

Petroliana Collecting – Part 1

Gas Pumps

By Bill McIntosh

Introduction

A great companion hobby to antique and classic car collecting is “petroliana” collecting. Petroliana refers to all manner of things associated with the refining and distribution of petroleum. Generally, collectors focus on three major categories: (1) gas pumps, (2) oil cans and (3) signage. However, anything is fair game: for example, I once had a TEXACO credit card machine in my collection. That said, this first article will focus on gas pumps, specifically those in my modest collection.

The Early Gas Pumps

Gas pumps were not really invented but rather evolved. If anyone could be credited with the idea, it had to be John J. Tokheim of Cedar Rapids, Iowa. His manufacturing business started in 1901 and began selling so called “curb pumps” -- those that sat close to a curb in front of a store. In 1913, Gulf Refining Company opened the first “off street” filling station where multiple cars could be filled at one time. Within two years, most major companies were operating their own stations. Stations were generally equipped with simple pumping devices of one kind or another.

While accuracy and honest measure were most important to customers, the question was “how did you know what you were buying and paying for?” This question was answered by a young inventor in 1916. Jack Fleckenstein, a resident of Ionia, Michigan, invented a twin cylinder device that could be adapted to existing pumps. Simple enough, the gas was pumped into a graduated glass cylinder and then, by gravity, the gas was dispensed into the car.



From there, it was easy to imagine the pump and glass cylinder integrated into one unit. In 1917, the Wayne Pump Company offered the first self-contained “visible measure” pump designed as a single unit. Within two years, other manufacturers offered such units and most major oil companies were specifying same. These so-called “visible” gas pumps came into standard use throughout the 1920s. A visible gas pump is shown at the right.

The First Mechanical Pumps

In 1925, manufacturers began experimenting with mechanical measuring pumps. Contrary to visible pumps,

these were pumps that included a sealed, calibrated measuring device. These devices were of a clock-like dial that registered the amount of gas dispensed. These types of pumps are known as “clock-faced” pumps. A typical clock-faced pump is shown on the left.

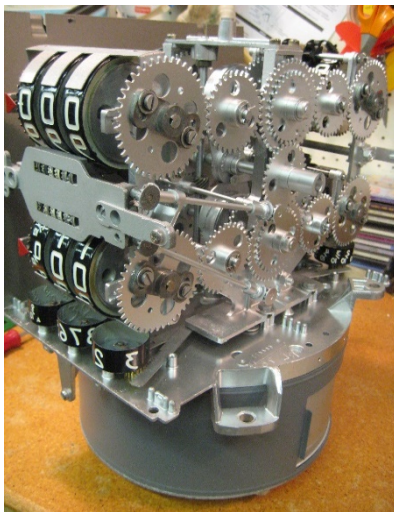


While these pumps calculated the gallons dispensed, they did not calculate the price. Since gas was sold at unusual fractional prices (e.g., 23-9/10 cents per gallon), computing the cost was complex.

In 1934, Wayne technical people solved the problem by inventing the “interlocking price computer.” Entirely mechanical, using a series of gear sets, each revolution the gear train activated gallons and dollar sale indicators simultaneously while a specific price was set.

The Veeder-Root Computer

To my amazement, Wayne licensed their invention to the Veeder-Root Company. With apparent patent protection, this licensee had exclusive rights over any similar type of computer calculator. This “monopoly” meant that all pump manufacturers had to buy or otherwise license this device from the Veeder-



Root Company. Thus, Veeder Root Company manufactured and sold the Veeder Root computer to all manufacturers of gas pumps from the late 1940s into the early 1960s. While I have three different brands of gas pumps (see below) in my collection, all of my pumps have Veeder Root calculators. Of course, the age of transistors brought fully electric calculators and made the Veeder Root calculator obsolete. Still, it was a good run.

At left is a photo of a restored Veeder Root calculator (cover removed). This is one of three I recently had completely refurbished for three Tokheim gas pumps currently under restoration. It and the two others like them were restored by Jerry Goulet of Flint, Michigan. To my knowledge, Jerry is the last living person who restores Veeder Root calculators!

My Gas Pumps

I have had ten (10) gas pumps in my collection for some time. I acquired all of them between 2001 and 2005 from JDT Petroleum located just outside of Philadelphia. JDT Petroleum is in the business of buying old gas pumps of almost any kind. The result is that they have a “gas pump junk yard” with pumps dating back to the 1930s (at least they did at the time). JDT

dismantles old gas pumps and sells them to people who need parts, particularly for pumps that no longer have parts manufactured for them. Much of their business is done with customers in third world countries where lax laws (or none at all) permit the use of very old (and undoubtedly polluting) gas pumps.

Similar to the automobile industry and over the past century, there could have been hundreds of



companies manufacturing some sort of gas pump or another in the 1900s. The first pump I acquired and the first one I restored is a Gilbert & Barker (G&B). The company that evolved out of G&B through a long series of acquisitions is now called Gilbarco-Veeder-Root or simply Gilbarco. The company started in 1902 and changed its name to Gilbarco in 1935. Gilbarco remains one of the few companies to manufacture gas pumps today. Indeed, when you stop to fill up your car, look on the side of the pump and you will likely see a nameplate with the Gilbarco name.

The Gilbarco pump I have is a Model 98 manufactured around 1938, so it probably was in service from the immediate pre-WWII years to well into 1950s and maybe beyond. This is a computing pump with a sight glass in its face. (The sight glass of the “new” computing pumps appears to be a historical remnant going back to the original visible gas pumps). The sight glass allows customers to

visualize the gas as it is being pumped, and most have some kind of “spinner” that twirls as the gas flows by it. When I acquired this pump, it was “dressed” (paint, lettering, etc.) as an Esso Extra. A picture of this pump is to the left. This is a very tall pump, similar to most models from the 1930s and 1940s (with the globe it measures 90 inches). While the globe is a reproduction the pump handle is an original Gilbarco model.

I made three trips to JDT Petroleum. On the first, I acquired my Gilbarco. On the second, I acquired four Bennett pumps. On the last, I acquired five Tokheim pumps. All of the Bennett pumps have had some form of restoration if not a complete one. All of my Bennett pumps in the collection are Model 766. Like Gilbarco, the Bennett Pump Company was one of the major players in the gas pump manufacturing industry of the 18th century. Started in 1919, the company evolved into one selling a variety of gas station service equipment. During the 1940s and 1950s, sales were concentrated in gas pumps. However, the company’s most famous product was the ECO Tireflator (I have one).

The Bennett Model 766 was manufactured and sold from 1948 through the mid-1950s. The only difference between any of mine is that some have a nozzle cover – a hood-like fitting protruding from side where the nozzle tip is stored. The others do not have that feature but rather a simple stainless trim. All feature “ad glass” panels at the bottom of the window, and all have a weight-actuated hose reel feature.



Shown at left, this pump is one of two “matched” Bennett 766 pumps dressed in TEXACO attire, this one being Fire Chief, their regular grade of gas. The most unusual feature of this pump is that the globe on top is an original “black T.” This probably dates back to the 1940s or earlier. It is described as a “black T” because the outline around the letter T (in green) is black. Later in TEXACO’s history, they changed the outline color to white. Note that this pump has not been fully restored yet. A partial restoration was done such that it displayed well and lit up but did not take the effort of a full restoration.



This too is a Bennett 766 and the “match” to the TEXACO Fire Chief Bennett. Again, this pump was partially restored for purposes of display and is dressed as TEXACO Sky Chief, their premium grade of gas. The globe on this pump is a reproduction with a milk glass “frame” to match the Fire Chief pump. Note that both pumps have original porcelain pump signs advertising the fuel to be dispensed from the respective pump.



This Bennett 766 was restored as an Esso regular grade pump. While this could be thought of as the “match” to the Gilbarco Esso Extra pump, a true match would be another Gilbarco 98. This pump has a very large diameter globe on top. I won this original globe at an auction on one of my many trips to look for interesting petroliana. While original (which gives it some value), it probably would best belong on a visible gas pump. Visible pumps were generally large if not massive and very, very tall.



This last Bennett 766 was restored as a “Save More” pump. At one of the many petroliana auctions I attended, I acquired this very original globe that graces the top of the pump. I know little or nothing about this brand other than this is the regular gas pump, and it was probably a brand that appeared in the mid-west in the 1950s.

The last five pumps in my collection are all Tokheim Model 39 pumps. If you remember back to the early part of this article, it was John J. Tokheim who was credited with the idea of the gas pump. Starting his company in the early part of the 18th century his first pump was produced and patented in 1901. Tokheim Company had a long and prolific history. They rode the wave of

all major changes in the industry all the way to the 1960s into the era of transistorized/electric calculators. In 2002, the Tokheim Corporation closed and filed for bankruptcy.

Tokheim produced a large variety of its Model 39 from 1949 through 1959. This pump is one of the most produced and popular of collectors. A least one company has produced full-size replicas of this pump. The majority of my pumps were made in 1950 and, with one notable exception, are the Model 39L-RP. Specifically, the 39L-RP featured rubber to hold the glass, door hinges, hose on a retracting cable and ad panels. All of mine are exactly the same with the exception of the fact that they do not have ad panels.

Of my five Tokheim 39s, one is a modified version that does not have the usual start/shut-off gear. My guess is that it was used in a private setting rather than a commercial gas station. All of these pumps were in pretty bad shape, and, until recently, I was not sure I was going to restore them. But rather than send them to the scrap yard, I thought I could get at least three restored pumps out of the five, using the other two for parts.



Serious work on restoration started over a year ago. One pump is almost finish and shown to the left. This one and another are being restored as Canadian brands (namely “SuperTest” and “Maple Leaf Gasoline”) as a tribute to my native land, Canada. The third is being restored for my brother as a “Sinclair” pump.

By the way, the only major manufacturer of gas pumps that has survived to today, other than Gilbarco, is Wayne, as far as I can determine. Look for the brand name located on the side of the gas pump where you dispense your own gasoline.

References:

1. *An Illustrated Guide to Gas Pumps* by Jack Sim, 2nd Edition, 2008, Krause Publications (I believe a 3rd edition has been published)
2. *Gas Pump Collector's Guide* by Scott Benjamin & Wayne Henderson, 1996 MBI Publishing Company