Garrett Morgan

Innovator

Garrett Morgan was born on March 4, 1877, in Paris, Kentucky during the end of the Reconstruction era following the American Civil War. His mother, Elizabeth Reed, was the daughter of a Baptist minister. Garrett’s father, Sydney Morgan, was the son of a Confederate colonel. Despite his mixed heritage, Garrett was still viewed as a black boy in southern states, so his academic opportunities were very limited. The lack of academic opportunities was replaced with the need for work. Garrett would leave Kentucky at the age of 14 for Cincinnati, Ohio and start working as a handyman. He managed to pay for private lessons from a tutor while he was working to continue his education. This thirst for knowledge coupled with his newfound passion for repairing things would help him create a legacy that has lasted well after his death.

In 1895, Morgan moved to Cleveland, Ohio after years of several handyman jobs in sewing machine factories in Cincinnati. His experience helped him land a job as sewing machine mechanic. In 1901, Garrett invented an improved sewing machine and received his first patent for it. His invention called for the use of a belt fastener. Garrett would continue to find ways to improve and repair sewing machines over the next couple of years until eventually opening his own sewing machine repair shop in 1907. At the age of 31, he would wed Mary Anne Hassek and the couple would go on to have three sons together; John, Garrett, and Cosmo. A year after tying the knot, Garrett and Mary would start a tailoring shop together in Cleveland. While working at the shop, Garrett was looking for a way to prevent the needles on the machine from burning certain fabrics. Most machines during the time operated at very high speeds and the friction from the needle would cause certain fabrics to be burned. Garrett applied a chemical solution to the needle and noticed the solution had a smoothing effect on the fabric. This sparked an idea in Garrett’s mind, and he tried a form of the solution on a dog. The experiment proved to be successful, and he would go on to try the solution on his own hair. Despite his fear, the experiment worked on his hair as well. This revelation led him to create the G.A. Morgan Refining Company in 1913 to produce his hair refining cream. The cream was very profitable and allowed him to create other inventions in the near future.

During the time Garrett was developing his refining cream, he also started working on a safety hood/helmet. He filed the patent application for his new invention in 1912 and it was granted in 1914, just a year after establishing his hair refining company. He established the National Safety Device Company, or Nadsco, to produce and sell the mask. Initially, Garrett experienced trouble selling his device to southern states due to him being black. At the time entrepreneurs sold their products through live demonstrations. Garrett would hire white actors to act as the inventor of his products and he would act as their assistant “Big Chief Mason” while demonstrating the product. The marketing plan was a genius idea and the mask became widely accepted. In 1916, the mask was recognized with a gold medal at the International Exposition of Sanitation and Safety, and the International Association of Fire Chiefs. In the same year, the mask was put to the test when some workers had been trapped in an underground tunnel under Lake Erie. Garrett heard about the explosion and wanted to help. Morgan, along with his brother Frank, wore the masks and were able to save over 20 lives. In normal times, Garrett and Frank would be loved across the world for their heroic actions. But this was during the time of racial segregation and their efforts proved to be bad for business. Media outlets all over the country reported on the Cleveland Water Works explosion which would include photos of Garrett. Once Garrett’s identity was made public, a number of requests for mask through Nadsco were canceled. Some media outlets would even omit Garrett from their writeups and give the credit to white males for the rescue efforts. The decline in sales and lack of proper recognition did not cause for Garrett to lose his innovative and caring spirit.

The lack of recognition for saving the lives in that tunnel was very disheartening for Garrett but he did what he had always done, find a solution to the problem. In the same year, 1916, he created ‘***The Call***’. The Call was Cleveland’s first black newspaper and merged with the Cleveland Post in 1829 to become Call & Post newspaper. The paper would become the most well-regarded paper for African Americans throughout Ohio, a distinction it still holds to this day. Due to the success of his previous inventions, Garrett was the first African American with a car in Cleveland. While driving around in his car one day, Garrett witnessed a collision involving a vehicle and a horse & carriage. True to his nature, Garrett wanted to create an improved stop light to help to help prevent similar collisions from occurring in the future. In 1923, Morgan was granted a patent for the first three-light traffic signal. He would on to sell the rights to the patent to General Electric. Following the success of his newspaper and the traffic light, Garrett would become involved in politics briefly during the 1930s. Unfortunately, in 1943 Garrett began developing glaucoma and lost majority of his ability to see. Garrett Morgan died in July of 1963 but his inventions still impact our everyday lives and help make our would much safer.