

Coleman Howe

For some years, a number of articles and postings have repeated a long-told story that Howe Brothers copied the Coleman Motors patent for their own Howe-Coleman front-drive axle, made sufficient minor changes, was granted their own unique patent, and Coleman Motors then sued Howe Brothers in open court over what Coleman perceived to be "patent infringements." Additionally, at least one article even reported that John Howe had actually "teamed up with Al Coleman and Harley [sic] Holmes in developing the first Coleman truck."

- None of the has ever sounded quite right to me, so I decided to dig a little deeper, using both original Coleman/American Coleman and Howe Brothers company files and correspondence.

As has often been documented, Howe Brothers of near Troy, New York, were among the major East Coast distributors of Coleman Motors trucks from about 1929 to 1950. Some sources go on to suggest they were actually the "exclusive Coleman distributorship for East of the Mississippi," but this just isn't true. Official Coleman distributorship listings show at least (10) other Coleman Motors authorised distributorships in the general Northeast region, located in CT, ME, MA, NH, NJ, NY, and PA. (Howe Brothers were did not hold "exclusive" rights to the New York" sales territory.

In the mid-late 1940's, second-generation brothers John and Frank Howe realized it actually may be cheaper to "in-house" fabricate several components of the authorized "Coleman Motors Front Drive Axle Kits," resulting in significant savings when purchasing the otherwise complete "conversion kits" from Coleman, while also improving the Howe Brothers's "bottom line." Coleman Motors soon realized that Howe Brothers were now substituting "unauthorized" non-Coleman components in what were being advertised and sold as true "Coleman Conversions," and promptly cancelled the Howe Brothers distributorship license effective in about December of 1950, while also threatening legal action. In addition to the very obvious "proprietary interests" regarding Howe Brothers apparently "infringing" on the pre-existing Coleman patents for the various components, Coleman, very understandably, also did not want to accidentally be honoring warranties for "unauthorized" components they did not even manufacture.

Accordingly, Howe Brothers made what they believed were sufficient minor modifications (primarily to how the power yoke attaches to the compensating ring) to justify applying for their own "Howe-Coleman" patent, but in spite of a thick volume of applications, denials, re-applications, and supplements, the U.S. Patent office denied all applications as not being significantly "different" from the original Coleman patent, and never actually granted a separate patent to Howe-Coleman for their somewhat modified axle design. The extended patent application process, filing of appeals and supplements, and related attorney fees became exceedingly expensive, and with business on the downturn, Howe Brothers eventually gave up on their patent applications, and a final U.S. Patent was simply never granted.

The legal challenges from Coleman Motors, and then successor The American Coleman Company, continued on for at least eight more years, and American Coleman even began the very aggressive strategy of contacting Howe Brothers conversion customers directly and also threatening them regarding their own "participation" in the perceived Coleman patent infringement process by knowingly buying "knock off" Coleman conversions, now being branded as "Howe-Coleman" conversions. As late as November 1958, these threatening letters were still

being sent, and Donald G. Higgins (then American Coleman Sales Manager, later company president) was still reporting that American Coleman was considering legal action. Ultimately, as Howe Brothers business continued to decline, American Coleman calculated that it was just not worth the anticipated legal costs of continuing with a full-blown formal law suit and extended open court battles for a problem that was slowly going away of its own accord. In short, it appears that Coleman Motors, and then American Coleman, never actually filed their threatened suit, but their repeated "company letterhead" threats to do so clearly wore on the minds of Howe Brothers staff.

In an interesting side-note, in the late 1940s and early 1950s, Howe Brothers briefly called their conversions the "Howe-Quad-Drive," but the axle and hub itself was physically branded as "Howe-Coleman," so it was the latter name that gained full acceptance, since it always appeared in cast bold letters on the heavy dome hub protectors, and in some cases, on the front differential housing. Originally, Howe Brothers used a heavy cast iron dome cover, but eventually switched to using a much lighter fiberglass dome cover.

At least one published article also reports that Howe Brothers founder John Howe (1897-1972) "teamed up with Harley [sic] Holmes in developing the first Coleman truck." Again, there are just no indications this is true. Harleigh Holmes began development of his "Fore Wheel Drive" (as he preferred to call it) in 1915, and actually patented his first "Holmes Front Drive Axle" in 1916, also founding the "Holmes Truck Manufacturing Company," a.k.a. "Holmes Motors Company," at the same time to incorporate his axle into trucks. At first, he experimented with converting a Model-T Ford truck chassis, but then eventually developed his own "Holmes Truck" in 1919, and began actual manufacturing operations in Littleton, Colorado in 1920. The initial "Holmes Truck" brand, then the "Plains Truck" brand was not actually re-branded as "Coleman" trucks until March, 1924. John Howe is never mentioned in the numerous contemporary Littleton Independent and Carbondale Item newspaper articles that commented almost weekly on the development of the Holmes Truck, and conversely, "Coleman" is not mentioned in Howe Brothers company files until about 1930. It does appear to be true, however, that John Howe went west in about 1929 and viewed the Coleman Truck, offered to go into "partnership" with Al Coleman (actual owner by this time) and Harleigh Holmes, but his offer was declined, and he only got a Coleman Trucks "dealership," which lasted until about December of 1950 when it was summarily cancelled by Coleman Motors as the result of the perceived "patent infringement" issues.

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