

The Von Glover Ferguson Fish and Alligator Trap

By William Blauser

On October 19, 1926, Von Glover Ferguson of Cedar Grove, Louisiana, a small town south of New Orleans and just east of Barataria Bay, near the equally small town of Jean Lafitte, was granted a patent for an "Automatic Fishhook", being United States Patent #1,604,031 (Figure 1).

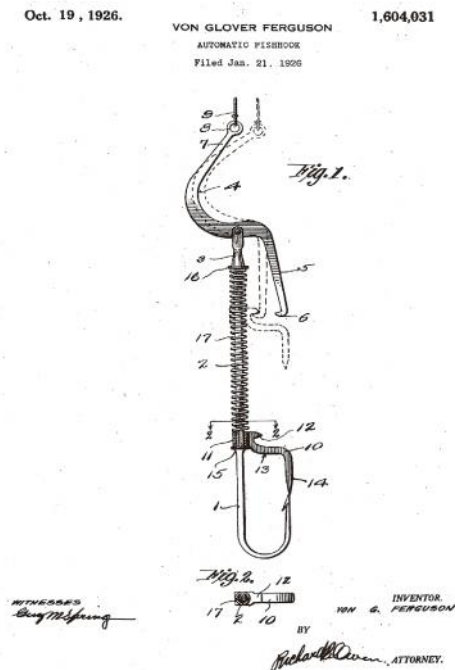


Figure 1. Patent drawing of the Von Glover Ferguson Trap.

Figure 2. Von Glover Ferguson Automatic Fishhook shown in the sprung position.

This spring-loaded metal killer fish trap, as seen in Figures 2 and 2a, and which has a very recognizable silhouette, conforms in every way to the patent description and drawing. It is empowered by a powerful 6" expansile helical spring and measures 12.5 inches in length when in the set position. It is made from cast and hand- forged steel, with the jaw gap of the main stationary barbed fishhook with the elongated shank, that forms the "body" of the trap, measuring 2 inches across. The jaw gap on what the inventor describes as the "sliding spear" portion of the trap, and which is actually a tandem pair of barbless, sharp-as-a-tack hooks, measures 1.5 inches across (Figure 3).

This trap is set by, when referenced to Figure 2, pushing the "sliding spear" portion of the trap, positioned at the bottom of the helical spring, upward past the quarter (which is included for scale). This compresses the spring to a point where the notched vertical stud connected to the "sliding spear" comes into engagement with the notched end (the dog) of the pivotally mounted, curved arm whose other end is the line tie. These 2 notches then interconnect by a slight rotation of the curved arm and are held together by the tension of the spring, thus setting the trap. When in this engagement, even a slight downward pressure on the bait hook serves to rotate the curved arm outward so as to disengage it from the "sliding spear" , which is then forced downward into the top of the prey's head.

From the Patent Text: "The spring will then force the spear downwardly upon the shank and drive the spur into the head of the fish, holding the fish in firm engagement with the hook."

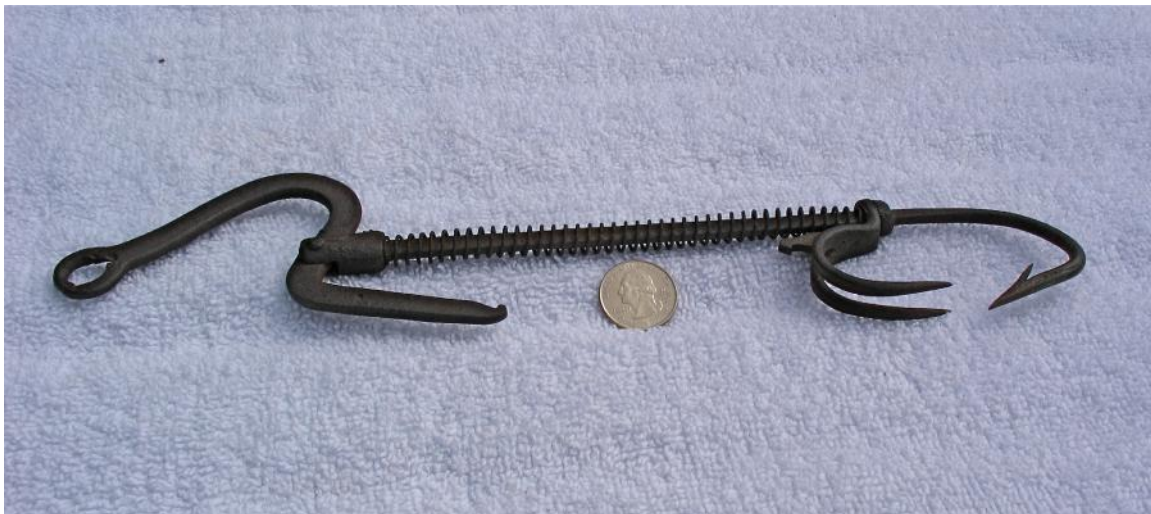


Figure 2a. Von Glover Ferguson Automatic Fishhook alternate view.

The Von Glover Ferguson trap pictured in Figure 4, whose mechanism and construction also matches the patent description and drawing, (as the unique mechanical operation of a devise is what allows that devise to be patented), is 9" longer and 10 times more massive than the trap shown in Figure 2. It has an unusually thick, heavy, hand-forged "sliding spear" which bears the blacksmith's cartouche of 2 grooved parallel lines, (Figure 5), and a proportionately larger, thick, heavy, hand-forged, barbed, bait hook which appears less intended to be baited with a worm than it would be baited with a chicken (or some similar sized chunk of flesh). Clearly, given it's much larger mass and size, *this* trap was meant to be used with a different prey in mind than the relatively small Von Glover Ferguson Fish Trap shown in Figure 2, and which are shown together in Figure 6 as means of comparison.



Figure 3. Close-up of the "sliding spear" on Glover Von Ferguson's Automatic Fishhook.

The majority of independent conclusions, (including my daughter Sarah and her college roommate Sasha), from advanced collectors, when asked to interpret the intent of this trap, and the general consensus among trap collectors who have seen and handled these 2 traps, is that the larger one as seen in Figure 4 was intended to trap alligators. This trap would most likely have been deployed in a manner similar to certain German wolf traps from the late 1700's which were suspended from tree limbs above the ground, while this trap would most likely have been intended to be suspended over the water, and not submerged, lest minnows or turtles or other small fish eat the bait (personal communication Tom Parr). Different means of hooking alligators can be seen in some current television shows based on living,

hunting and trapping in the swamps of the southern United States (Swamp People for one, Duck Dynasty another), but it is thought by some current skilled trappers whom the author has spoken with, that this trap may in fact have proved more effective in securing a large alligator than would a simple fish hook of standard design.

Figure 7 shows more detail of the....from the patent text...”bifurcated cap upon which is pivotally secured the trigger member” of the Alligator Trap.

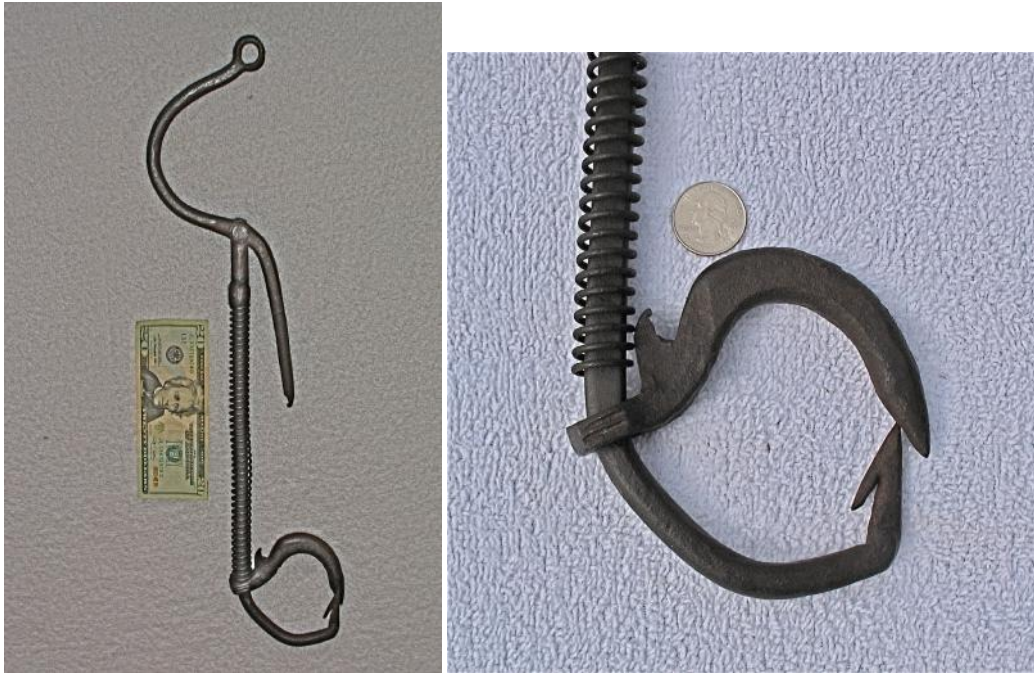


Figure 4. Von Glover Ferguson Alligator Trap in the sprung position.

Figure 5. Close-up of the “sliding spear” on the Von Glover Ferguson Alligator Trap.

When examined by collectors, it was noted that these 2 traps appeared older than their 1926 patent date would indicate, especially so for the alligator trap, and they may well be. It has been documented in the literature that some fish and animal traps were made and used and refined by their inventor for a period of 50 years or more prior to a patent ever having been applied for by them, and that finally, in old age, they patented their invention either as a way to prevent it from being plagiarized by someone else, or as an act to ensure some type of immortality, or as is often thought by inventors, to reap great wealth for them and their family from their inventive genius.



Figure 6. Von Glover Ferguson's Automatic Fishhook and his Alligator Trap shown side-by-side in a pendant orientation in the sprung position for comparison to each other.

It is also conjectured among a few trap collectors that the smaller "Automatic Fishhook" of Von Glover Ferguson was invented and forged prior to it being realized that a much larger version would be effective for alligators. This author theorizes however, that the reverse was true, and that this trap design was originally conceived in south Louisiana as an alligator trap, and that later, (and possibly decades later), it was scaled down in size so as to be more effective for fish. In doing so the market for selling his trap would have increased greatly, as a fish trap could more readily be sold all over the United States, while a trap patented and produced for alligators only would have a very limited market.



Figure 7. Close-up of the cast steel ..."bifurcated cap upon which is pivotally secured the trigger member", (the fulcrum), portion of the Alligator Trap.

Another possibility exists, though less likely, it being that this alligator trap and this design was in use in south Louisiana as far back as the early 1800's, possibly even pre-dating the Battle of New Orleans with Andrew Jackson in 1812. There would certainly have been no shortage of skilled blacksmiths in New Orleans during this time period capable of making a trap of this construction, whose original design could have come from almost anywhere, since New Orleans was a hub of international trade and ideas at this time. Should this have been the case, and that this style of trap pre-dates the Civil War, it would mean that even though used throughout the swamps of south Louisiana for decades, no one had ever bothered to take the time and spend the money to patent its design. It would not be too hard to

conceive then of a man named Von Glover Ferguson in 1926, who really had no connection to the trap design's true inventor, scaling down the size of this trap so as to be suitable for fish, and applying for and being granted a patent.

Since the author's are the only 2 known examples of a Von Glover Ferguson Trap, (and the only alligator trap of any design), known to exist in the hands of collectors, and with both having only recently been discovered and never documented in the literature before, many questions remain and may not be answered until further information comes to light, (possibly an advertisement in an old outdoor magazine), or other examples of this intriguing, early, patented, hand-forged trap are found.

Should anyone have any other information about these traps or their inventor or their history, or know of the existence of any other than these 2 or any similar traps, the author would very much appreciate being contacted through his webpage....springhook.com....or by email at springhook@comcast.net or by phone at 412-373-8202.