

Isaac and His Contraption



Isaac Singer

By Steve Hathcock © 2013

We've all heard stories or have personal experience of not buying something when the price was right; and there are many of us here on South Padre Island who lament the fact that at one time they could have bought an acre of land for \$500 or a large beachfront tract for as little as \$2500. But opportunity is not always easily recognized. Our story begins in the spring, of 1851. William A. Townsend was a successful book publisher with a stable of writers that included such literary giants as James Fennimore Cooper whose "last of the Mohicans" inspired a slow building of recognition for the plight of the American Indians to Frank G Forrester a rod and

gun writer whose exploits were told and retold all across the country. One day a tall burly man dressed in shabby clothes and carrying the model of his newest machine came to his office and to the intense irritation of Townsend, proceeded to extol the virtues of his new device which was an improvement on Elias Howe's sewing machine. In its current design, the man, whose first name was Isaac explained, Howe's machine was very unreliable and was prone to breakdown. He himself had redesigned the machine in such a way that it would become one of the greatest mechanical improvements of the age but he had not the means to secure the patent and put it in the market. All he needed to perfect his patent was \$500. In exchange for the money, he offered Townsend a half interest in all the profits he (the inventor) was sure to make. Isaac was no stranger to Townsend. Just a few years earlier he had patented an improvement in the manufacturing of movable type made from wood. Townsend's career had taken a great leap about that time due in part to Isaac's invention which greatly enhanced the speed of production and also reduced the cost of printing. Townsend was not interested though, books were his business and besides, if the truth were known Townsend felt uncomfortable with the way the man was practically begging for the money. Stating he "had not time for such a project," Townsend sent Isaac and his contraption away. Dejectedly, Isaac took his machine and left. He returned a couple of days later and asked Townsend to reconsider his proposition but Townsend was adamant, if the machine could not be used in the printing industry then he, Townsend was not interested. Pondering his dilemma as he walked the streets of New York City, Isaac miraculously found himself face to face with his long-lost brother, John

Singer. After a great deal of conversation, Isaac said, "So there is my story brother. I am broke and to keep my share of the partnership, I must raise \$500." Reaching into a leather money belt strapped around his waist, John removed a thick sheave of bank notes and peeled off the amount asked. "Here brother," John said, nonchalantly as he handed the bills to Isaac, "good luck to you for I am off to the Texas frontier."

ADVERTISEMENTS.

An advertisement for Singer Sewing-Machines. The illustration is framed and divided into two scenes. On the left, a horse-drawn wagon with a driver and a passenger is moving towards the right. In the background, a large industrial factory with multiple chimneys is visible. On the right, a man in a suit and hat stands next to a Singer sewing machine, presenting it to a family consisting of a woman, a man, and a young child. The child is sitting on the floor, looking up at the machine. The overall scene is set in a domestic interior.

FROM MAKER TO USER.

Singer Sewing-Machines cannot be obtained through department stores or merchandise dealers; they are delivered directly from maker to user only through our own employees. They are offered to the public on their intrinsic merits as the best device obtainable for family sewing.

CAN YOU TRY ONE FREE?
CERTAINLY. Deliver it at your door, in our own wagon, upon application to any of our offices, located in every city in the world.

EITHER LOCK-STITCH OR CHAIN-STITCH
ANY STYLE OF CABINET WORK.

Sold for Cash, or Leased.
Old Machines Exchanged.

SINGER SEWING-MACHINES
ARE SOLD ONLY BY

THE SINGER MFG. CO.

(After the meeting with his brother John finished his own business in New York City and boarded the first steamer to New Orleans, There he loaded his wife and their new child aboard the Alice Sadell, a three-masted schooner and set sail

for Texas. In the meantime, unable to reach a settlement, Elias Howe sued Isaac and his partners for patent infringement.



The lawsuit revolved around one issue. Like Howe's machine, the Singer Sewing Machine used thread from two different sources. Isaac Singer's improvement consisted of a needle with its eye at the point which when the machine was engaged, would push the thread through the fabric, thus creating a loop on the opposite side. Then a sliding shuttle slipped the thread through the loop. The returning needle drew the thread tight which created a perfect lockstitch. The outcome of the whole affair rested in the hands of Judge Sprague of Massachusetts who announced his ruling one fine day in 1852, stating "The plaintiff's patent is valid and the defendant's machine is an infringement" A settlement was soon reached between Howe and Singer. All agreed that Isaac Singer was by far the greater promoter and the Singer Sewing machine, patent infringement aside, was the superior machine. Finally, the two sides agreed that Singer and

Company would manufacture and distribute the machine and Howe would be paid a royalty of five dollars for each one sold. The new machine would aptly be called, "The Singer Sewing Machine." Ironically, Townsend's fortunes would wane while Singer's soared. Upon his death Isaac Singer's net worth was estimated to be somewhere around fifteen million while Townsend died almost a pauper. Prologue: New York City:



Early sewing machine

1853. A large wooden crate is delivered to the wharves in New York City where it is placed in the hold of a steamship bound for the Gulf of Mexico. The packing label reads, To Captain John Singer and wife, General delivery, Brazos Santiago, Texas. This was the first Singer Sewing Machine delivered to Texas. Several years later, John Singer received another packet containing a bank draft for \$150,000. The money was from Isaac Singer and would not be the last such payment he made to his brother. John Singer and his lost treasure has become a Padre Island legend.