

INTRODUCTION

“Arose and tried to shave myself with a razor so dull that every time I scraped my face it looked as if I were in the throes of *cholera morbus*. By shaving often I, to a certain extent circumvent the diabolical malignity of these razors.”

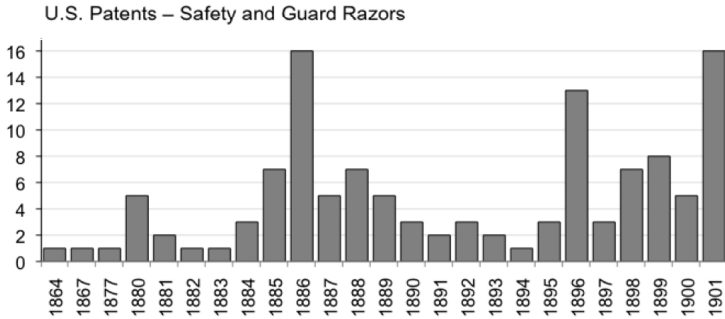
– *From the diary of Thomas A. Edison, July 13, 1885.*

ALTHOUGH EDISON COMPLAINED, he apparently had neither the time nor inclination to devise a less ‘diabolical’ shaving instrument. Other contemporaries of Edison (1847-1931) did pursue a solution. Between 1864 and December 3, 1901, when King Camp Gillette applied for his patent, about 120 razor guard or safety razor patents were applied for and granted by the United States Patent Office (see chart). Designs were also patented in Germany, France, and England (and undoubtedly elsewhere). Fashion trends prompted an interest in a safer razor for do-it-yourself shaving. Photographs of American families of the late 1800s show the patriarch with a full beard and his adult sons either clean-shaven or adorned with a variety of mustaches. After the turn of the century, Gillette’s patent inspired an explosion of safety razor creativity – but that is another, much longer, story.

Four milestones stand out in the course of safety razor history: the Perret blade guard (1762), the Henson hoe (1847), the Kampfe Brothers safety razor (1880), and the Gillette flexible double-edge blade (1901). The innovations of Perret and Henson were to be rediscovered several times over the years. On the other hand, the Kampfe razor with a Henson-like narrow forged blade and decorative lather-catcher scoop was widely imitated. Perhaps the design appealed to the Victorian fancy. Of Gillette, much has been said, save for his lesser-known co-innovator, William Nickerson (see Epilogue).

Prior to King Gillette’s epiphany, many inventors, amateur and professional, struggled with the problem of creating a razor safer than the common folding ‘cut-throat’ design. Who were these pre-1901 inventors? A few were famous – most were not. They were cutlers, barbers, farmers, salesmen, engineers, machinists, and business entrepreneurs. Some were part-time tinkerers and others professional inventors. In the United States, many were immigrants (most became US citizens)

or their first-generation descendents, often from Germany, England, and Ireland. Geographically, they ranged from New England to California. One inventor, the mysterious Ruth Ethelinda Gibbs, may be the lone female patent holder. Citizens of Germany, France and England also held US patents.



Number of patents filed each year through 1901. Kampfe Brothers received five of the patents filed in 1886; the first Kampfe patent expired in 1897.

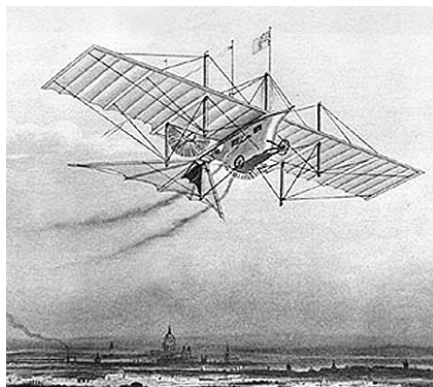
The state of the safety razor art in 1893 was described in a British publication of that year:^{*}

There are, broadly speaking, two kinds of safety razors. One kind consists of a hollow-ground blade about one and a half inches in length, which has a handle like that of a common or garden rake. ... The safety portion of it is a metal comb, the teeth of which just reach a trifle beyond the edge of the razor [blade]. The idea is that the teeth of the comb prevent the razor from penetrating. The little bit of blade is so arranged that it can be removed from the comb, fitted into a back and stropped and it requires stropping and setting [honing] too from time to time, whatever advertisements may say to the contrary. Of this safety razor there are some half a dozen varieties. The other safety razor is in the ordinary form, with a comb guard added ... I am inclined to think that it is the razor of the future.

^{*} Joseph Morton, ed., *The Mysteries, Secrets and Whole Art of an Easy Shave*, (London, 1893), pp. 23-25. Quoted in *Explorations in Entrepreneurial History*, George B. Baldwin (Univ. of Wisconsin, 1951), p. 75.

William Henson's Invention – 1847

Sixty-three years after Perret's death, a former engineer in Somerset England's lace-making industry patented "Improvements in the Construction of Razors for Shaving."



William S. Henson (1812-1888) and the Henson-Stringfellow aerial steam carriage.

William Samuel Henson, born in Leicester in 1812 (some sources give 1805), is best known as an aviation visionary. With John Stringfellow (1799-1883) he designed and patented* a steam-engine-powered airplane they called an "aerial steam carriage." (Then as now, a patent could be obtained without demonstrating that the invention actually worked.) Henson, following his father, became a machinist and engineer in the lace manufacturing business in Somerset, and later, Lambeth. In the 1830s and 1840s, along with several patents on lace-making machinery, Henson obtained patents on improvements in steam engines, hoping to increase their efficiency (and reduce weight). Henson and Stringfellow proposed creating an international airline, the Aerial Transit Company, and tried to lure investors by a publicity campaign complete with illustrations of flights over London and exotic destinations in Egypt, India, and China. Potential investors did not take this vision of international air transport very seriously, and the funds raised were insufficient for the enterprise. Aviation historians have concluded that,

* British Patent No. 9478 (1842).

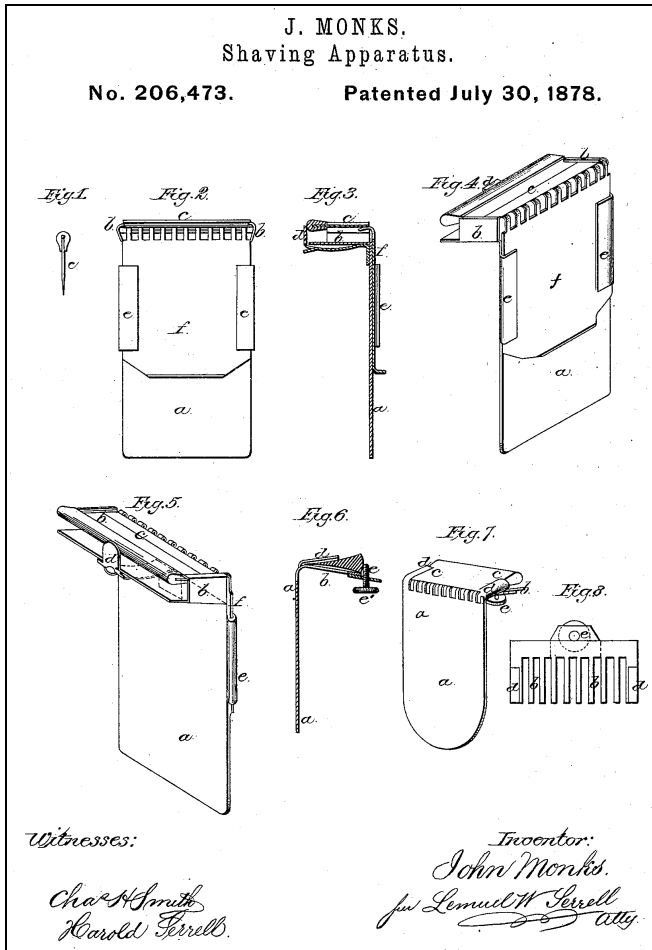
RASOIR À RABOT – THE PIG SCRAPER

Monks' Shaving Apparatus – 1874

AN L-SHAPED GUARD RAZOR using a short single-edge forged blade was described in 1874 and 1875 British patents awarded to John Monks of Gloucester, England. A US patent was issued in 1878. A simple design, it could be made from a single piece of sheet metal. It was “intended for shaving the beard, but may be employed for trimming the hair, or removing the same from the skin of any animal.” Perhaps this wording from the patent suggested the somewhat disrespectful term ‘pig-scraper’ (the French prefer rasoir à rabot) for these L-shaped razors. From the patent: “The guard-plate serves as a gage, that slides over the surface and lessens the risk of injury... The blade is to be removed to any suitable holder while being sharpened or strapped.”

Who was John Monks? The name was, and is, very common in England, so one cannot be certain which of the dozen or so John Monks residing in Gloucester at the time was the razor inventor. Two likely candidates emerge: John Monks, born about 1822 in Huddersfield, Cheshire, and his namesake son, born about 1856 in Gloucester. The John Monks family was recorded in the 1871 census of Barton St. Michel, Gloucester Civil Parish. The elder John was a “hair worker” and

his wife, Caroline, was a “ladies hair cutter.” They had three daughters and a son, also John, then 15, who was “learning hairwork.” In 1874 when the patent was first filed, the senior John Monks would have been about 52 and son John about 18, and either could have had the motivation to invent a safer razor “for shaving the beard ... [or] for trimming the hair.”



206473 – 30 Jul 1878, filed 3 Dec 1877. John Monks, Gloucester, England.
Patented in England, 6 Nov 1874 and 26 Apr 1875.

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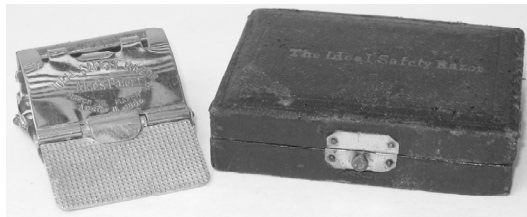
And all leading wholesale and retail hardware houses in the country.

ALOE'S PATENT
 MAR. 16, '86
 MAR. 16, '86
 APRIL 8, '86

The Ideal Safety Razor, November 1886 advertisement.
 For sale by Ideal Safety Razor Company, A. L. Aloe & Co., and Simmons
 Hardware Company, St. Louis, Mo.
 ALOE'S PATENT / MAR 16, '86 / MAR 16, '86 / APRIL 8, '86.



Blade marked ALOE'S IDEAL / SAFETY RAZOR.
 Courtesy of Dave Grant.



Razor marked IDEAL SAFETY RAZOR / Aloe's Patent /
 March 16 March 16 / April 8, 1886.
 Courtesy of Dave Grant.

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