



Paper No. 14

FINNEGAN, HENDERSON, FARABOW,
GARRETT AND DUNNER
1300 I STREET, NW
WASHINGTON DC 20005

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OFFICE OF PETITIONS

In re Patent No. 4,863,217 :
Issued: 5 September, 1989 :
Application No. 07/205,279 : DECISION ON PETITION
Filed: 10 June, 1988 :
For: HAIRDRESSER'S STATION :

This is a decision on the petition under 37 CFR 1.378(e), filed on 13 March, 2006, requesting reconsideration of a prior decision which refused to accept under § 1.378(b)¹ the delayed payment of a maintenance fee for the above-referenced patent.

The petition is denied.

BACKGROUND

The patent issued 5 September, 1989. The first maintenance fee was timely paid. The second maintenance fee could have been paid from 5 September, 1996, through 5 March, 1997, or, with a surcharge during the period from 6 March through 7 September, 1997. Accordingly, the patent expired at midnight 7 September, 1997, for failure to timely submit the second maintenance fee. The petition filed on 30 January, 2006, was dismissed on 14 February, 2006.

On 13 March, 2006, petitioner filed the present request for reconsideration, accompanied by the required fee of \$400.00.

¹ A grantable petition to accept a delayed maintenance fee payment under 37 CFR 1.378(b) must include

(1) the required maintenance fee set forth in § 1.20(e) through (g);

(2) the surcharge set forth in §1.20(i)(1); and

(3) a showing that the delay was unavoidable since reasonable care was taken to ensure that the maintenance fee would be paid timely and that the petition was filed promptly after the patentee was notified of, or otherwise became aware of, the expiration of the patent. The showing must enumerate the steps taken to ensure timely payment of the maintenance fee, the date and the manner in which patentee became aware of the expiration of the patent, and the steps taken to file the petition promptly.

In the initial petition and the present petition, petitioner pro se, Kit Sanders, avers that the patentee, her father, died in 1996, and that the maintenance fees were not paid. Petitioner avers, in essence, that she recently discovered that the maintenance fees were not paid.

STATUTE AND REGULATION

35 U.S.C. § 41(c)(1) states that:

The Director may accept the payment of any maintenance fee required subsection (b) of this section which is made within twenty-four months after the six-month grace period if this delay is shown to the satisfaction of the Director to have been unintentional, or at any time after the six-month grace period if the delay is shown to the satisfaction of the Director to have been unavoidable.

37 CFR 1.378(b)(3) states that any petition to accept an unavoidably delayed payment of a maintenance fee must include:

A showing that the delay was unavoidable since reasonable care was taken to ensure that the maintenance fee would be paid timely and that the petition was filed promptly after the patentee was notified of, or otherwise became aware of, the expiration of the patent. The showing must enumerate the steps taken to ensure timely payment of the maintenance fee, the date, and the manner in which patentee became aware of the expiration of the patent, and the steps taken to file the petition promptly.

OPINION

The Commissioner may accept late payment of the maintenance fee if the delay is shown to the satisfaction of the Commissioner to have been "unavoidable".² A patent owner's failure to pay a maintenance fee may be considered to have been "unavoidable" if the patent owner "exercised the due care of a reasonably prudent

² 35 U.S.C. § 41(c)(1).

person."³ This determination is to be made on a "case-by-case basis, taking all the facts and circumstances into account."⁴ Unavoidable delay under 35 U.S.C. § 41(b) is measured by the same standard as that for reviving an abandoned application under 35 U.S.C. § 133.⁵ Under 35 U.S.C. § 133, the Commissioner may revive an abandoned application if the delay in responding to the relevant outstanding Office requirement is shown to the satisfaction of the Commissioner to have been "unavoidable". Decisions on reviving abandoned applications have adopted the reasonably prudent person standard in determining if the delay was unavoidable.⁶ However, a petition to revive an application as unavoidably abandoned cannot be granted where a petitioner has failed to meet his or her burden of establishing the cause of the unavoidable delay.⁷ In view of In re Patent No. 4,409,763,⁸ this same standard will be applied to determine whether "unavoidable" delay within the meaning of 37 CFR 1.378(b) occurred.

This petition does not satisfy the requirement of 37 CFR 1.378(b)(3). The statements presented in the petition fail to satisfy the showing required to establish unavoidable delay within the meaning of 37 CFR 1.378(b).

A petition to accept the delayed payment of a maintenance fee under 35 U.S.C. § 41(c) and 37 CFR 1.378(b) must be accompanied by (1) an adequate, verified showing that the delay was unavoidable, since reasonable care was taken to ensure that the maintenance fee would be paid timely and that the petition was filed promptly after the patentee was notified of, or otherwise became aware of, the expiration of the patent, (2) payment of the appropriate maintenance fee, unless previously submitted, and (3) payment of the surcharge set forth in 37 CFR 1.20(i)(1).

As 35 U.S.C. § 41(c) requires the payment of fees at specified intervals to maintain a patent in force, rather than some response to a specific action by the Office under 35 U.S.C. §

³ Ray v. Lehman, 55 F.3d 606, 608-09 (Fed.Cir.), cert. denied, -- U.S. ---, 116 S.Ct. 304, L.Ed.2d 209 (1995).

⁴ Smith v. Mossinghoff, 671 F.2d 533, 538, 213 USPQ 977, 982 (D.C. Cir. 1982).

⁵ In re Patent No. 4,409,763, 7 USPQ2d 1798, 1800 (PTO Comm'r 1988).

⁶ Ex parte Pratt, 1887 Dec. Comm'r Pat. 31, 32-33 (Comm'r Pat. 1887) (the term "unavoidable" "is applicable to ordinary human affairs, and requires no more or greater care or diligence than is generally used and observed by prudent and careful men in relation to their most important business"); In re Mattullath, 38 App. D.C. 497, 514-15 (D.C. Cir. 1912); Ex parte Henrich, 1913 Dec. Comm'r Pat. 139, 141 (Comm'r Pat. 1913).

⁷ Haines v. Quigg, 673 F. Supp. 314, 5 USPQ2d 1130 (N.D. Ind. 1987).

⁸ 7 USPQ2d 1798, 1800 (Comm'r Pat. 1988), aff'd sub nom. Rydeen v. Quigg, 748 937 F.2d 623 (Fed. Cir. 1991) (table), cert. denied, 502 U.S. 1075 (1992).

133, a reasonably prudent person in the exercise of due care and diligence would have taken steps to ensure the timely payment of such maintenance fees.⁹ That is, an adequate showing that the delay was "unavoidable" within the meaning of 35 U.S.C. § 41(c) and 37 CFR 1.378(b)(3) requires a showing of the steps taken to ensure the timely payment of the maintenance fees for this patent.¹⁰

Unfortunately, the showing of record is that there were no steps in place to ensure timely payment of the maintenance fee. Rather, the showing of record is that petitioner failed to take adequate precautions to ensure that maintenance fees were timely paid. Petitioner's preoccupation with other matters which took precedence over payment of the maintenance fees for the above-identified patent constitutes a lack of diligence, not unavoidable delay.¹¹ As petitioner has not shown that it exercised the standard of care observed by a reasonable person in the conduct of his or her most important business, the petition will be dismissed.¹²

While the Office is mindful of the unfortunate circumstances surrounding this petition, in the absence of a showing that steps were taken to ensure the timely payment of the maintenance fee, the Office is precluded from providing the relief requested by petitioner.¹³

CONCLUSION

The prior decision which refused to accept under § 1.378(b) the delayed payment of a maintenance fee for the above-identified patent has been reconsidered. The petition under § 1.378(c) has also been considered. For the above stated reasons, the delay in this case cannot be regarded as unavoidable, or unintentional, within the meaning of 35 U.S.C. § 41(c)(1) and 37 CFR 1.378(b) and (c).

The address in the petition is different from the address of record. A copy of this decision is being mailed to the address in the petition. All future correspondence, however, will be mailed solely to the address of record.

⁹ Ray, 55 F.3d at 609, 34 USPQ2d at 1788.

¹⁰ Id.

¹¹ See Smith v. Mossinghoff, 671 F.2d 533, 538, 213 USPQ 977, 982 (D.C. Cir. 1982).

¹² See note 6, supra.

¹³ It is additionally noted that the patent's expiration date is 17 years from the date of issue, which is 5 September, 2006. As such, even if this petition were granted, the patent would soon expire.

The petition is DENIED.

As stated in 37 CFR 1.378(e), no further reconsideration or review of the decision refusing to accept the delayed payment of the maintenance fee under § 1.378(b) will be undertaken. This decision may be regarded as a final agency action within the meaning of 5 U.S.C. § 704 for purposes of seeking judicial review. See MPEP 1001.02.

The maintenance fees and surcharge will be refunded by treasury check.

Telephone inquiries should be directed to Senior Petitions Attorney Douglas I. Wood at 571-272-3231.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Charles A. Pearson".

Charles A. Pearson
Director, Office of Petitions
Office of the Deputy Commissioner
for Patent Examination Policy

cc: Kit L. Sanders
202 Fountain Drive
Columbus MS 39702