

The Rhodes of Kalamazoo

Bill Sonnett

Author's note: Fortunately for today's student of the history of the Rhodes family's involvement in early tackle development, Jay Rhodes was called as a witness in 1913 in the patent suit between Shakespeare and Pflueger. The court recorded 16 pages of testimony in which Jay gave definite dates and circumstances in which he and his nephew Fred Rhodes entered the tackle business and proceeded in their efforts. That testimony along with other court documents have been used to make the following account as accurate as possible.

The Kalamazoo Michigan area contains many natural lakes that at the turn of the last century drew vacationers and fishermen by train from Chicago and Detroit. Much of the development in early baitcasting tackle took place in the surrounding area. The Kalamazoo Casting Club held contests in accuracy and distance using fly-fishing tackle. Contests were also held using the newly developed "short baitcasting rod." Locally, William Locher and Tilden Robb have been credited with the creation of the "short baitcasting rod" and they were sold as "L&R" branded rods. The rods were very short by the standards of the day and were outfitted with oversized line guides made from bicycle spokes, and the first ones sported handles made from bicycle handlebar grips. William Locher, a prominent sporting goods entrepreneur and dealer, had also been involved in the bicycle manufacturing business. His name appears over and over on patents having to do with the manufacture of fishing tackle, including William Shakespeare's wooden and aluminum "Revolution" baits.

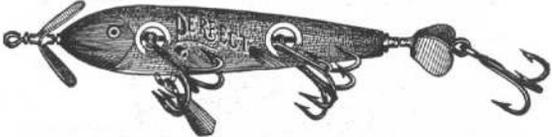
In 1902 a 28-year-old fisherman, machinist and bicycle repairman in Kalamazoo, Michigan worked on perfecting his own version of the newly popular "wooden minnows" used in baitcasting. His name was Fred Rhodes and toward the end of 1902 he achieved what he was looking for and christened it the "Perfect Casting Minnow." He began producing the Perfect Casting Minnow in December of 1902 in anticipation of the 1903 season. He filed for a patent for his bait in December of 1903.

During this same period, Jay B. Rhodes, who was Fred's uncle and a nationally known trouble shooter for the Austin Manufacturing Company, decided that he too would take advantage of the growing enthusiasm over wooden minnows and try his hand at making a better product. Jay was only nine years older than his nephew but had achieved great success as a machinist and as a manufacturing problem solver. Jay was also an inventor who eventually held many patents in diverse

fields. Though a lifelong avid sportsman, Jay was destined to spend less than two years manufacturing fishing tackle under the name "Kalamazoo Tackle Company."

Jay's first commercial wooden minnow effort started sometime late in 1903 and he was geared up to produce and sell his first bait in 1904.

...THE...
RHODES' PERFECT CASTING MINNOW



BEST BAIT ON EARTH.
STEEL RING, TIPS AND GUIDES.
ROD WINDING AND REPAIRING.
CASTING RODS MADE TO ORDER. BICYCLE REPAIRING.

FRED. D. RHODES,
115 E. BUSH STREET. TELEPHONE 1735.

Advertising from the 1903 City Directory for Kalamazoo, MI.

THE
"Original Kalamazoo" Bait
TWO BAITS IN ONE



A bait having all of the desirable qualities required of a bait and without objectionable features.
Manufactured in three sizes: No. 1, 60c.; No. 2, 75c.; No. 3, 85c.; 25c. extra each with weedless hooks. Ask your dealer, or will be sent by mail upon receipt of price.

THE KALAMAZOO FISHING TACKLE MFRS.
610 DOUGLAS AVE., KALAMAZOO, MICH.

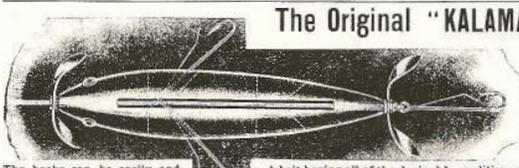
Advertising from the May, 1904 *National Sportsman*.

He called this bait the “Kalamazoo.” Collectors today refer to it as the “Kalamazoo String Minnow.” It was unique in that the angler’s line passed through the wooden body and was tied to the treble hook at the rear end of the bait. Along the way, the line passed through the eyes of the side hooks which were inserted into the wooden body through the holes provided for them. A slot sawed lengthwise down the middle of the back of the wooden bait was supposed to make the line installation easy. Though advertising indicated this was easily done, “without the aid of tools,” anyone who has attempted to re-string a Kalamazoo Minnow knows what a difficult task it is. This explains why many Kalamazoo Minnows have been found with a piece of wire (installed by a frustrated fisherman) running through the bait rather than string. Also, silk casting line at the time had a reputation for wearing out in a hurry, especially the last 20 inches or so at the end of the line. Should the line break, all the hooks would come loose from the bait, necessitating a repeat of the challenging restringing process.

Before leaving for the 1904 World’s Fair where he was to represent the Austin Machine Company, Jay secured permission from them to display his Kalamazoo Minnow while manning their display. The rules of the World’s Fair prevented him from selling his bait to the public at the event but he did give away some free samples to prospective dealers. He marked these examples and included a small paper describing the bait. At least one of these sample baits with accompanying paperwork has been found. Jay recognized the better points of his nephew Fred’s Perfect Casting Minnow and bought the patent rights to the Perfect Casting Minnow from Fred before attending the Fair. He entered into an agreement with Fred whereby Fred would continue to produce the Perfect Casting Minnow and share in the profits. Jay realized that there were manufacturing problems associated with the Perfect Casting Minnow. The flat body was time-consuming and expensive to produce and in order to change the hooks on the bait, one was expected to straighten the line tie at the front of the bait and withdraw the steel rod which passed through the split rings on which the hooks were hung. This second problem was soon solved by Jay when he had Fred switch to long screw eyes at each end of the bait that could be partially withdrawn and the split rings released.

ADVERTISEMENTS. 479

The Original “KALAMAZOO” Bait.



The hooks can be easily and quickly changed without aid of knife or tools.

PRICES:

No. 1..... 60 cents
 No. 2..... 75 cents
 No. 3..... 85 cents

Equipped with 3 weedless hooks, 25 cents extra each bait.

A bait having all of the desirable qualities required of a bait, and without objectionable features. The “KALAMAZOO” can be used with any style of hook—single, double, treble, or weedless. Ask your dealer for them, or send prepaid on receipt of price.

THE KALAMAZOO FISHING TACKLE MFRS., 610 Douglas Ave., KALAMAZOO, MICH.

AN EXCELLENT CASTING BAIT.

IN the new Kalamazoo trolling and casting device the hooks can be easily changed without the aid of a knife or tools. The spinners are also detachable by pulling out at the ends and can be used independently at the head or rear of any live or artificial bait as may be desired. This bait is designed to be threaded on the fishing line that the angler uses, the line to pass through the body of bait and tied to the rear hooks, in order to allow the free drawing of the hooks to any desired distance from the body of the bait. Further particulars of the makers, the Kalamazoo Fishing Tackle Manufacturers, Kalamazoo, Mich.



Views from the back and from underneath a very fine example of a five-hook Kalamazoo Minnow from the collection of Floyd Hill. Note the holes into which the fisherman inserts the hooks of his choosing. The line from the fisherman’s reel passes through the front of the bait then through the eye of each hook before exiting the rear., and an additional hook is then tied on the line, holding the whole affair together.



So many Kalamazoo Minnows have been found with various pieces of wire running through them that for many years collectors debated whether they came that way or whether a fisherman had inserted the wire. This advertisement from the May 1904 issue of *Sports Afield*, courtesy of Jerry Martin, features an x-ray view of the bait with the string running through it. The same magazine contained the write-up shown here, which removes any doubt as to how the bait was rigged and gives some alternative possibilities as far as using the spinners with live bait.

While in court in 1913, he testified that he acquired the long screw eyes from the Heddon Company. The need to use a more economically produced round wood body presented a bigger problem as available split rings were so large that a hole in the round body big enough to accommodate them would weaken the body. This was solved by Jay with the invention of an elongated split ring-like hook hanger, which collectors have named the “Gem Clip” because it somewhat resembles the commercial brand of paper clip by that name. Jay invented this new hook hanger in his spare moments while working at the World’s Fair and indicated in court testimony that when the fair was over (1 December 1904) he returned home and never produced another Kalamazoo Minnow.

Bert had been in the bicycle manufacturing business and like Jay, was an accomplished machinist and inventor. His frog was made of molded rubber and was sold by the Kalamazoo Tackle Company in 1905.



Jay Rhodes patented a wooden version of the Rhodes Mechanical Frog. It proved too difficult to mass produce. Jay’s brother Bert “improved” the frog by making it out of rubber. The frog was for sale as early as 1905. Jay was a person who bought patents from other folks including Fred and Bert. Those common oil bottles we see at shows that say “JB Rhodes” were actually invented and patented by Bert, but Jay purchased the patent from Bert. We suspect that Jay bought the rights to the rubber frog from Bert and as part of the sale to Shakespeare, Bert had to go back and file for a patent after the sale to clear up any confusion as to legal ownership. The frog pictured here (courtesy of Joe Stagnitti) is an early example with a round lead weight on the belly. Shakespeare changed the shape of the lead weight early on to be more tapered, perhaps to more easily shed weeds when retrieved.



These Fred Rhodes Perfect Casting Minnows are beautiful examples. Note the steel rod running lengthwise through the bait. According to court testimony, one was expected to straighten the line tie and draw the rod back through the bait to facilitate changing hooks. Photo of the five-hooker courtesy of Morphy’s Auction. Photo of three-hooker courtesy of Lang’s Auction.

Upon returning from the World's Fair, Jay went immediately to his lawyers to file for a patent on his new hook hangers. The lawyers convinced him that this was unnecessary as he already owned Fred’s patent which used split rings inside the wooden body to hold the hooks and they felt that he had merely modified (elongated) the split ring. This decision not to file for a patent led to one of the longest protracted lawsuits in fishing tackle history when Pflueger patented Jay’s design for the elongated split ring. Luckily the testimony of Jay Rhodes during that trial left us a detailed history of the events chronicled here. At this same time (December 1904) Jay filed for a patent on a wooden mechanical frog bait that he had been working on, but which ultimately proved too complicated to be mass produced. This frog design was later “improved” by Jay’s younger brother Bert O. Rhodes.

For the season of 1905, Jay's new wooden minnow was to be simply called "The Rhodes" and it would be the first-ever round bodied wooden minnow using what we now know as Gem Clip hook hardware. Though Jay had placed several ads for the Kalamazoo minnow in 1904, advertising for the 1905 "Rhodes" is nearly impossible to find. It does appear in the 1905 VL&A catalog and two different sets of box papers or flyers have been found.



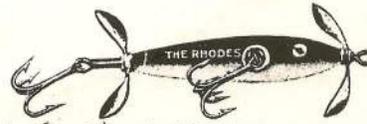
This beautiful example of the 1905 Rhodes Minnow is from the collection of Floyd Hill. This is the earliest bait to use "gem clip" hardware. Jay Rhodes invented this hardware while at the 1904 Worlds Fair. He hired Fred Rhodes to assemble and paint the baits. The close-up view of this bait shows gill marks that are nearly identical to those that Fred painted on the Perfect Casting Minnow. Also, the flat-rimmed brass liners where the hooks are attached are the same as those on the Perfect Casting Minnow. Fred hand-painted the bait as he had done on the Perfect Casting Minnow. When William Shakespeare bought the rights to the bait in October of 1905, he mentioned that he did not care for the paint jobs. Shakespeare began to produce his own version of the round-bodied "Shakespeare-Rhodes Minnow" in 1906. Shakespeare's baits were spray painted with blush chins and raise-rimmed hole liners.



The Kalamazoo Fishing Tackle Co.



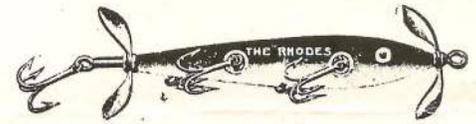
THE RHODES



No. 1, 60 Cents.

PATENTS ALLOWED.

THE RHODES



No. 2, 75 Cents.

Awarded gold medal at the World's Fair, St. Louis, Mo., 1904, on their Artificial Minnows and Mechanical Swimming Frog, Automatic Line Spooling Attachment for reels. Baits, Casting Rods, and Line Governors that prevent backlash. We guarantee that any inexperienced person using these attachments can enjoy this mode of fishing as well as an expert.

Our Bait Casting Rods also hold the world's record for long distance, won by Ernest Bartholomew in an open tournament given at Chicago, Sept. 17th, 1904.

On receipt of a two cent stamp we would be pleased to send you our 1905 catalogue, which gives full details of past and present records of bait casting, also how to bait cast.

We guarantee that the above goods are superior to any goods on the market. A trial will convince the most skeptical fisherman.



Advantages of the Rhodes Minnow Over All Others.

- 1st.—It is the most effective and attractive artificial minnow on the market.
- 2nd.—The hooks cannot tangle or mar the body of the bait.
- 3rd.—The hooks can be easily and quickly changed when so desired by turning the screw-eyes at the front or rear to the left in which the patent hook fasteners are attached.
- 4th.—This bait can be used with single, double, triple or weedless hook, as desired.
- 5th.—The spinners are detachable and quickly removed and can be used at the front and rear of any other lure.
- 6th.—The body portion is chemically treated and guaranteed never to shrink or swell.

Ask your dealers for them or we will send them prepaid to any address on receipt of price.

KALAMAZOO FISHING TACKLE CO.

610 Douglas Ave.

KALAMAZOO, MICH.

Though Jay Rhodes placed several ads in 1904 for the Kalamazoo Minnow, no magazine ads have been seen for Jays Rhode's Minnow despite the efforts of many researchers. The author is aware of two different box papers. The one reproduced here is courtesy of Randy Anderson.

Across town in Kalamazoo, William Shakespeare Jr. headed up one of the more successful and growing fishing reel manufacturing companies in the country. He also manufactured baits made from aluminum and hard rubber but was a Johnny come lately as far as the wooden minnow market. He introduced the so-called “Patent Minnow” in 1904. That wooden bait was very complicated to produce and was not a popular seller. One of the reasons the Shakespeare Company was so successful for so many years was William Shakespeare’s ability to recognize and acquire good ideas. The 1908 acquisition of Walter Marhoff’s single-threaded shaft levelwind is one example. He also recognized Jay Rhodes’ 1905 “Rhodes” minnow as a superior idea and approached Jay with the intention of buying the Kalamazoo Tackle Company along with its patents and the rights to the Rhodes name. Jay sold everything to Shakespeare in October of 1905. He was out of the tackle business for good. This sale came as a surprise to Fred Rhodes who (according to court testimony) was none too happy with his Uncle. This sale also made it necessary that Bert file for a patent as soon as possible (two weeks later) for the rubber version of the Rhodes Mechanical Frog as it was part of the sale. I’m sure William Shakespeare, as an astute businessman, wanted there to be no doubt as to who owned the rights to the frog.

This acquisition by William Shakespeare has caused much confusion among collectors over the years as Shakespeare continued to use the names “Rhodes” and “Kalamazoo Tackle Company” for many years for its second quality line of products. The baits and reels made by Shakespeare under the names “Rhodes” and “Kalamazoo Tackle Co” were all made after 1905 and are far more common than those made by Fred or Jay Rhodes.



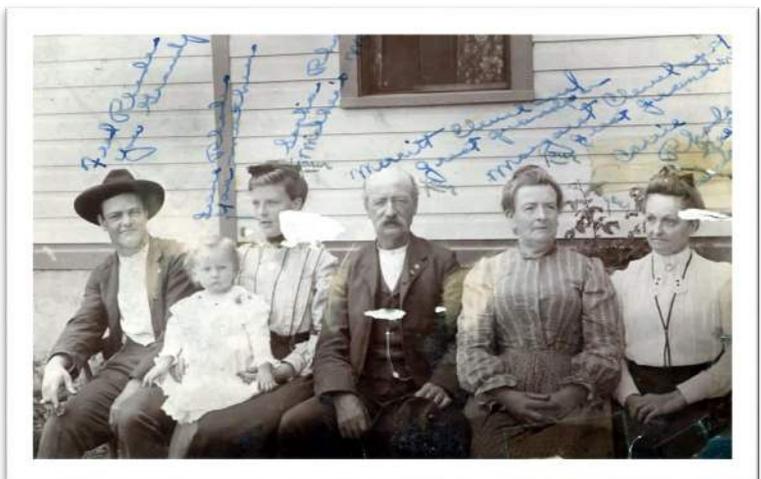
Fred Rhodes and first wife Sophie with a very respectable string of fish. Sophie was also an accomplished tournament caster, taking first place in the women’s bait casting division at the 1906 tournament.



The “boys” go fishing in Jay Rhodes’ 1907 Cadillac Victoria. This photo shows Bert O. Rhodes in the driver’s seat and Jay B. Rhodes sitting in the right front seat. Fred Rhodes is sitting closest in the rear seat next to Fred’s father Irvine.



A portrait of Fred Rhodes at age 20.



Fred and Sophie Rhodes on the left with his in-laws, the Cleavelands.



ed - 7-mis old Mich
 Rev. St. Hayes



Left: Jay B. Rhodes after a successful hunting trip with what appears to be a bag of Sharp-Tailed Grouse. Top: Jay Rhodes, Bert, Jay's wife Florence and adopted son Walt Stafford. Walt was one of eight adopted children of Jay and Florence Rhodes. This photo was probably taken at his Gun Lake cottage. Middle: The old Rhodes homestead. Bottom right: A young Fred Rhodes and his mother Celia.

The Rhodes family photographs included in this article have never been published anywhere to my knowledge. They were all provided by friend and fellow researcher Eric Jeska of Kalamazoo, Michigan. In addition to being a meticulous researcher of the lives of both William Shakespeare Jr. and Walter Marhoff, he is the grandson of William Shakespeare Jr. I have benefitted greatly from Eric's generosity over the years. On his first visit to my home many years ago he arrived with his grandfather's tackle box. Later, he invited me to inspect the materials in storage at the Michigan State University Museum that were donated by the Shakespeare Company many years ago. This included the small jeweler's lathe on which William Shakespeare Jr made his first reels in the 1890s.

Eric is always on the lookout for early Shakespeare items, so was attracted to a "Shakespeare" fly rod that was listed for sale on eBay. The rod was obviously very early but the pictures did not show any Shakespeare identifying marks. He contacted the seller, an elderly man, who when asked how he knew the rod was Shakespeare, said that he assumed that it was a Shakespeare as the rod belonged to his grandfather who lived in Kalamazoo and who knew William Shakespeare. Imagine Eric's surprise when he asked the gentleman what his grandfather's name was. The answer was "Fred Rhodes." Eventually, Eric established that the gentleman had no descendants and that he owned his grandfather's photo album. Eric was able to acquire the album and as students of tackle history, we are all the richer for it. Oh yes, the fly rod turned out to be not just any old bamboo rod, but a 10' 7-3/4" 7-1/2 oz. Morton rod that Fred used in the 1906 Casting tournament in Kalamazoo, casting against such notables as Reuben Leonard, Edward Mills, and John Waddell. A tangible connection to that historic event!

Fred D Rhodes died in Sturgis Michigan on 23 May 1934 at age 60, Jay B Rhodes died in Kalamazoo Michigan 12 October 1931 at age 66, and Bert O Rhodes died in Vicksburg Michigan 2 March 1943 at age 73.