John Wesley Hyatt Biography

John Wesley Hyatt

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Biography

John Wesley Hyatt went to work as a printer at age sixteen. In 1861 he patented a knife sharpener and went on to develop a new method for making dominoes and checkers, starting a company to produce them. His work with the playing pieces led to his search for a cheap substitute for ivory. He was also attracted by the $10,000 prize offered by Phelan and Collender for an artificial ivory to use in billiard balls.

Hyatt and his brother Isaiah had heard of Alexander Parkes's (1813-1890) success using nitrated cellulose dissolved in alcohol, ether, and camphor to produce a moldable substance. The Hyatt brothers improved on Parkes's process by refining the production of nitrated cellulose and devising a variety of ingenious means by which nitrocellulose could be impregnated with camphor. The Hyatts patented their manufacturing method for billiard balls in 1869, using the substance they called celluloid. They did not win the prize, however. But the Hyatts' celluloid was marketed as rattles, collars, film, and dental plates, even though its flammability (from the nitric acid used to produce the nitrocellulose) limited its uses. Its popularity diminished when celluloid billiard balls reportedly struck each other and caught fire. Today acetic acid is used in place of nitric acid to produce the more stable cellulose acetate, which has replaced celluloid in most uses.

John Hyatt went on to develop many other inventions and established the Hyatt Roller Bearing Company in New Jersey to produce the roller bearings necessary for them. He received the Perkin Medal of Honor from the Society of Chemical Industry in 1914 for his work with celluloid. When Hyatt died in 1920 in New Jersey he held over 200 patents.