

Gordon McKay

Brief life of an inventor with a lasting Harvard legacy: 1821-1903

by HARRY R. LEWIS

ONE DAY in 1858, Gordon McKay paid cobbler Lyman Blake \$70,000, mostly in promises, for the patent on a machine Blake had devised to stitch the uppers of shoes to the soles. Shortly afterwards, a group holding a prior option appeared with \$50,000 cash and contested the sale. The matter was litigated for years before being settled in McKay's favor.

McKay's name today graces 40 Harvard professorships, numerous fellowships, and a building. He made a fortune in shoe machinery and gave it all (now grown to half a billion dollars) to support applied sciences at the University. His inventiveness, shrewdness, cultural ambitions, and complex love life all helped shape the foundations of the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences.

McKay was born in Pittsfield, in western Massachusetts. He was a fine violinist as a boy, and his taste for high culture stayed with him for life, but he was trained as an engineer. He worked on a railroad and on the Erie Canal before acquiring a machine shop. His first patented invention perfected Blake's stitching machine.

Ingenuity is good, but nothing beats good timing. When the Civil War began, the government suddenly needed lots of cheap, sturdy boots. In 1862, McKay filled an army order for 25,000 pairs.

Yet he realized the *real* money lay in shoe machinery. From 1862 to 1890, alone and with others, McKay patented some 40 sewing, nailing, tacking, lasting, and pegging machines for mass-producing shoes. Rather than sell his machines, he leased them for royalties—a few cents on every shoe made (anticipating the way Bill Gates supplied Microsoft's operating system to computer manufacturers, with payments per unit shipped). The shoe machines kept tallies of their output, and manufacturers had to buy stamps to match, redeemable for shares in McKay's company. Later they had to buy his nails and wire, too. Thanks to such anticompetitive (and now illegal) practices, McKay's machines by the late 1870s produced half the nation's shoes—120 million pairs, yielding \$500,000 a year.

McKay lived on Arrow Street, near Harvard Square, and got to know Nathaniel Shaler, the eminent geologist, who interested him in Harvard's scientific affairs. Shaler also advised him to invest in a Montana gold mine, a venture that in time contributed about 10 percent of McKay's wealth. (He never visited Montana, but his last patented invention was a mining dredge.) Thanks to Shaler's friendship, and his own hopes for broadly educated engineers, McKay left his fortune to Harvard, rather than to MIT.

But his millions did not come all at once. Because his will provided lifetime payments to various individuals, the principal was not fully Harvard's until 1949, when all annuitants had died.

And so we turn to McKay's women.

McKay first married in 1845. That marriage ended 22 years later

in a messy divorce. To counter an allegedly libelous pamphlet, he published his own 30-page account of his wife's desertion, his payments and gifts to her, and her mother's meddling.

Later he married Minnie Treat, reportedly his housekeeper's daughter. She was 21; he 57. A week before the wedding, he told a cousin that Minnie was "the prettiest and sweetest young lady the world has produced." They moved to Florence, bought a palace, and lived the high life. Minnie bore two sons, in 1886 and 1887.

Three years later the marriage was over. McKay was publicly gracious, but his 1887 will was blunt. After providing for his wife, he gave each boy \$500 per year until age 21, stiffly referring to them as "her two children." A draft has more detail than McKay's lawyer apparently thought appropriate: they "are not my children—but are the result of the infidelity of my wife with Arturo Fabricotti of Florence, Italy." He had had "no sexual intercourse" with his wife for some time, and had "incontestable proof" of Fabricotti's paternity. Minnie, in turn, alleged that her health had been injured by the strain of frequent posing so McKay could admire her beauty. She charged him with adultery and divorced him.

McKay's will provided for Minnie, the boys, and 13 others—all women. Cousins to whom he was close got nothing, to their surprise. His wife's mother and sister were beneficiaries; the others seem not to have been relatives. Six codicils added seven more women to the list and crossed off five. An 1897 letter to "My Dear Edith" suggests how such business was done. "You asked me," wrote McKay, "to let you know what I could do for you, and you asked me not to write you a terribly cruel note.—I'll try to do the one and avoid the other....You will remember when this commenced I asked you how much you would require a month. And your mother answered (you being present and not dissenting) \$300. This was about the undertaking I thought I was engaging in."

"Of his personal character all his friends speak in highest praise," said one obituary. But in 1900 an anonymous letter, decorated with skull and crossbones, warned, "You are a disgrace to the community and they don't propose to stand it much longer, you miserable old *whore master*. Why don't you take some poor little waif and educate them—do some good in this world instead of filling your house with loose women under the noses of respectable people?"

McKay's machines transformed the manufacture of shoes, and his grand bequest still renews engineering education at Harvard. However he may have lived, his life can be remembered with thanks for what it has made possible. ▽

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