on incomplete terms of reference.

SANDS, THE COMPANY AND THE NAME

First, to dispel the myth of the reel being a 1920's product, there was no company called SANDS making fishing tackle or metal products in Toronto in the 1920's or even the 1930's; at least none listed in the Toronto City Directories³ for that time. The only legally registered company that fits is SANDS TOOLS LIMITED⁴, a private

¹<http://66.51.163.9/fishing/collection/index.cfm?depth=SI&item=M001029&museum=1&search=Sands%20>

² <http://orca-online.org/reel-talk/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=11002&hilit=sands>

³ Toronto Reference Library - numerous volumes of Toronto City Directory 1918-1967

⁴ Corporate Name: Sands Tools Limited, March 18th, 1943, C., Liber. 380, No. 119, Ontario Management Board Secretariat, RG-55-1, Company Charter Books, Archives of Ontario.

company incorporated in 1943, located in Toronto, Ontario, with machine shop at 35 Carlaw Avenue, just north of Lakeshore Blvd. Today, the address number 35 Carlaw no longer exists although based on a recent site visit by this author it looks like the adjacent address on the north side at 45 Carlaw may have taken over a building previously at 35 Carlaw (possibly used by SANDS).

In the 1942 Toronto City Directory, the year prior to the date that SANDS was legally registered as a corporation in Ontario, the 3 initial directors of SANDS TOOLS LIMITED were all individually listed with their personal addresses in the Toronto City Directory and in each of those personal address listings they were each described as employees of a company shown as "S & S Tools (Ltd)". Since there is no record of a company registered in Ontario by that spelling in this period, it is assumed that S & S was a phonetic equivalent of SANDS used for the City Directory or possibly a 'doing-business-as' name created by these partners in anticipation of establishing a formal company. It is interesting that if you spell out S & S, it becomes S AND S, which concatenated spells SANDS.

Was the reel made before or after SANDS TOOLS LIMITED was formally incorporated in 1943 or was it earlier in 1942 when the partners first listed themselves individually in the City Directory as employees of "S & S"? Did SANDS make these reels later, such as in the mid 1950's? These are good questions and while we still do not have definitive answers, consider the rest of the discovered information disclosed later in this article and you might come to think that many SANDS reels *could* have been made continuously over the period 1943 through 1966.

It should be noted that in the Toronto City Directories reviewed, listings at 35 Carlaw for both S & S and SANDS had a number of informal, unregistered variations e.g. S & S Tool and Die, S & S Tools Limited, Sands Tool & Die Co Ltd, Sands Tools Ltd.

SANDS TOOLS LIMITED was registered with 3 directors: a tool and die maker Thomas Samuel Beatty, Frederick Kennedy and a salesman Alexander Strachan, all from Toronto. According to the initial 1943 Toronto City Directory where SANDS (Tool and Die Co Ltd) first appears under the SANDS name, Alex Strachan was the president, Thomas Beatty was vice president and Frederick Kennedy was listed as the secretary. There was no occupation listed for Mr. Kennedy.

Coincidentally, there was a company operating at that time called Toronto Stamp and Stencil (TS&S) - note the "S and S". According to a representative interviewed from the current successor of TS&S, it was then owned by a 3-way partnership that included the "Kennedy family", although a connection could not be found between the TS&S Kennedys and Frederick Kennedy of SANDS. A stencil making company would have had the equipment and experience to make the faceplates on skeleton fly reels, so that is a potential connection that warrants further research.

The purposes and objectives of SANDS TOOLS LIMITED were: “To carry on the business of tool makers, die makers, metal workers, machinists, makers of electrical machinery, apparatus and equipment, smiths and wood workers, and to buy, sell, manufacture, repair, convert, alter, operate, let on hire and deal in machinery, implements, tools, dies and hardware of all kinds”. There was no specific mention of fishing reels or scales but they would have had the machinery to make these products.

In terms of share structure and capital, SANDS TOOLS LIMITED started out with 220 “first preference shares” worth \$100 each and 120 “conditional-voting second preference shares” also worth \$100 each, for a total of \$34,000 paid-in capital. Bearing in mind that 1943 was only about 4 years after the end of the Great Depression in Canada⁵, this was probably considered a small to medium sized company based on that level of investment. There were also 1,500 common shares set out with no initial value but they could be valued up to \$10.00 each and held by up to 50 persons. No records could be found as to how shares of SANDS were distributed or owned.

Alex Strachan remained listed in the Toronto City Directory as the president of Sands Tools Ltd until 1961. A search was conducted for any Canadian or US design or process patents relating to the company name and the directors but none were found. Nor were any of these names found during a thorough review of the October 1945 List of Members of the Association of Professional Engineers of the Province of Ontario.

Why we find so little about SANDS is a mystery. Wholesale or retail outlets (or possibly the military) presumably distributed SANDS fly reels and scales in volume because they are seen all the time by Canadian collectors of vintage tackle. They are almost ubiquitous in that sense. But, in spite of best efforts, we have not found any product ads or documentation that shows the reels or fisherman scales. There have been no newspaper articles, ads or other written records found about SANDS (other than the Bankruptcy Notice to Creditors discussed below) in spite of extensive research on the Internet, at the Toronto Reference Library, at the Archives of Ontario, the library at the Royal Ontario Museum, the City of Toronto Archives and in private collections of fishing tackle catalogs of the time. Curiously, their products are not even listed in any Allcock, Laight & Westwood (AL&W Toronto) catalogs⁶.

On March 30th, 1962 a Bankruptcy Act Notice to the Creditors of Sands Tools Limited was published in the Globe and Mail⁷ newspaper. In spite of this notice, the

⁵ The Great Depression 1929-1939, Pierre Burton

⁶ Copies of the fishing reel sections of AL&W catalogs between 1923 and 1971 are now available in the ORCA library courtesy of Merrick Burr and Paul Manuel.

⁷ Proquest Historical Newspapers, Pg. B6, Classified Ad, - No Title, The Globe and Mail, Mar 30, 1962

1962 Toronto City Directory continues to show Sands Tools Ltd at 35 Carlaw but under a new president, Lorne John Nichol, with H. Mavety listed as secretary treasurer. The same company name continued to be listed at that address with Nichol as president until 1966 at which time there were no further listings for SANDS Tools Ltd or *any* business at 35 Carlaw Ave, Toronto. So apparently that was the latest possible year for the company relating to fly reels marked MFG BY SANDS TORONTO.

Lorne J. Nichol was a tool and die maker as well as an engineer⁸. The Nichol family originally came from St. Catherine's, ON. On Nov 20, 1944, at the age of 28 years old, Lorne J. Nichol, *a Canadian*, enlisted in the U.S. Army at Buffalo, NY to go and fight in WWII. On the enlistment form it describes him as being born in 1916, married, with one year of college and his civil occupation was listed as "Toolmaker, Die Sinker and Setter".⁹

While president at SANDS, Lorne Nichol lived on Parkside Ave in the High Park area of Toronto. He was characterized in an interview with his daughter-in-law as having a large number of somewhat secretive business connections, especially in the U.S. At one time Lorne Nichol operated his own company named after the middle name of his son Brian Jeffrey Nichol (e.g. Jeffrey Industries) but Preeti Nichol (nee Sen)¹⁰ stated that she was unable to find out anything about that company either. It makes one wonder if, like the prior SANDS discussion, nothing is being found about their products because there was some sort of military contractor activity.

Preeti Nichol had not heard of SANDS prior to the telephone interview and unfortunately did not know anything about the reels being researched. She added: "There are no reels in the closet" but she admitted that she had not yet gone through everything from her father-in-law's estate and said she would advise if pictures of the factory or documents relevant to the reels turn up. Lorne John Nichol passed away in Huntsville, ON, on December 27, 2012¹¹ in his 97th year.

Maybe SANDS was just a small company or perhaps they were a military contractor that had to operate below the radar, or both. Surely they were reasonably successful, though, as SANDS was listed in Toronto City Directories continuously for

⁸ Telephone interview conducted by Paul Manuel on Sept 19, 2015 with Preeti Nichol, of Bracebridge, ON, the daughter-in-law of Lorne John Nichol.

⁹ Enlistment Record of Lorne J. Nichol, U.S. World War II Army Enlistment Records, 1938-1946, Ancestry.com (courtesy of Ken Kerr).

¹⁰ Obituary of Brian Jeffrey Nichol – The Toronto Star, Dec. 13, 2010 (Sadly, this son died before his father).

¹¹ Obituary of Lorne John Michael, The Toronto Star, Dec.20, 2012.

a span of 24 years between the end of the Great Depression⁵ and “Canada’s Centennial of Confederation¹².”

THE FASCINATING SANDS SKELETON *REELS*

While the foregoing company history of SANDS in Toronto does not give any manufacturing dates within the 1943 to 1966 range for the often-seen single-action, raised-pillar skeleton fly reels, there are some clues in the construction of the reels themselves.

Only one general style of SANDS reel has been found although with a few variants. Most of the variants the author has seen look the same from a distance but when you only see one of these reels at a time and with no catalogs or product ads to compare, there is no way to know that there are design differences among their skeleton fly reels. In this author’s own collection of four SANDS reels, the many variations suggest mass production over a number of years.

(Referring to the pictures) Examples #1 and #2 are made of Nickel-Plated Brass (NPB), markedly shinier and corrosion-free compared to examples 3 and 4. There are minor differences between Examples #1 and #2 that are the shapes of the counterbalances and the shapes of the clicker switches. However, both of these examples have the same weight and dimensions: 4.94 oz. (140g), 2 ¾” diameter (excluding raised pillars) and spool width of ¾”.

Both Examples #1 and #2 have common tool marks where the tab/slot foot assembly has been connected. There are circular tool swirls around the 4 cut-off reel-foot tabs on each reel. Example #3 shows evidence of a much cruder, manual strike approach to force the foot-tabs to hold in the slots, leading this Author to believe it is the earliest model of the reel among the available four specimens.

Example #3 is not shiny at all and has a bit of surface corrosion. According to a consultation this Author had with reel materials expert and ORCA member Don Champion, example #3 has been made with either a gunmetal or satin finish versus the shiny NPB material seen in examples #1 and #2. Example #3 has the exact same dimensions as Examples #1 and #2 but is slightly lighter at 4.66 oz. (132 g) than the nickel-plated brass materials used in Examples #1 and #2.

Examples #3 and #4 are significantly different from Examples #1 and #2 because the clicker switches are mounted on opposite sides of the back-plate e.g. effectively making left-hand (LH) and right-hand (RH) models. This LH/RH variation in the

¹² Robert Fulford on July 1, 1967: The Greatest Day of them all, National Post, June 20, 2012.

case of Example #3 was no accident as it would have been impossible to make Example #3 by mistake in reverse of the design of #1 and #2.

Example #4 is significantly different from all the other examples. Firstly, it is made of aluminum, including the clicker switch and grasp. In contrast, all of the other examples in this study group have white painted wooden grasps (in various states of deterioration). Also, the aluminum version has a full one-inch wide spool that is 25% wider than the other 3 examples yet it weighs only 48% of the heavier NPB versions, thus noticeably lighter but with greater line capacity. The foot-tab finish is much cleaner on the aluminum version than on the other examples possibly due to improved precision or the less hard metal, or for both of these reasons combined.

The clicker assembly on Example #4 is radically different than the other 3 models that have traditional 2-pin spring assemblies, on-off single axis clicker switches and diamond-on-circle shaped clicker tongues. By comparison, on Example #4 the clicker switch floats through a 2 axis "L" shaped slot and a simple spring is used to lock it at one or the other end of the "L" slot, to engage or disengage the clicker tongue which in this example is a simple triangular shape. This more sophisticated lighter weight aluminum design is obviously the most recent model from among the available examples reviewed.

SANDS FISHERMAN SPRING SCALES

We know from examples found that SANDS not only made fly reels but also fisherman's spring scales, marked with a different version of the maker name: SANDS TOOLS TORONTO. This aluminum reel may be from the same time period as the SANDS aluminum fish scales. At least 2 versions of the scales exist, differentiated by 'Not legal for trade' marked on some but not others. Again, this points to a long duration of production involving multiple design changes.

CONCLUSION

All of the SANDS skeleton reel examples are clearly built for economy with a variety of materials used over time, ease of manufacture and low cost production. By the same token, these reels provided the average fisherman with sufficient functionality to catch fish day-in and day-out without breaking down. This type of reel was mostly used to store line (whether a fly-line or braid or mono for ice fishing). Use of the reel's grasp to reel in a larger fish on occasion was available if needed.

SANDS fly reels and scales are interesting yet inexpensive items for collectors of Canadian vintage fishing tackle and now that this reel maker has finally been uncovered, SANDS TOOLS LIMITED of Toronto may find its own small place in the history of reel makers.

Check out pictures and information about SANDS and other Canadian marked reels at www.reelyoldreels.com