

Elijah McCoy

May 2, 1843 – October 10, 1929

Innovation



“The whole purpose of education is to turn green buds into beautiful flowers.” Elijah McCoy

The *real McCoy* is a phrase that is meant to conote authenticity and seems to have started with the high quality inventions of Mr. Elijah McCoy. His use of **soft skill of innovation** enabled him to receive 58 patents during his lifetime.

Elijah McCoy was born on May 2, 1843, in Ontario, Canada, to former slaves from Kentucky, who had escaped through *The Underground Railroad*. After the end of the Civil War, they moved back to the United States and settled in Detroit, Michigan. Although his parents were poor, they managed to save enough money for their son's education. At the age of 15, McCoy was sent away to boarding school in Edinburgh, Scotland, to pursue study in mechanical engineering.

Despite his credentials, he had a difficult time finding work upon his return. He took a job as a fireman for the Michigan Central Railroad, oiling the moving train engine parts. McCoy found this work tedious, and his manual process seemed capable of automation, which he began exploring. He devised a cup system to evenly oil the engine without having to stop to oil them man-

ually, allowing for greater rail efficiency. McCoy continue to refine the invention among the creation of other innovations, receiving 58 patents during his lifetime. Most of his inventions were related to solving that first lubrication problem. However, he also developed designs for an ironing board and a lawn sprinkler. Unfortunately, his name did not appear on many of the products he invented due to lack of capital funding. However, by 1920, he was able to form the Elijah McCoy Manufacturing Company and produce the lubricators under his own name.

There were knock-off products appearing in these years. But, it is believed that his reputation was earned for providing both high quality and efficient products. As a result, his products were specifically requested. It is believed that the phrase “*The real McCoy*” was born of these preferences for his products.

Elijah McCoy died on October 10, 1929, at the age of 85 in Detroit, Michigan, due to sustained injuries from an automobile accident that killed his wife and left him weakened and vulnerable.

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