Disston in Australasia.

By Neil Searle

Disston Saw Works was an American company owned by English immigrant, Henry Disston that manufactured handsaws during the mid-19th to early 20th century in the Tacony neighborhood of Philadelphia. The company was initially named Keystone Saw Works and then Henry Disston & Sons, Inc.

A Maori Hand Saw

Mr. N. S. Prouse, of Mangaraku, Collingwood, Nelson, New Zealand, Recently sent the photo of the Maori Hand Saw from which the illustration in this article was made. It is from

the collection of canoe-making tools, Tasman Bay, N. Z. F. V. Kappp's Collection. The photograph was taken By W.C. Davis of Cawthorn, Institute.

The saw is made from stone, blade and handle one piece. The cutting edge is chipped to serve as teeth.

The Maoris, whose traditions assign them a residence of some 600 years in New Zealand, were first known to Europeans as cannibals, at which time they had an elaborate system of society and government under the control of chiefs and priests, and comparatively elevated ideas of morality and religion.

They showed skill in building and artistic ability in wood carving, weaving, etc.

They have now adopted a life of Civilization. Large numbers of them have accepted the Christian religion.

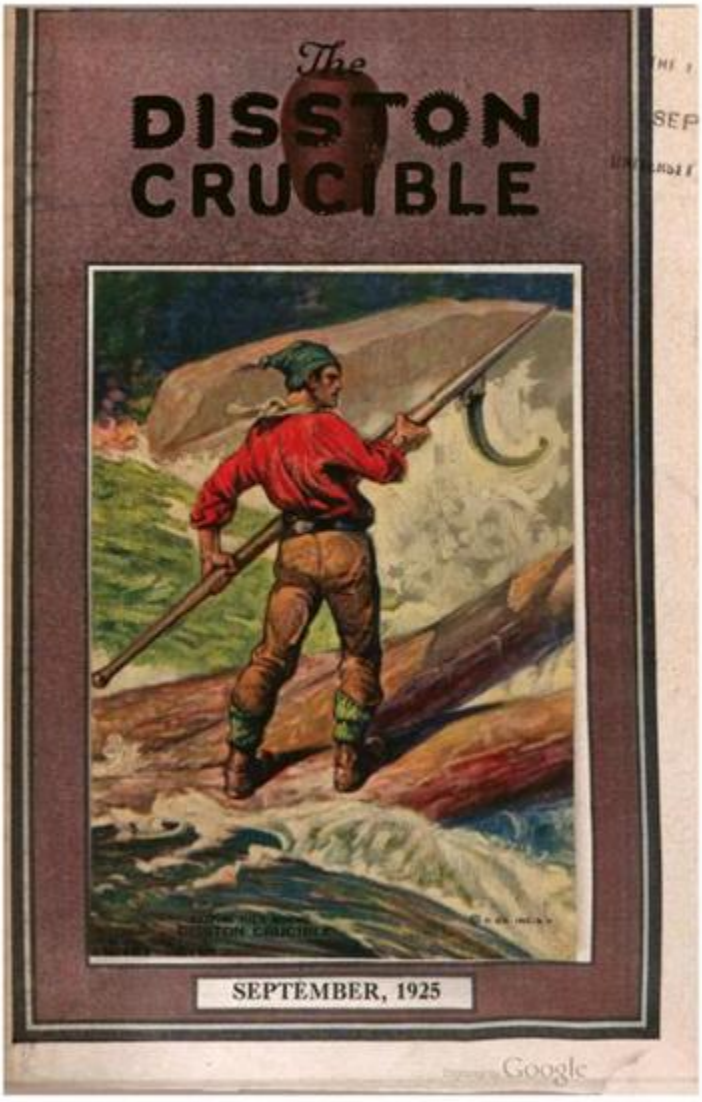
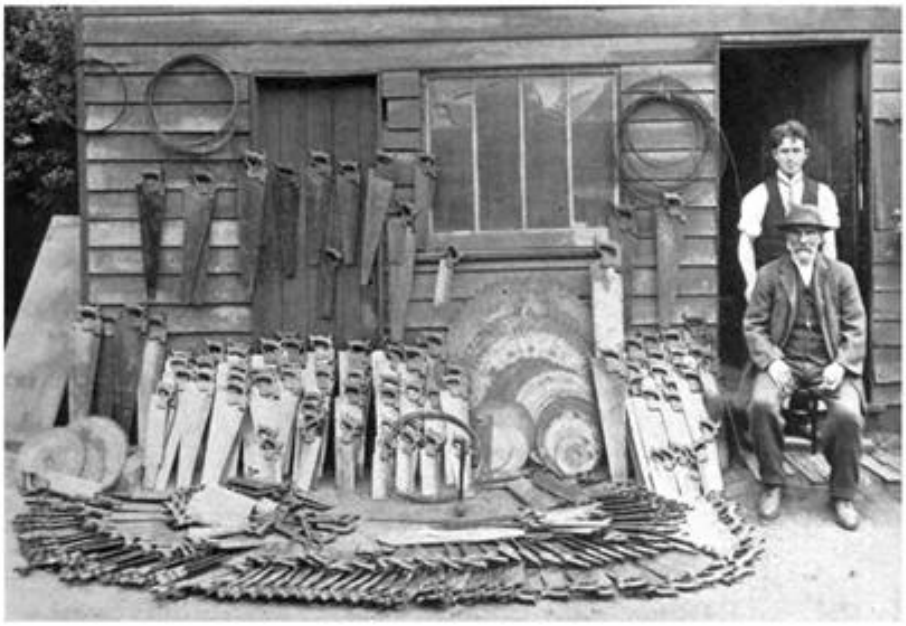


Fig. 1. From the **'Disston Crucible'** September, 1925

Disston had a factory in Toronto from 1910 until at least the 1950's. The saws were the same as the Philadelphia models. This allowed Disston to sell in the British Commonwealth without paying tariffs. Disston also had a showroom in Australia which opened in Sydney in 1910.



This is a New Zealand saw fitting shop. Mr. Fraser surely seems to have a pretty complete assortment, and it is interesting to note from his letter that Disston Saws are in almost universal use in New Zealand.

Henry Disston & Sons, Inc.,
Philadelphia, Pa.

238 St. Asaph St.,
Christchurch, N.Z.

Gentlemen:

I have forwarded you a photo which no doubt will be of interest, being a saw repair shop in New Zealand, and shows that over ninety per cent. of the saws in use here are Disstons, and with my sixteen years experience as a saw expert, with Mr. S. Frasee, whose photo is shown, but now has returned after over fifty years both working and repairing saws.

We are both of the same opinion that Disston Saws excel all others.

Wishing you continuous success, I remain,

Yours, etc.

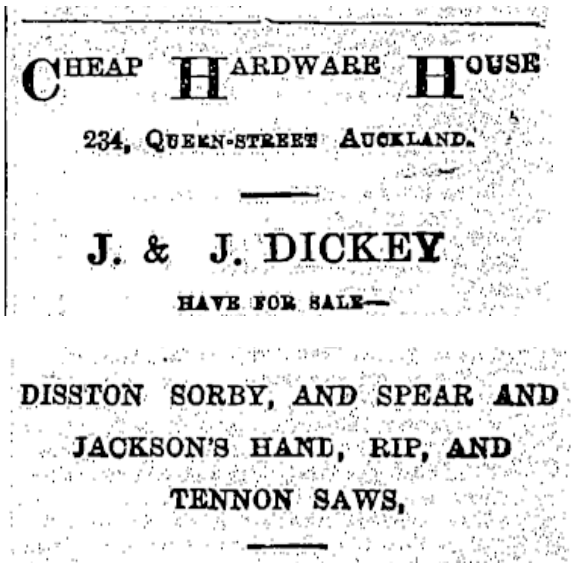
Robert J. Fraser.

Fig. 2. From the 'Disston **Crucible'** (Vol. V. May 15, 1916 No. 4)

One of the reasons for setting up in Australia was the favourable import duties that applied to trade between commonwealth countries that meant that Disston in Canada could ship saw blades into Australia at reduced import duties, and then ship out to other Commonwealth countries like New Zealand etc. At this stage, saws were not manufactured in Australia until 1926, there are claims that a lot of Disston saws with Canadian medallions were made in Sydney. The saw plates and other hardware from Canada and handles made in Australia, and assembled in Australia. Later bought out by HK Porter, and continued up until 1978 when they were bought out by Sandvik, which closed the Sydney premises.

Henry Disston and Sons, Inc. (Australia) Ltd. was registered in 1914 to take over and conduct the Australasian business of Henry Disston and Sons Inc. (Philadelphia). They began making circular and band saws in Australia targeted to the Australian timber industry and saw mills.

By the end of 1958, H. K. Porter Australia Pty. Ltd. were making Disston branded handsaws at their Guildford plant in New South Wales.


CHEAP HARDWARE HOUSE

234, QUEEN-STREET AUCKLAND.

J. & J. DICKEY

HAVE FOR SALE—

DISSTON SORBY, AND SPEAR AND JACKSON'S HAND, RIP, AND TENNON SAWS,

Fig. 3. (**J & J Dickey** were listed in the Auckland Trade and Professional Directory, 1866, under Ironmongers at 222 Queen Street)

Fig. 4. 1949 Shop window display. John Burns & Co. Hardware and General Merchants, corner of Customs and Commerce Streets, Auckland. Founded in 1882 as Wingate, Burns & Co.

British saws made by Robert Sorby displayed a kangaroo image on the medallion and a kangaroo etching on some saws. Established in Sheffield in 1797, from circa 1860-1967, the Sorby factory in Sheffield was known

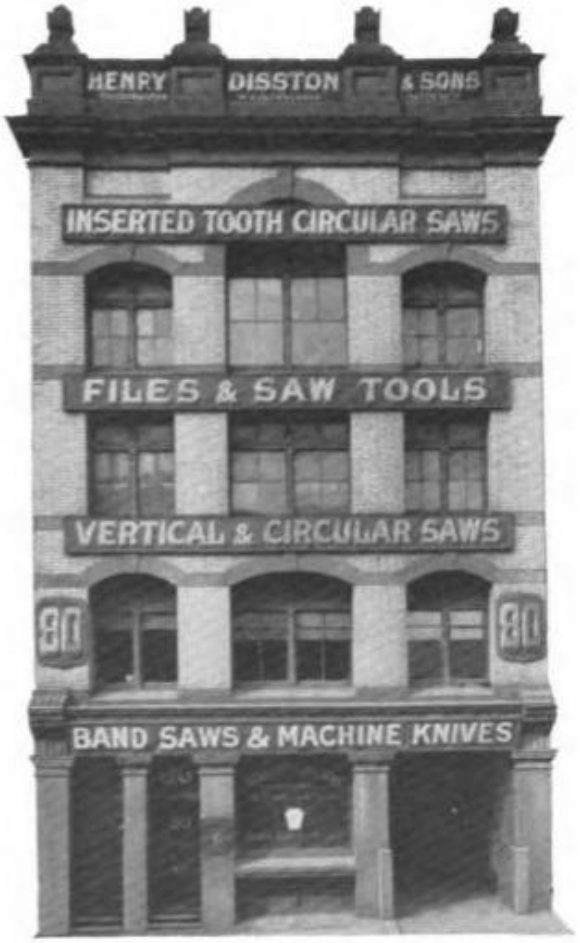
as the “Kangaroo Works”. The kangaroo was a Sorby Corporate Trademark; they had a large trade in Australasia.

H. K. Porter Australia Pty Ltd began operations in 1914 under the name of Henry Disston & Sons Inc. (Australasia) Ltd. At this time it was the subsidiary of Henry Disston & Sons Inc. of the U.S. and was engaged in the production of circular saw blades, veneer knives and planer knives. In 1958, following the acquisition of its parent company by H. K. Porter Co. Inc. of Pittsburgh in 1955, the company was sold to an Australian firm, Commonwealth Engineering Co. Ltd. But, in what is surely the only case in Australian industrial history of a foreign company buying *back* a subsidiary it has earlier sold, all the shares in Henry Disston & Sons Pty Ltd were repurchased by H. K. Porter Co. Inc. at the beginning of 1962 and the company renamed shortly afterwards. It is now Australia's principal manufacturer of hand saws.

From: ‘American Investment in Australian Industry’ by Donald T. Brash.

The most well-known, if not iconic Disston hand saw to collectors in NZ is the Maori Chief handsaw etching that was apparently made in the 1930's allegedly to acknowledge that New Zealand, per capita, was the largest importer of their saws, so to pay a tribute to NZ, they designed a special etching the Maori Chief. The second world war put a halt to the production, consequently these saws are highly sought after.

Fig. 5. One of three Maori Chief saws from the collection of Nolan Parker.



Disston Branch at Sydney, N.S.W.

Fig. 6. Henry Disston & Sons Ltd., 80 Sussex Street, Sydney. Previous premises were, University and Gibbens Streets, Camperdown, Sydney, Australia. "From *here Australian and New Zealand mill goods business is handled."*

"To better accommodate our sawmill trade in Australia, the House of Disston, in 1910, opened a sales room in Sydney. The business grew rapidly with the firm in close touch with the mills, and in a few years' time it became apparent that to give our trade the very best facilities, it was necessary to establish a branch, and carry a full line of sawmill goods and accessories, machine knives etc. Accordingly, on May 21, 1914, "Henry Disston & Sons,Inc., (Australia) Ltd.," was incorporated and registered under the "Companies Act" of NSW. They then moved into their present quarters at No. 80 Sussex Street, Sydney."

Fig. 7. From Dun's Gazette (For New South Wales), January, 1922

DISSTON'S AUSTRALIAN FACTORY AND OFFICE
IN NEW AND LARGER QUARTERS

Fig. 8. Henry Disston's Camperdown premises in Sydney.

Of interest are some of the comments of a visiting Englishman from Sheffield in England, at the Keystone Saw Works.

rolling and sheet rolling. They have some splendid machinery for turning out Saws, and I was very much struck with the machine they have for toothing Hand Saws. I tried to time these Saws going into the machine, but they went in too quick for me. I should say that a Hand Saw went through the machine and was toothed in from three to four seconds. When it had gone through, the machine had done its work thoroughly, and there was no "fash"—by which I mean there was no roughness—and it was perfect in every way. I am told that they put 1500 teeth per minute in these saws.

From the 'Iron Age' magazine, Jan. 22, 1891. At Disstons' factory in Philadelphia.

A Disston Postcard.
Henry Disston did influence Bob Semple (Minister of Works) early in WWII (on the basis of a photograph of the Disston Tractor Tank) to construct similar tanks to defend our shores. New Zealand - like its neighbour Australia - had no indigenous armoured fighting vehicle industry, and it was expected that armoured fighting vehicles would be imported from Britain.

The Disston Tractor Tank.
The tank was created as a joint venture by the Caterpillar Corporation and the Disston Saw Works. Caterpillar provided the chassis, which was from a standard Caterpillar Model 35 civilian tractor, and Disston provided the tank body, which was bolted on to the Caterpillar chassis.

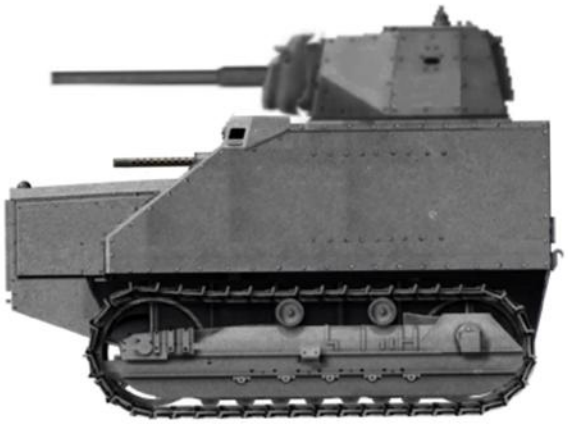


Fig. 9. The Disston Tractor Tank, sometimes known as the Disston 6-ton Tractor Tank.

The use of the American Disston "Six Ton Tractor Tank", a 1937 vehicle constructed of an armoured box on a Caterpillar Model 35 chassis which had been sold to Afghanistan and China, was suggested.
In WW2, New Zealand saw that every other country had some nice looking tanks, and decided to make some of their own. However, without the industrial resources to do that task, they settled on building a house of iron on a tractor's base.

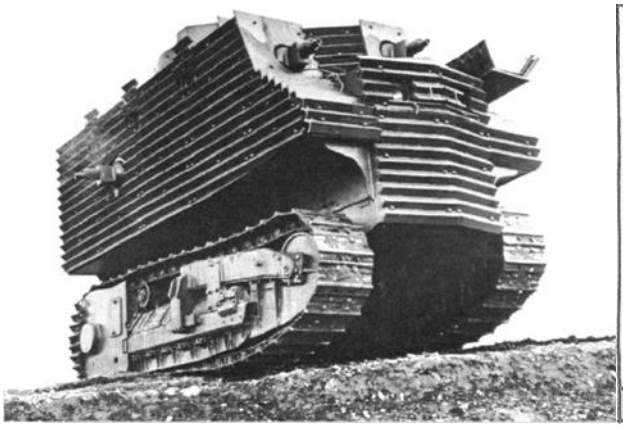


Fig. 10. The NZ version, the "Bob Semple Tank".

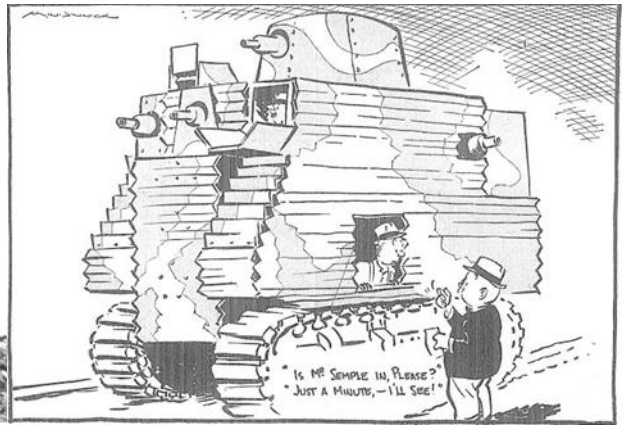


Fig. 11. "Is Mr. Semple in please?- Just a minute I'll see"

The vehicle would adopt the name of the minister who ordered it. Production started at Temuka, Christchurch workshops, based on a Disston postcard depicting the conversion of a tractor to a tractor-tank.

TG Beck from Christchurch District Works Engineer started an improvised conversion without drawing a single plan or blueprint, using every resource available, including the only weapons in store, the Bren machine guns previously supplied from Great Britain.

As built, the Bob Semple tank was a terrible vehicle of poor military value. It was tall and unstable, top-heavy, vibrating dangerously due to the overwhelmed chassis and crude tractor suspensions, utterly slow (at most infantry pace), and the improvised armor would have stood no chance against the solid 37 mm (1.46 in) shots from the average Japanese tank of the time. Accurate fire was also impossible. But after a few weeks, the Army ultimately rejected it, and all "tanks" were dismantled and converted back as tractors.

Ref: Woodwork Forums.com. The Disston Crucible Magazine. The Iron Age Magazine. Catalogue - H.K. Porter Australia Pty Ltd, Disston Hand Saws, 1964.

Ref: (Tanks) http://panzerserra.blogspot.com/2022/11/bob-semple-tank-temuka-no1-case-report.html (An excellent history of the Bob Semple tank) Warthunder.com/forums. Wikipedia.