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Williams, Jr.

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(54) **TELESCOPING AND SWIVELING HITCH ASSEMBLY**

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(73) Assignee: **Williams Innovations, LLC**, Durham, NC (US)

(*) Notice: Subject to any disclaimer, the term of this patent is extended or adjusted under 35 U.S.C. 154(b) by 153 days.

5,011,176 A	4/1991	Eppinette
5,277,447 A	1/1994	Blaser
5,322,315 A	6/1994	Carsten
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5,722,678 A	3/1998	Hunger
5,727,805 A	3/1998	La Roque
6,328,326 B1	12/2001	Slatten
6,357,779 B1	3/2002	Mok et al.

(21) Appl. No.: **11/624,965**

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(74) *Attorney, Agent, or Firm*—Myers Bigel Sibley & Sajovec, P.A.

Related U.S. Application Data

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(51) **Int. Cl.**
B60D 1/40 (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.** **280/478.1; 280/479.2**

(58) **Field of Classification Search** 280/478.1,
280/479.2, 479.3, 480.1, 489, 491.1, 491.2,
280/515, 462

See application file for complete search history.

(56) **References Cited**

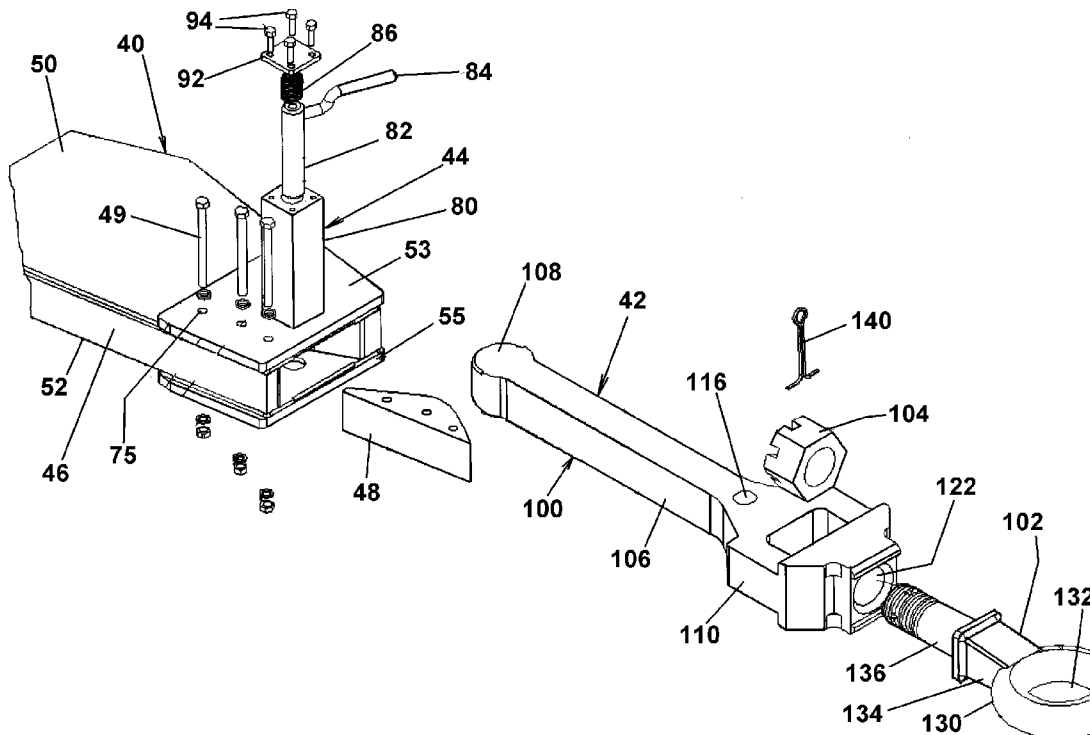
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(57) **ABSTRACT**

A hitch assembly for connecting a towed vehicle to a towing vehicle include a housing mounted on the towing tongue of the towed vehicle having a tow bar mounted in an internal cavity having a restricted throat. Tow bar can be extended and pivoted to position a hitching eyelet on a variably proximately located towed vehicle. The tow arm coacts with the walls of the cavity to provide a torque on the tongue upon forward or rearward movement of the towing vehicle. Upon rearward movement of the towed vehicle, the tow bar attains an aligned nested position in the cavity and a lock assembly is actuated for locking the tow arm to the housing.

11 Claims, 19 Drawing Sheets



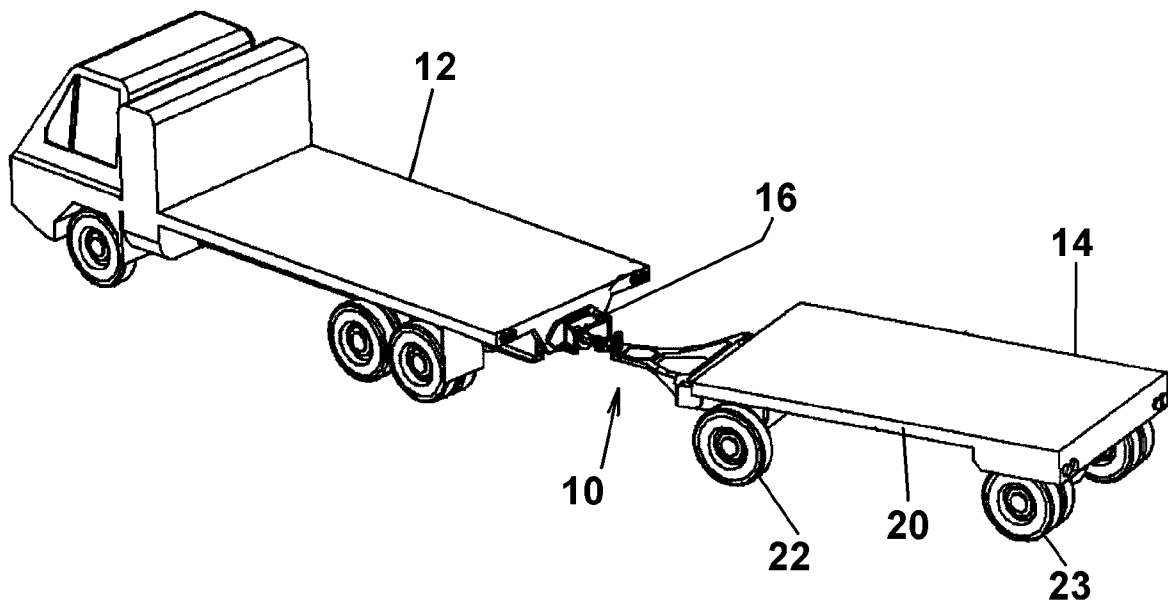


FIG. 1

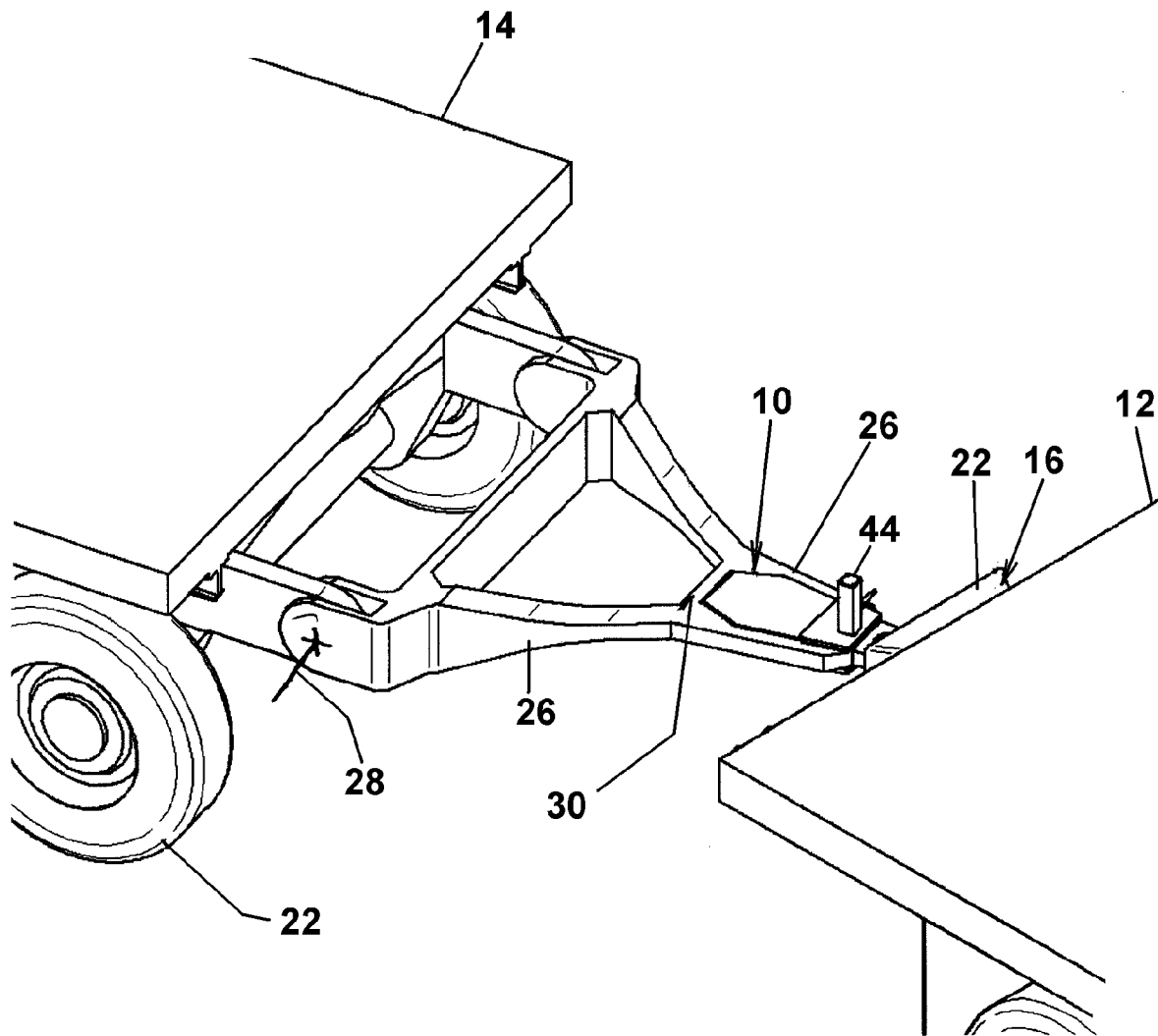


FIG. 2

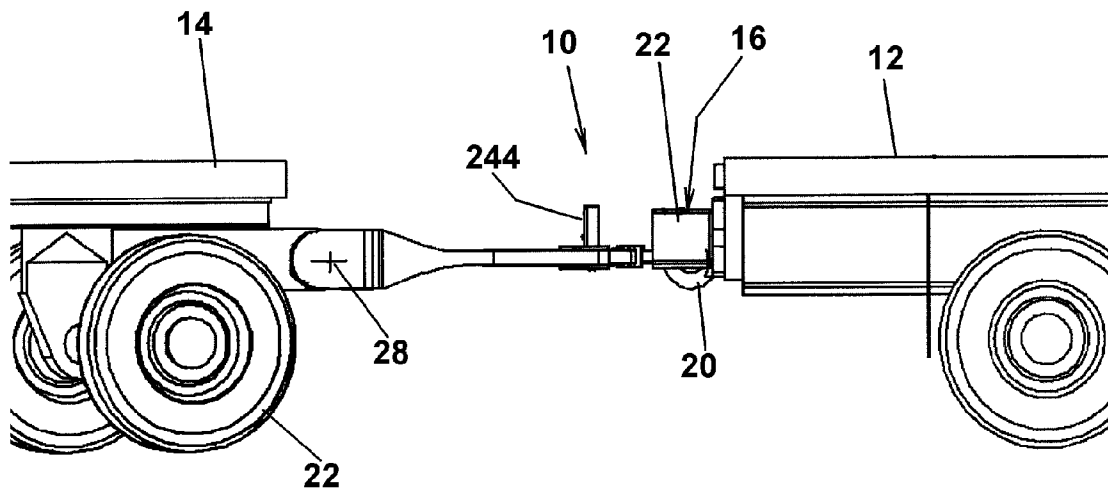


FIG. 3

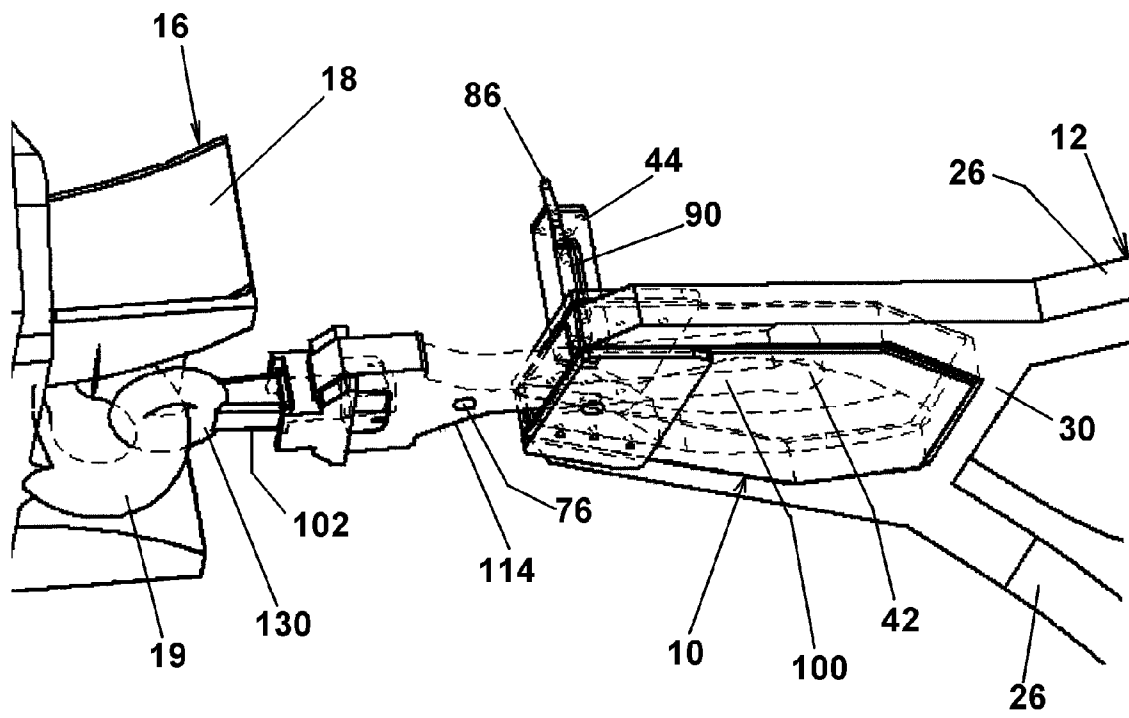


FIG. 4

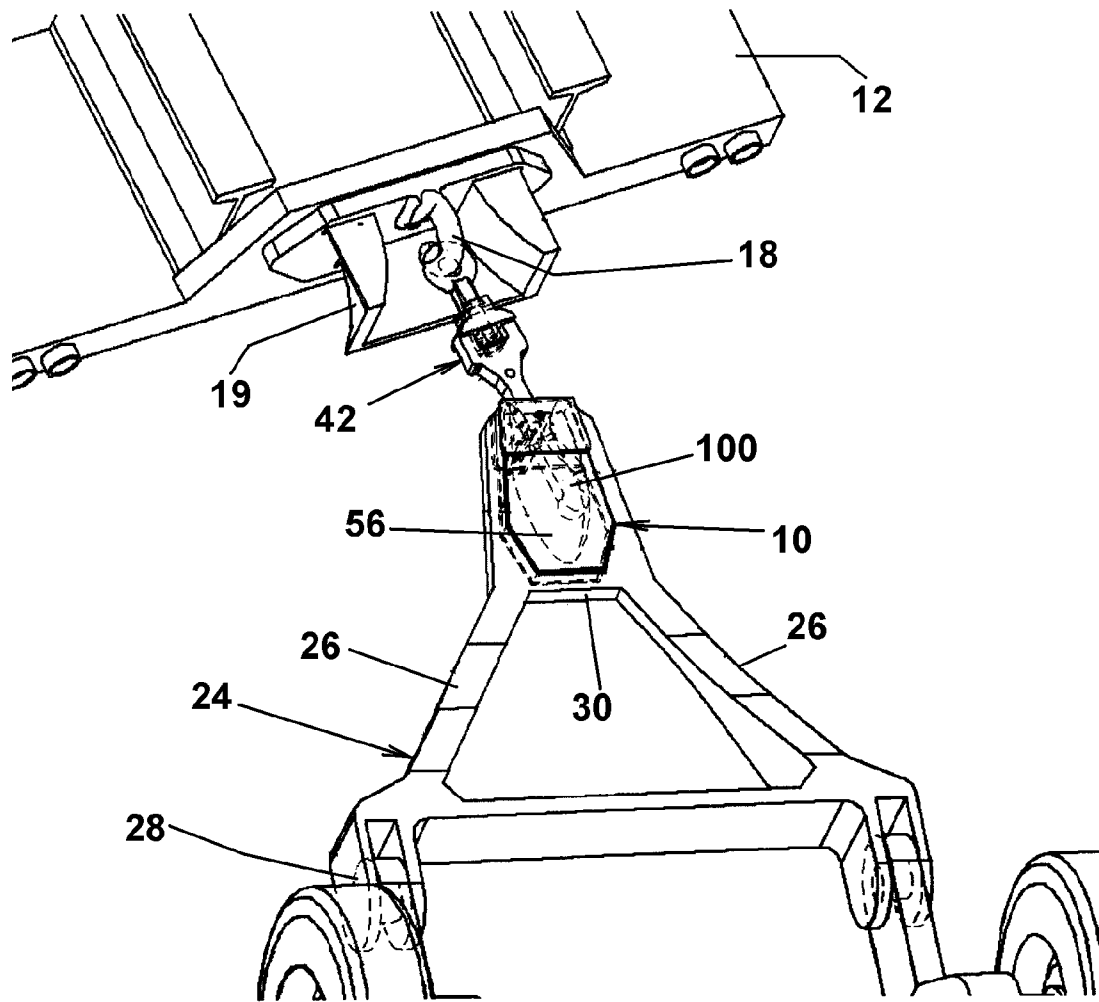


FIG. 5

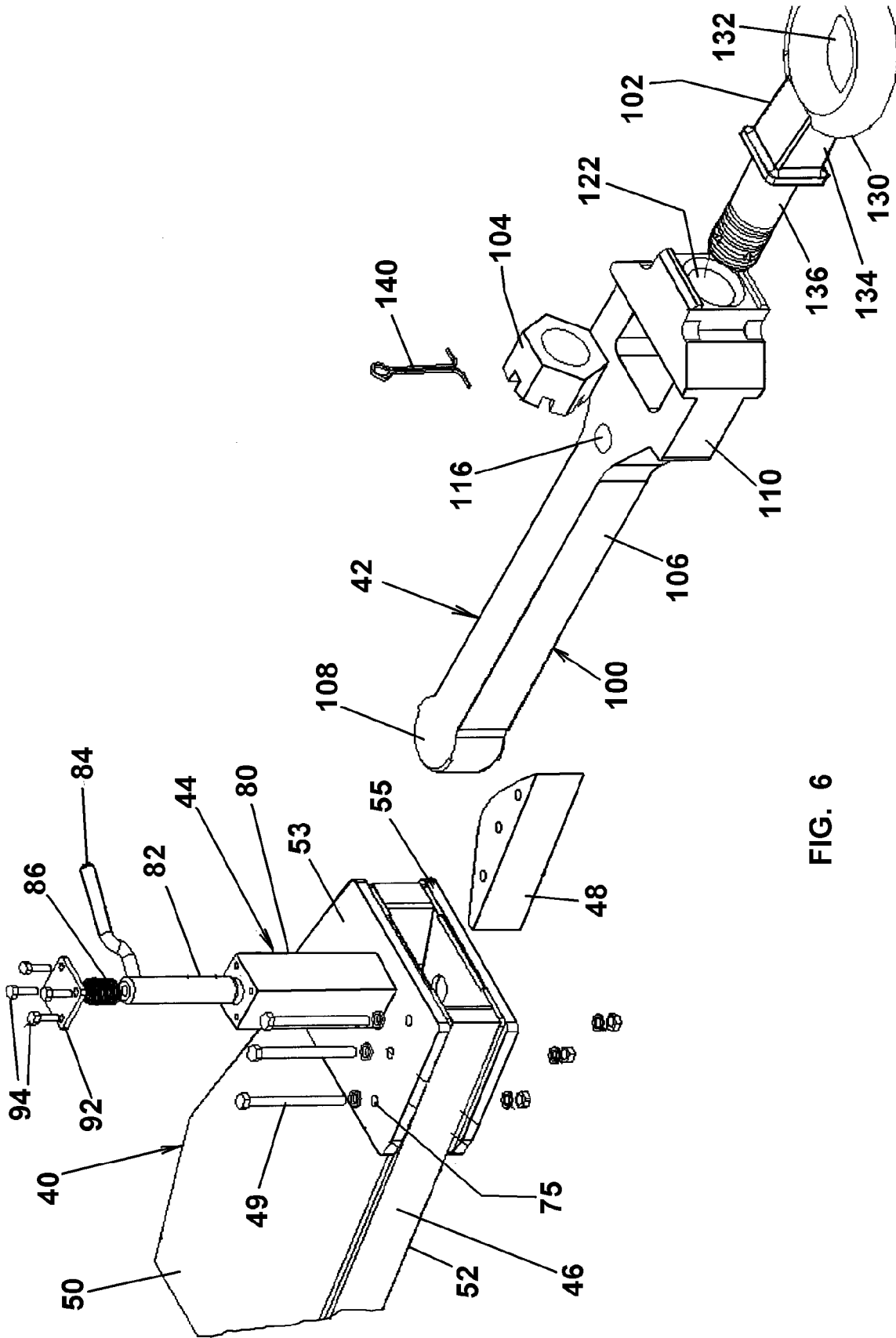


FIG. 6

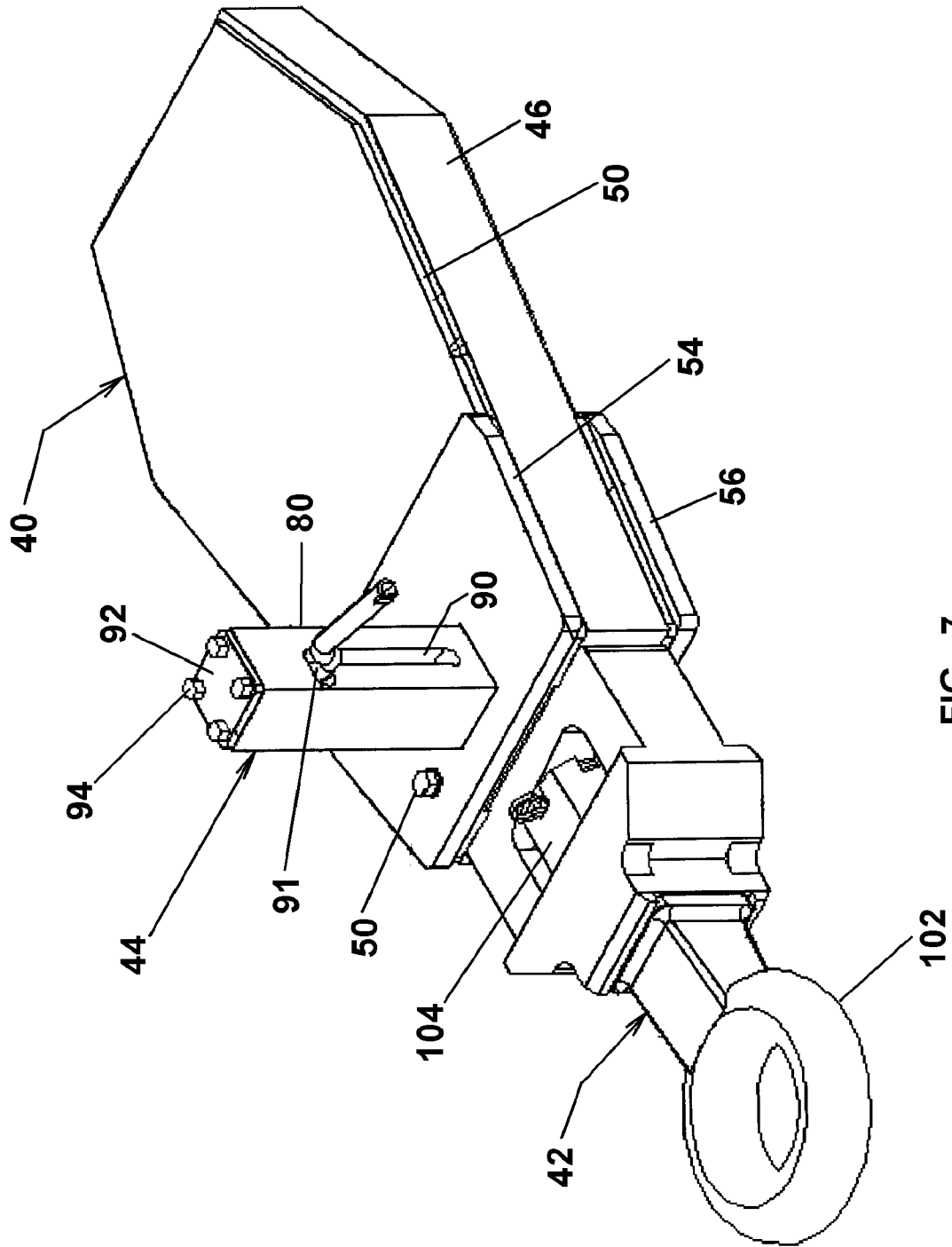


FIG. 7

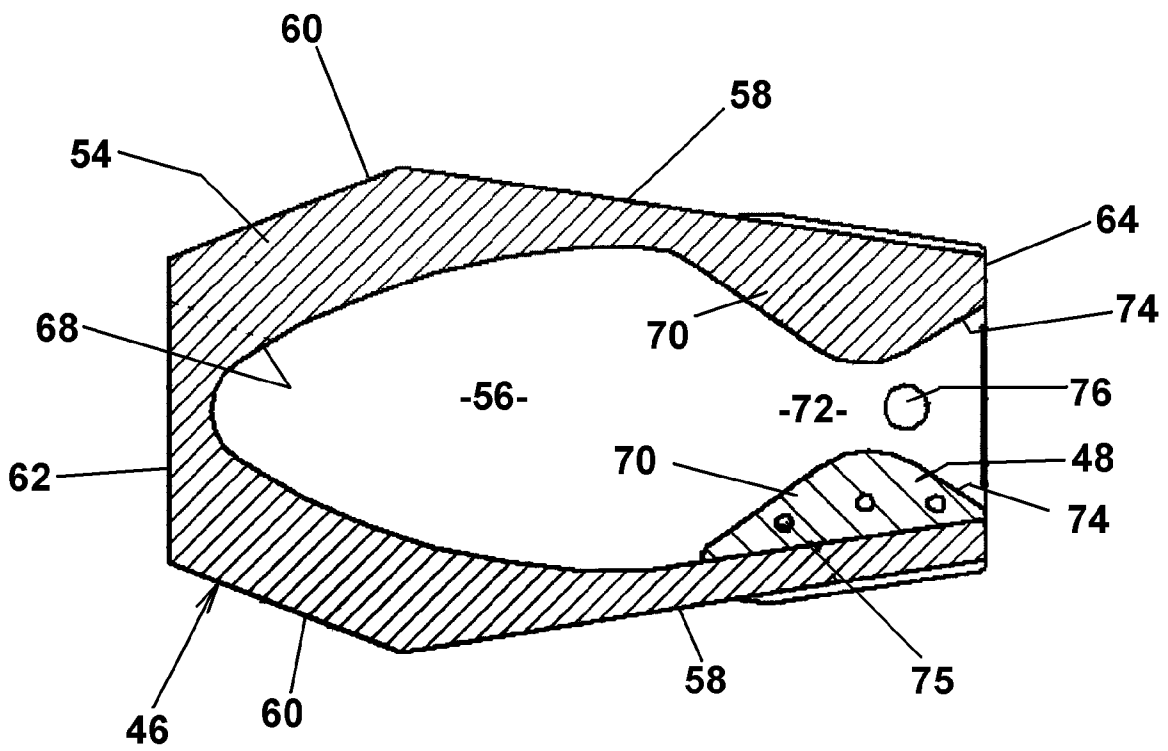


FIG. 8

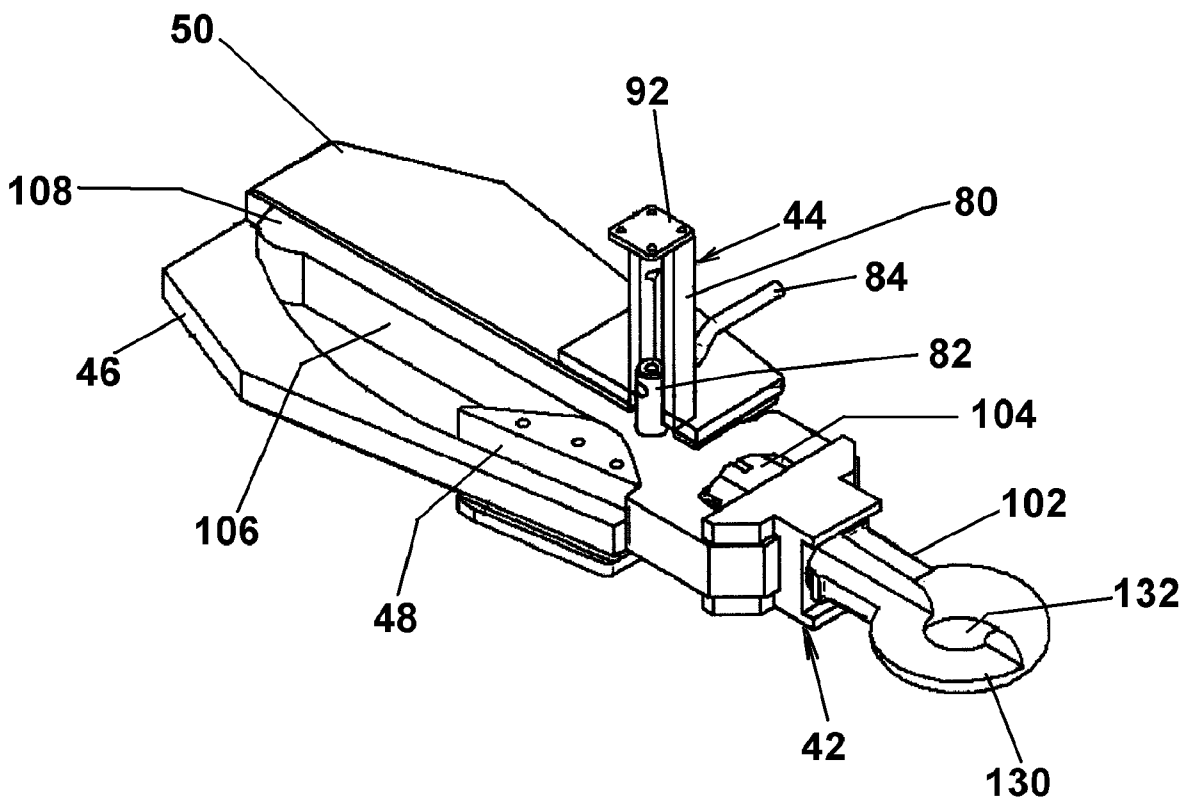


FIG. 9

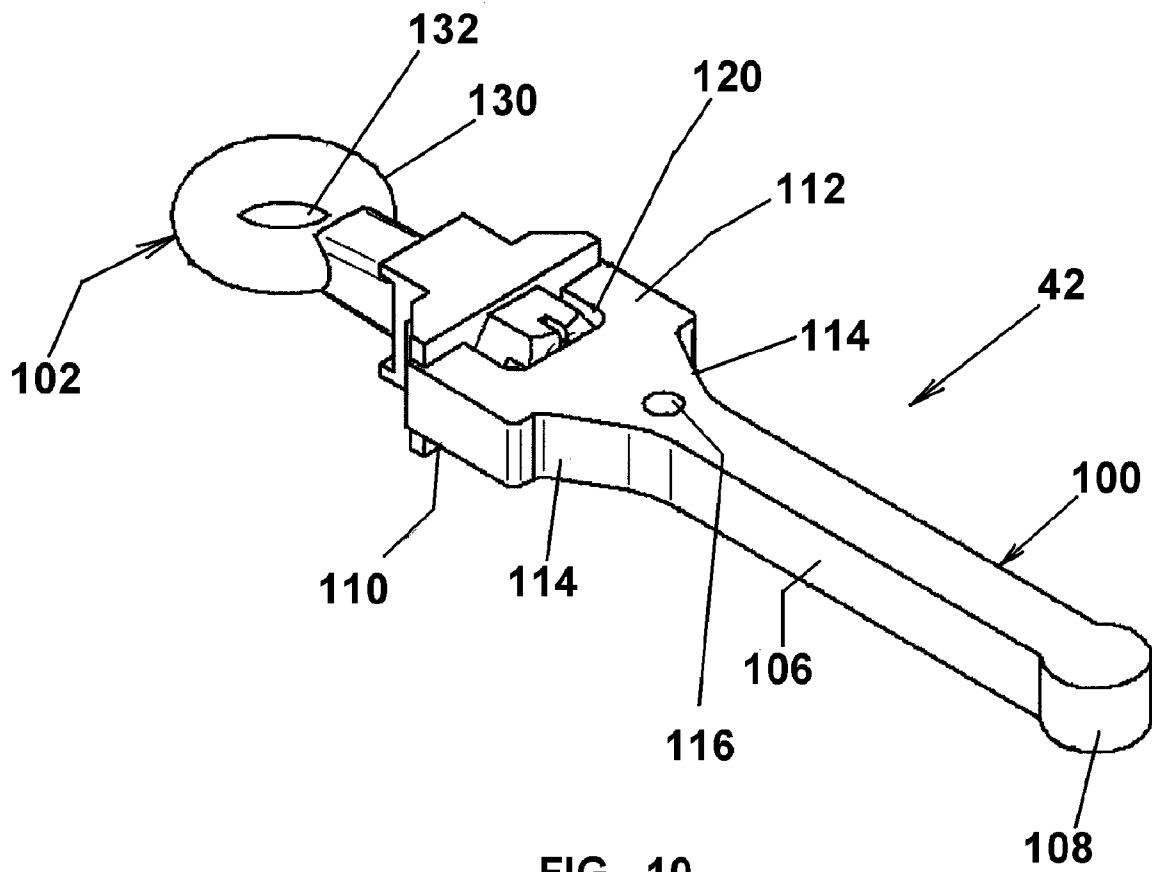
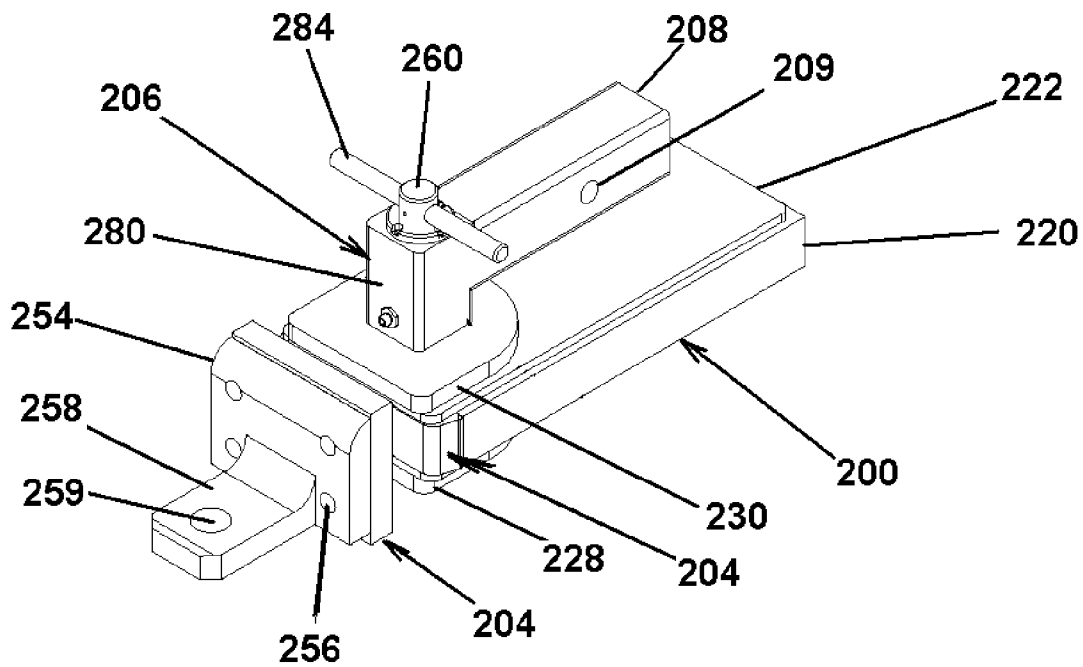
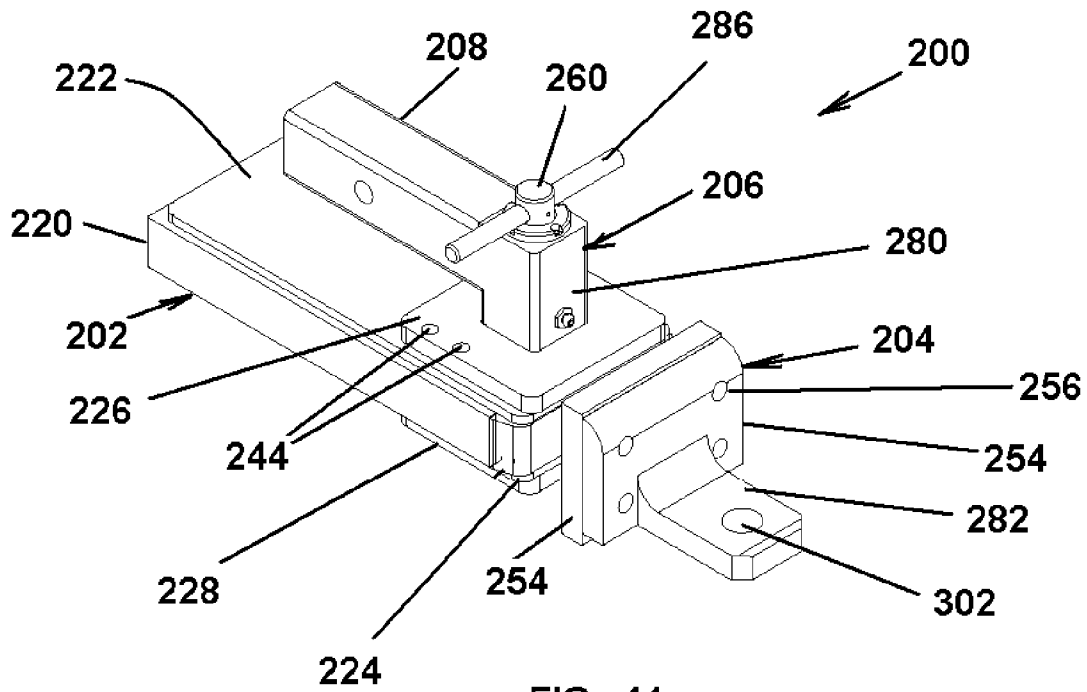


FIG. 10



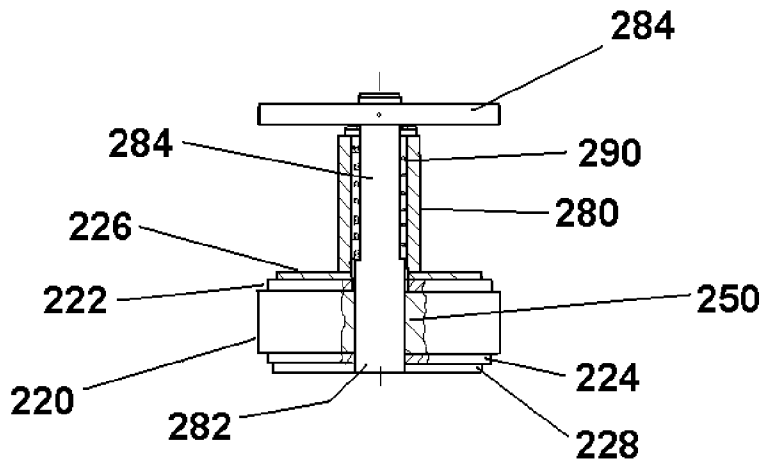


FIG. 13

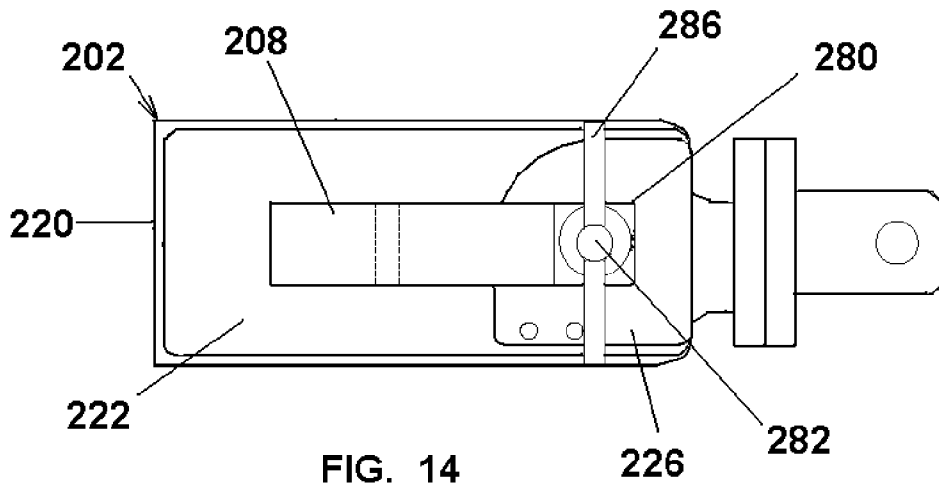


FIG. 14

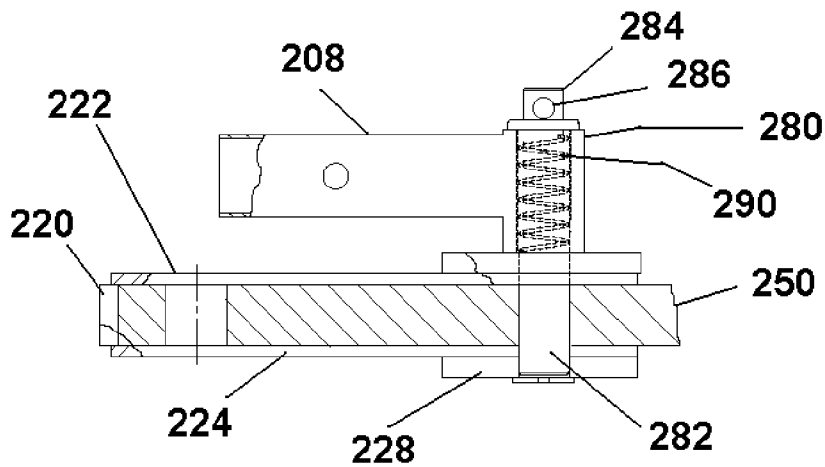


FIG. 15

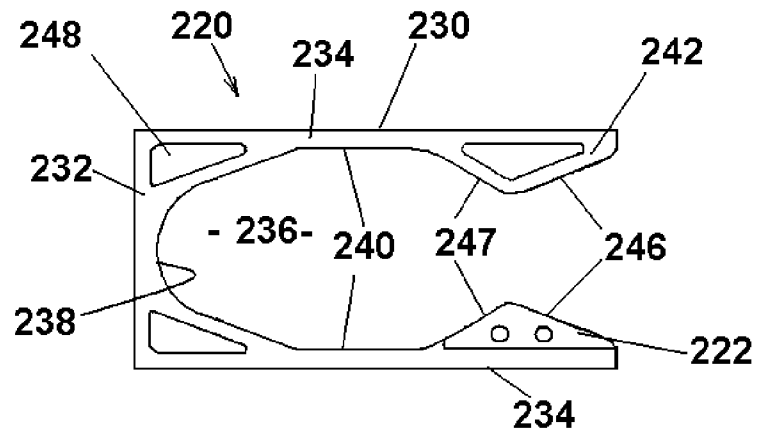


FIG. 16

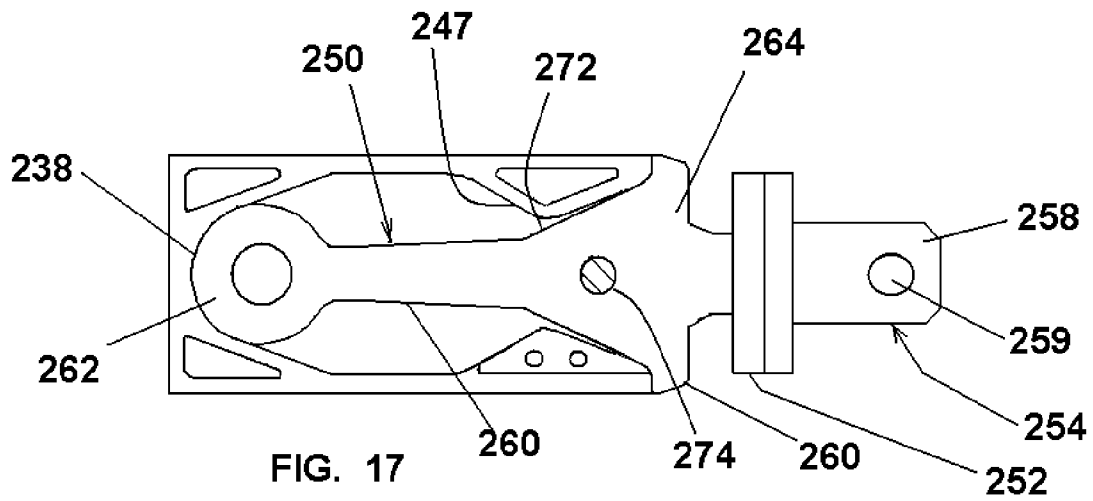


FIG. 17

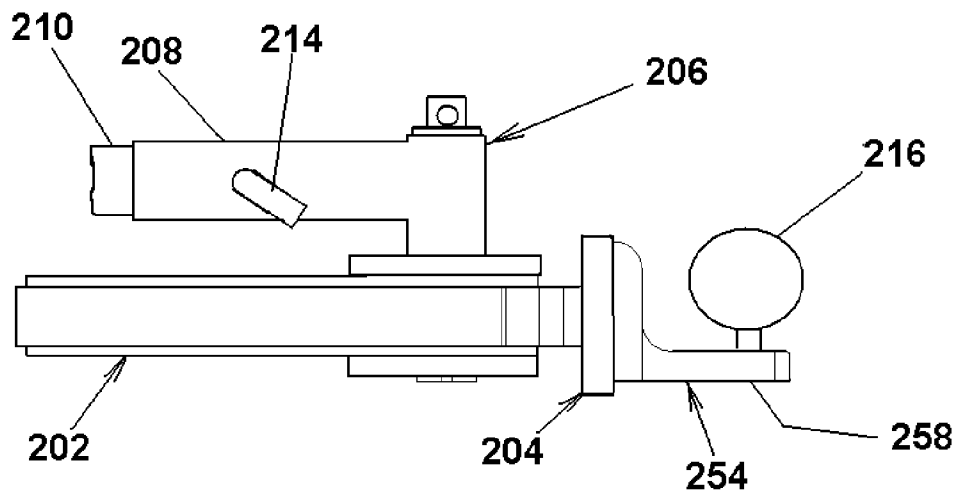


FIG. 18

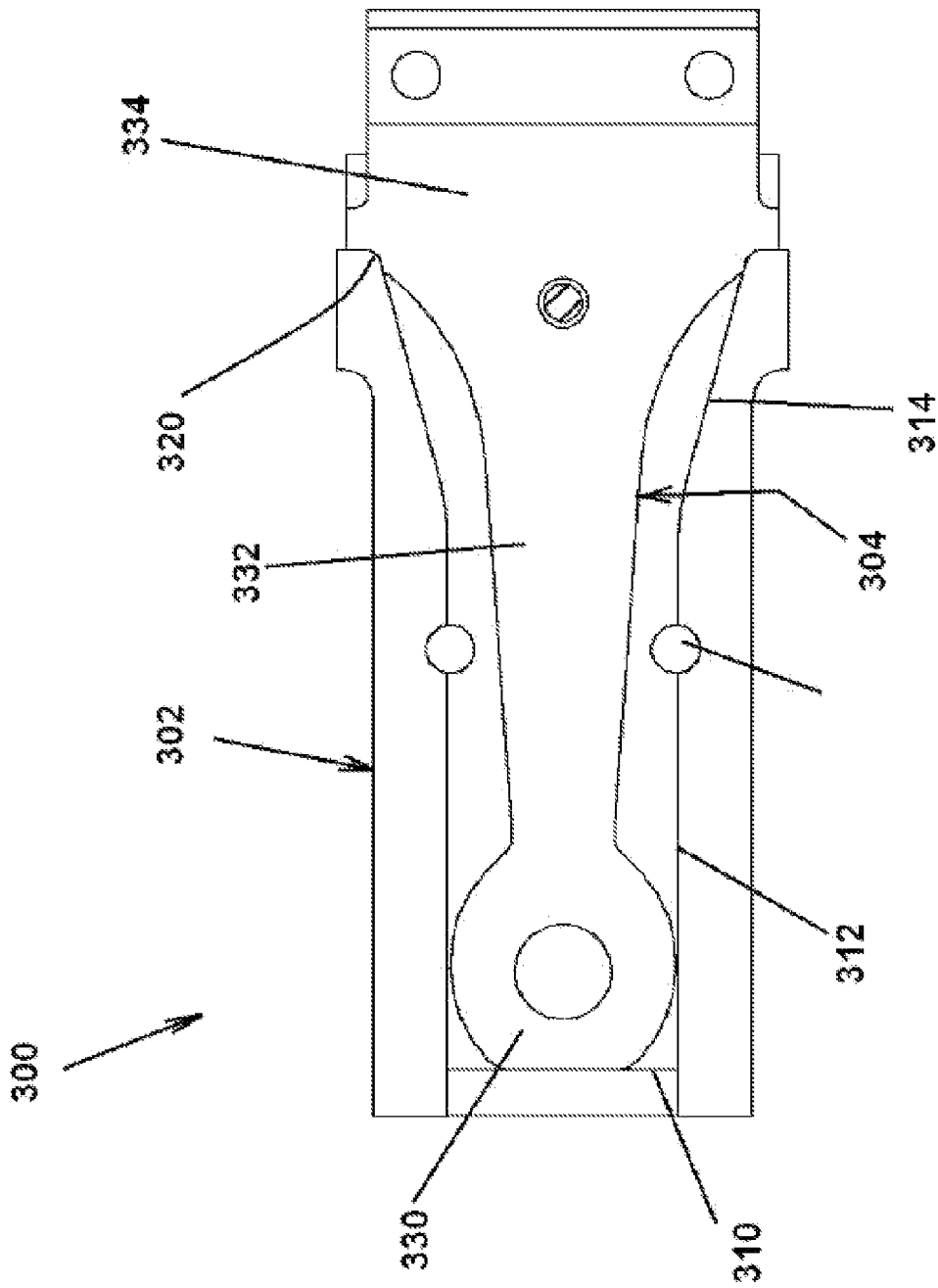


FIG. 19

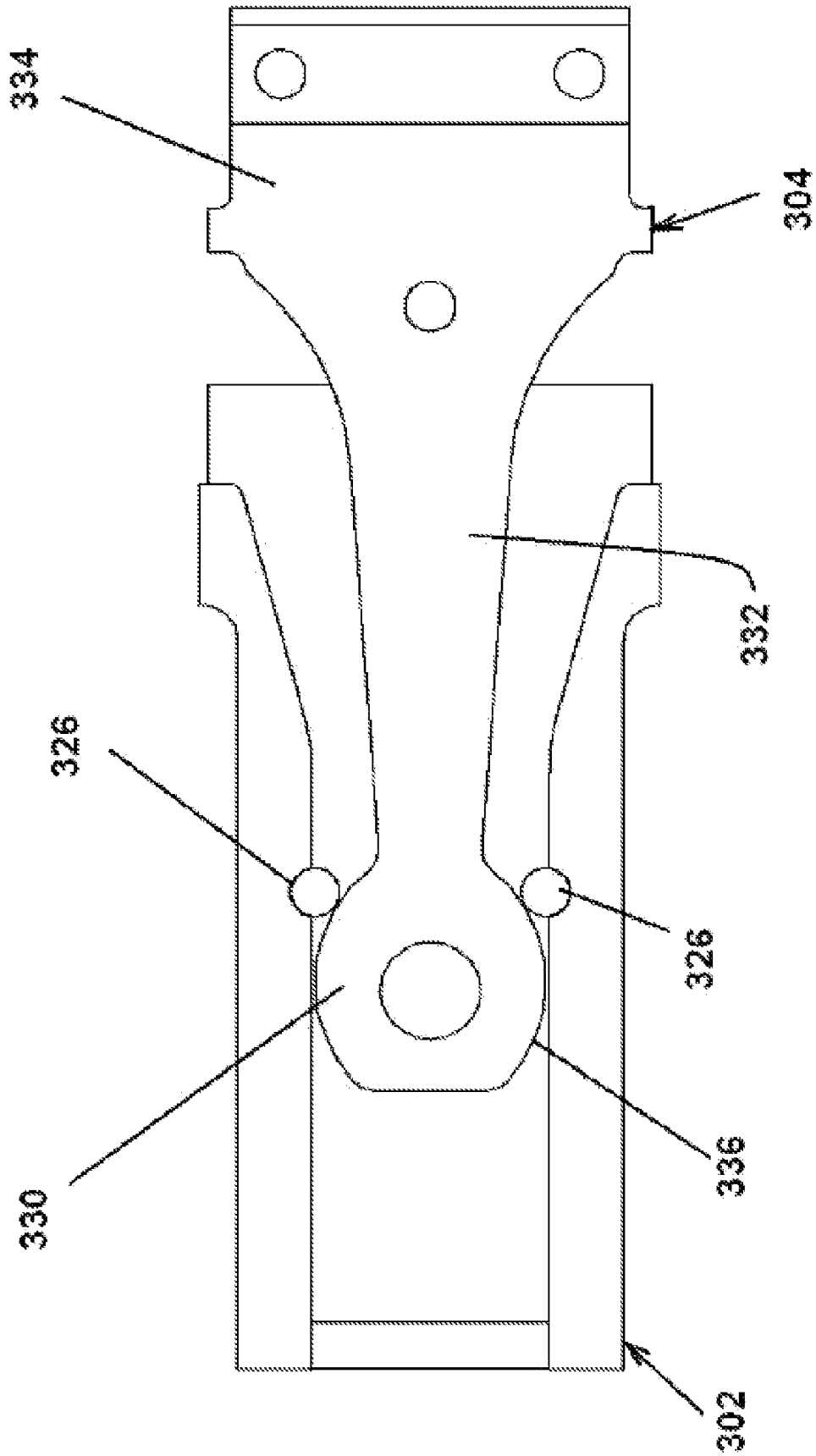


FIG. 20

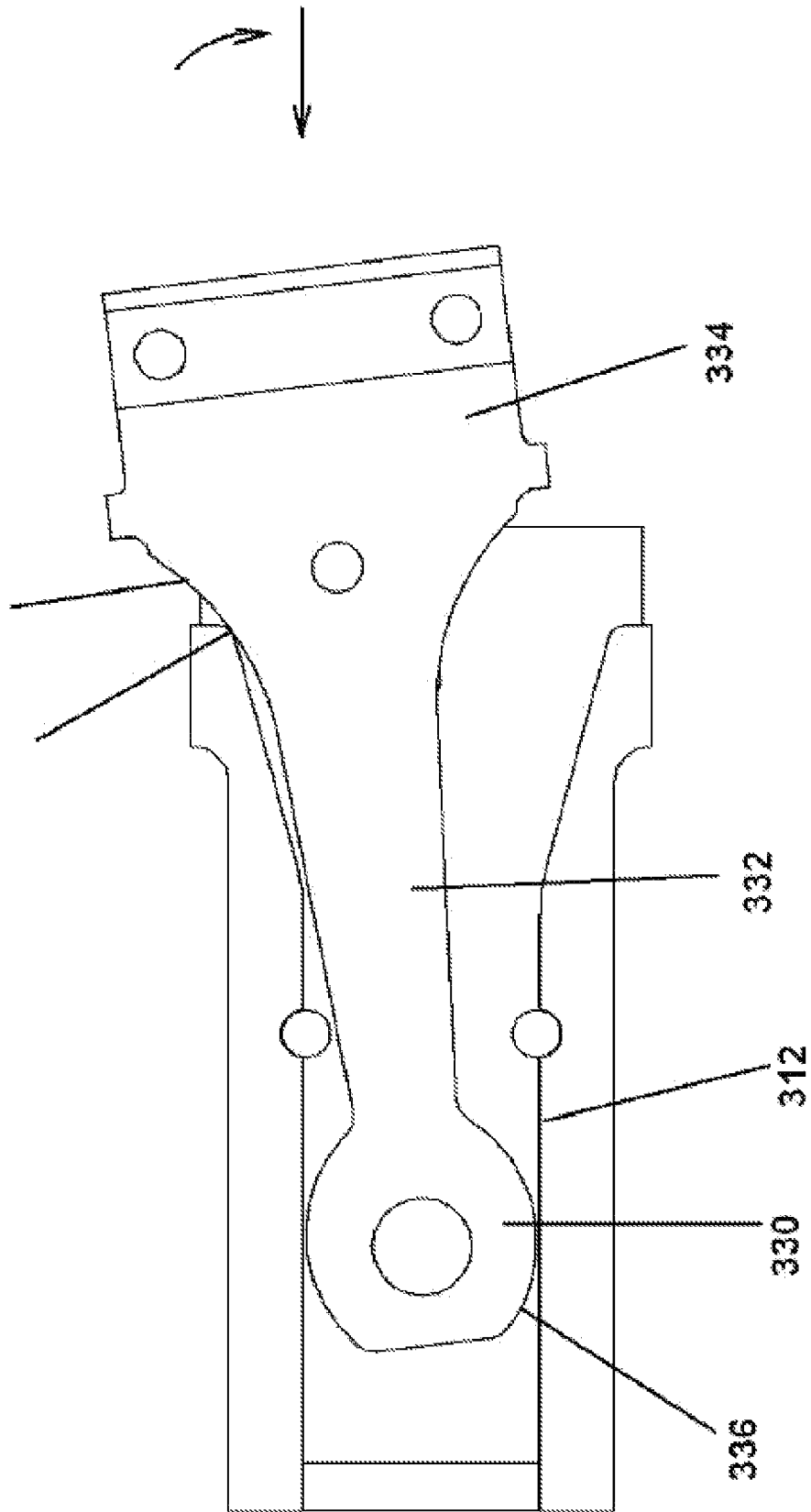


FIG. 21

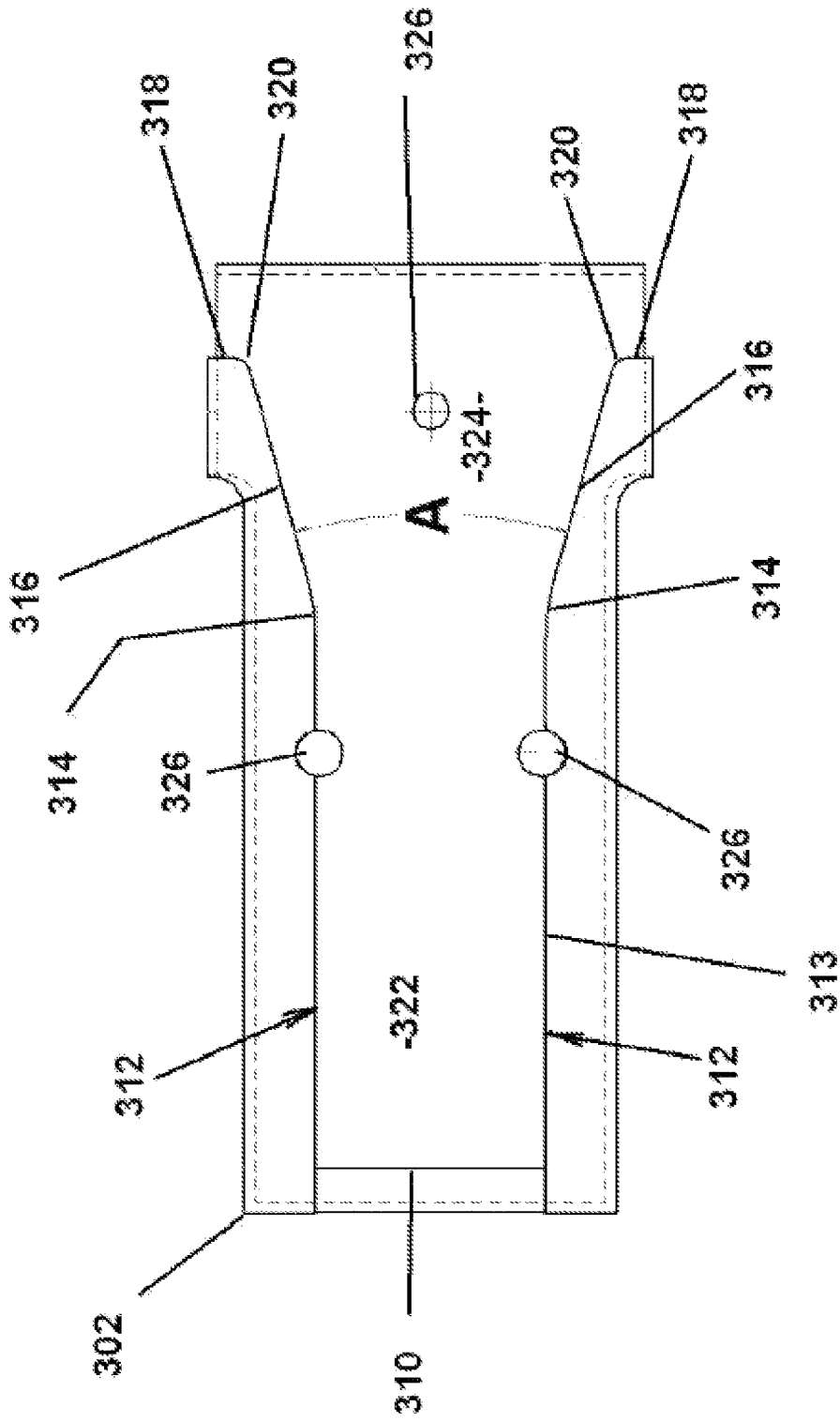


FIG. 22

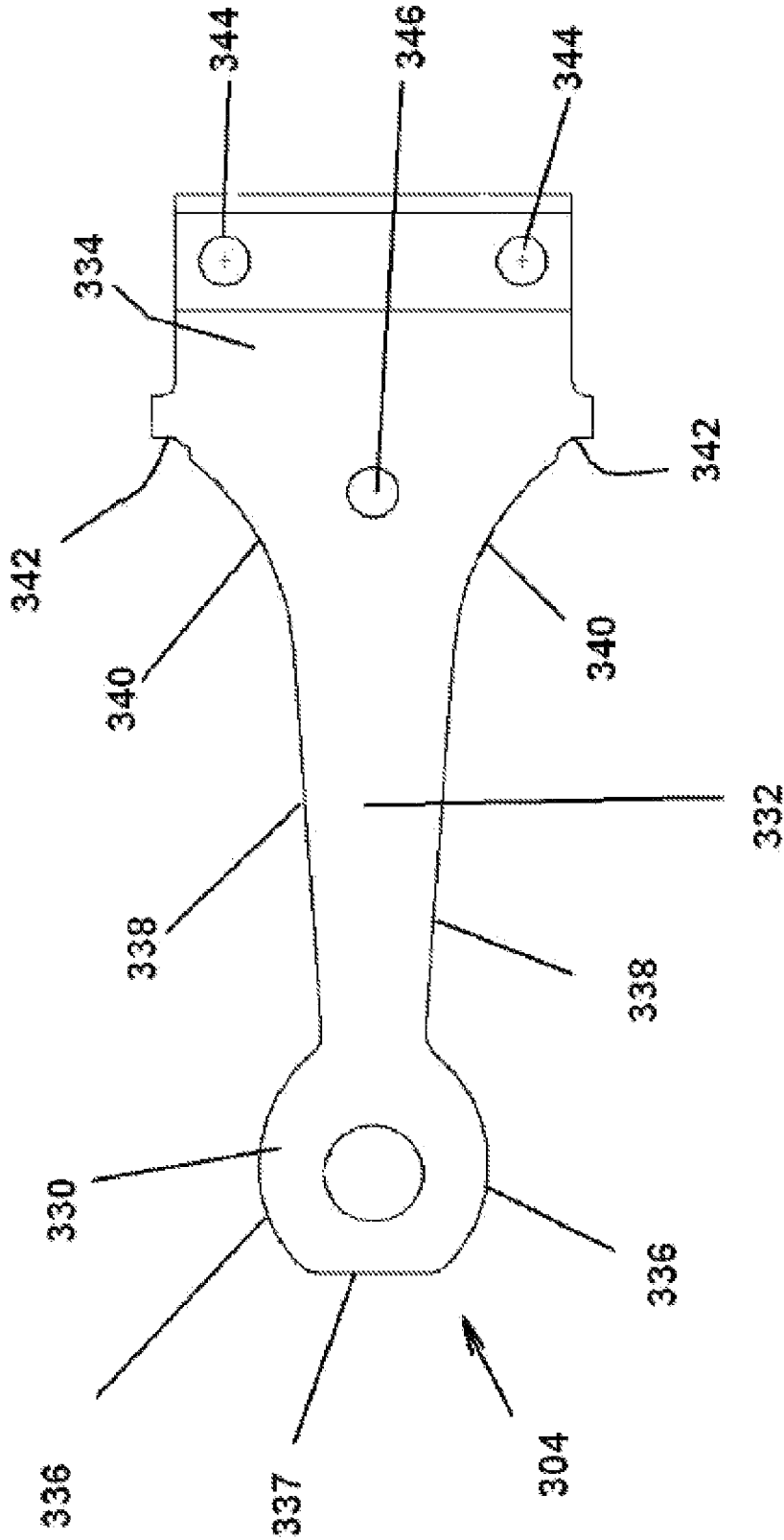


FIG. 23

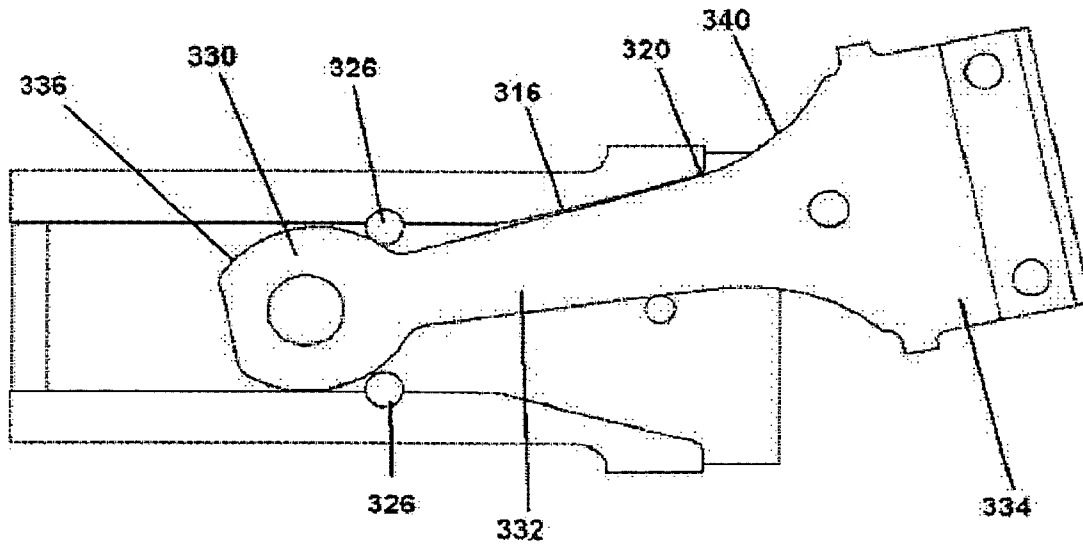


FIG. 24

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TELESCOPING AND SWIVELING HITCH ASSEMBLY

RELATED APPLICATIONS

This application is a continuation in part application of U.S. patent application Ser. No. 10/908,514 filed on May 16, 2005, now U.S. Pat. No. 7,293,791 dated Nov. 13, 2007 and claims the benefit of U.S. Provisional Application No. 60/398,757 filed on Jul. 26, 2002 and U.S. patent application Ser. No. 10/628,064 filed on Jul. 25, 2003, now abandoned, in the name of Thomas S. Williams, Jr. and entitled "Telescoping and Swiveling Hitch Assembly".

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

The present invention relates to coupling systems for releasably interconnecting a towing vehicle with a towed vehicle and, in particular, a telescoping and swiveling hitch assembly for enabling coupling between proximately located vehicles.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

Powered and trailed vehicles are conventionally interconnected for travel by coupling hitches involving fixed locations on the vehicles. Using ball and socket type universal connections or pin type connections the required relative movement during travel is provided. The fixed locations, however, are difficult to effect particularly with large vehicle that prevent ready manual alignment for final coupling. When accurate alignment is not obtained, the towed vehicle is manually moved to proper position, requiring strength, dexterity and multiple personnel, often with an attendant risk of injury. As the tongue weight of the towed vehicle increases the skills and risks are substantially increased. The problem is particularly troublesome for large steerable wheel trailers, such as employed by the military.

Telescoping and pivoting hitches have been proposed to allow coupling between misaligned vehicles. Most are designed for lighter weight trailers and unsuited for heavy load applications. Others provide only a length dependent articulation reducing the accommodated zone of vehicle misalignment.

For instance, U.S. Pat. No. 4,515,387 to Shuck utilizes a tongue that must be fully extended before tow bar can be pivoted, thereby restricting the permissible zone of vehicle misalignment. The hitch is formed of lightweight materials not suitable for heavy trailer applications. Further, the alignment torque during retraction is borne by a sliding pin connection further reducing the ability to handle heavier trailer units. U.S. Pat. No. 5,277,447 to Blaser also provides a telescoping hitch that is pivotal only in the fully extended position.

U.S. Pat. No. 5,011,176 to Eppinette discloses a telescoping arm having a pivoting outer end allowing coupling to a misaligned vehicle. The towing vehicle must be moved forwardly to align the arm sections, at which time a slidably collar is placed around the pivot connection to prevent pivoting. Thereafter, the towing vehicle reversed to shift the arm to a retracted locked towing position. The need for forward movement, which is not always possible or convenient, and the multiple manual steps for achieving final coupling are disadvantageous.

U.S. Pat. No. 5,322,315 to Carsten discloses a fixed pivot arm having a telescoping outer end mounted on the towing vehicle. After coupling, the towing vehicle must be moved

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forwardly for aligning and locking the pivoting arm and thereafter rearwardly for locking the telescoping arm. U.S. Pat. No. 6,357,779 to Mok et al. also provides a fixed pivot arm having a telescoping outer end that requires forward movement for vehicle alignment and rearward movement for retraction and locking.

U.S. Pat. No. 6,328,326 to Slatten discloses a hitch tongue that is slidably and pivotally supported on a housing for coupling misaligned vehicles. The tongue and housing have complementary camming surfaces for nested alignment in a locked position. The camming surfaces provide limited aligning torque precluding usage on heavier trailer applications.

BRIEF SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention provides a hitch assembly suitable for heavy vehicle applications that may be readily deployed for final coupling by rough relative positioning of the vehicles. The hitch assembly comprises only two unitized subassemblies, a housing and a tow bar, that may be assembled, and disassembled for repair, using simple tools. In one aspect, the hitch assembly comprises: a housing member having an internal cavity with a restricted throat opening; an tow bar member extending into the cavity an having a tail section larger than the throat opening and establishing when engaged therewith a pivotal connection for forward aligning movement, the tow bar member being supported by said housing member for cojoint longitudinal and pivotal movement between a retracted coupled position and an extended alignment position; means for mounting the housing member on one of the vehicles; means for mounting a component of the coupling member on the tow bar member; and latching means permitting movement of the tow bar member between the coupled position and the alignment position in a unlatched condition and fixedly connecting the tow bar member to the housing member in a latched condition; and actuating means for selectively moving said latching means between said unlatched condition and said latched condition.

The cavity has a parabolic shape characterized by widely spaced sidewalls gradually sloping inwardly from the throat and merging with a rounded base. The configuration allows substantial articulation for entire range of extension as the tow arms horizontally floats within the cavity. According, a coupling zone is provided of relatively constant width and substantial length thereby accommodating a wide range of vehicle misalignments. While the vehicles may be aligned by initial forward movement of the towing vehicle, advantageously the towing vehicle may be directly reversed to effect alignment and coupling. During initial rearward movement, the tow arm freely moves until contacting the cavity wall. Thereafter, a substantial lever arm is established with the throat providing a substantial aligning torque on the trailer tongue. As the tow arm reaches the retracted position. Nesting surfaces on the tow bar and housing coact for effecting final alignment. Whereas current military and heavy load vehicles require multiple attempts for proper vehicle placement and multiple personnel for final positioning and coupling, the present invention provides a permissible preliminary alignment zone that can be readily achieved by the vehicle operator. Moreover, either the vehicle operator or a single ground personnel, can establish the hitch coupling, with final retraction and locking accomplished with a single rearward vehicle movement.

Accordingly, it is an object of the present invention to provide a hitch assembly for interconnecting vehicles that accommodates a wide range of vehicle misalignments.

Another object of the invention is to provide a telescoping and swiveling hitch assembly for interconnecting vehicles that reduces the time, effort and personnel required to couple misaligned vehicles.

A further object is to provide an adjustable position hitch assembly that provides a constant width and substantial length zone for accommodating attachment to proximately located vehicles.

DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

The above and other objects and advantages of the invention will become apparent upon reading the following written description taken in conjunction with the accompanying drawings in which:

FIG. 1 is a perspective view of a truck and a trailer coupled with a hitch assembly in accordance with a preferred embodiment of the invention;

FIG. 2 is an enlarged perspective view of the hitch assembly in the coupled position with the truck;

FIG. 3 is a side view of the truck and trailer coupled with the hitch assembly;

FIG. 4 is a bottom perspective view of the hitch assembly in the extended and swiveled position at initial hookup with the truck;

FIG. 5 is a top perspective view of the hitch assembly in the extended and swiveled position;

FIG. 6 is a partially exploded perspective view of the hitch assembly;

FIG. 7 is a perspective view of the hitch assembly;

FIG. 8 is a horizontal cross sectional view of the hitch housing;

FIG. 9 is a partially sectioned perspective view of the hitch assembly in the locked position; and

FIG. 10 is a perspective view of the tow bar of the hitch assembly;

FIG. 11 is a left side perspective view of another embodiment of the hitch assembly;

FIG. 12 is a right side perspective view of the hitch assembly of FIG. 11;

FIG. 13 is partially section front view through the lock assembly of the hitch assembly of FIG. 11;

FIG. 14 is a top view of the hitch assembly of FIG. 11;

FIG. 15 is a partially section side view of the hitch assembly of FIG. 11;

FIG. 16 is a top view of the guide plate of the hitch assembly of FIG. 11;

FIG. 17 is a top view of the hitch assembly of FIG. 11 with the top plate removed;

FIG. 18 is a side view of the hitch assembly of FIG. 1 coupled to a hitch of a towing vehicle;

FIG. 19 is a top view of a hitch assembly in accordance with another embodiment with the top removed and illustrating the retracted position;

FIG. 20 is a top view of the hitch assembly of FIG. 19 illustrating an aligned extended position;

FIG. 21 is a top view of the hitch assembly of FIG. 19 illustrating a partially retracted position;

FIG. 22 is a top view of the hitch assembly of FIG. 19 illustrating an extended swiveled position;

FIG. 23 is a top view of the housing of FIG. 19; and

FIG. 24 is a top view of the probe of FIG. 19.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

Referring to FIGS. 1 through 5, the present invention provides a telescoping and swiveling hitch assembly 10 for inter-

connecting a towing vehicle or truck 12 with a towed vehicle or trailer 14. The hitch assembly 10 is particularly adapted for heavy-duty vehicles, such as military transport systems. An exemplary towing vehicle is a Medium Tactical Vehicle Replacement (MTVR) truck and a suitable towed vehicle is a Medium Tactical Vehicle Replacement Variant trailer, both manufactured by Oshkosh Truck Corporation of Oshkosh, Wis. As will become apparent, the hitch assembly may alternatively be fixedly mounted on either vehicle and be releasably coupled with the other vehicle. The hitch assembly may be combined with conventional coupling configurations, such as a ball and socket or pinned couplings, for accommodating relative articulating or universal movement between the vehicles. The hitch 16 on the truck 12 is conventional for MTVR truck/trailer combines and comprises a hook or pintle 18 surrounded by a protective shield 19.

The trailer 14 includes a chassis 20 supported on front and rear axle wheel assemblies 22, 23. The front wheel assembly 22 is steerable. A trailer tongue 24 includes forwardly and inwardly converging side arms 26. The side arms 26 are connected to the front wheel assembly 22 at horizontal pivot connections 28. A cross bar 30 laterally interconnects the arms 26. The front ends of the side arms 26 are laterally spaced whereby the side arms and the cross bar 30 form a forwardly opening generally triangular slot. In commercial units a tow bar assembly is removably connected at the forward end of the side arms at the slot entrance. In the present preferred embodiment the tow bar assembly is removed for direct reception, without further modification of the trailer, of the hitch assembly 10 and using a modification of the existing hitch eyelet.

Referring to FIGS. 6 and 7, the hitch assembly 10 comprises two subassemblies: a housing assembly 40 and a telescoping and swiveling tow bar or probe assembly 42. The housing assembly includes a lock assembly 44. As described in greater detail below, upon release of the lock assembly 44, the probe assembly 42 has free horizontal movement and in combination with the pivoting of the trailer tongue 24 about the pivotal connections 28 permits the ready and safe coupling with a proximately located truck hitch.

The housing assembly 40 is hexagonal and configured to be received in the tongue slot of conventional MTVR trailers. The housing assembly 40 is welded or mechanically connected to the side arms 26 and cross beam 30.

The housing assembly 40 comprises a hexagonal center guide block 46, a removable triangular stop collar 48 assembled with fasteners 49, a hexagonal top cover plate 50 and a hexagonal bottom cover plate 52. Preferably, the plates 50, 52 are peripherally welded to the guide block 46 to provide a unitized assembly. A top reinforcing plate 53 is welded to the top cover plate 50 at the forward end thereof. A bottom reinforcing plate 55 is welded to the bottom cover plate 52 at the forward end thereof.

As shown in FIG. 8, the guide block 46 comprises a unitary body 54 having a generally U-shaped forwardly opening cavity 56. The body 54 is exteriorly defined by forwardly inwardly converging front sidewalls 58, rearwardly inwardly converging rear side walls 60, a transverse rear wall 62 and a centrally vertically slotted front wall 64. As discussed above, the front sidewalls 58 nest with the inner surfaces of the side arms 26 of the tongue, and the rear wall 62 engages the cross beam 30 whereat the housing assembly is welded or mechanically affixed.

The cavity 56 is defined by a continuous inner wall 68 in the longitudinal center of the body 54 and comprises a U-shaped, forwardly opening parabolic base and a pair of laterally spaced, apex opposed triangular sections 70, one of which is

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the removable stop collar **48**. With the stop collar **48** assembled with the fasteners **49** establishing a constricted frontal throat opening **72** and frontally terminating with outwardly diverging planar guide surfaces **74**, forming a forwardly opening wedge shaped, tapered socket.

Vertical through holes are drilled through the housing assembly and the stop collar **48** for the shanks of the fasteners **49** thereby providing for ready assembly and replacement of the collar **48**. A vertical bore **76** is formed through the longitudinal center of the housing assembly **40** and the lock assembly **44** forwardly of the opening **72** for reception of the lock bolt of the lock assembly **44**.

The lock assembly **44** includes a lock block **80**, a lock bolt **82** having an actuating handle **84** and spring biased downwardly by a compression spring **86**. The lock block **80** is a rectangular bar attached by welds to the top reinforcing plate **53** and centered over the vertical bore **76**. The lock block includes a bore extension concentric and complementary to the bore **76** and formed concurrently therewith. The lock bolt **82** is cylindrical and slidably supported in the bore **76**. An inverted J-slot **90** is formed in the sidewall of the lock block **80**. The inner end of the handle **84** extends through the slot **90** and connected in a counterbore in the side of the lock bolt **82**. When the handle **84** resides at the base of the slot **90**, the lock bolt **82** extends through the bore **76** to the bottom plates **52, 56** of the housing assembly **40** to establish a locked condition with the tow probe **42**. When the handle **84** is raised to the top of the slot **90** and rotated into the side notch **91** thereof, the lock bolt **82** is in an unlocked position with the lower end thereof above the guide block **46**. A cover plate **92** is connected to the top of the lock block by fasteners **94** thereby capturing and preloading the spring **88** against the top of the lock bolt **82**.

Referring additionally to FIGS. **6, 9** and **10**, the tow probe **42** comprises an elongated tow bar **100** connected to a hitch eyelet **102** by threaded nut **104**. The tow bar **100** includes straight rectangular center section **106** narrower in width than the throat opening **72**, an enlarged circular tail section **108** and an enlarged head section **110**. When the tow bar **100** is in the fully retracted position, the tail section **108** engages the end wall of the housing cavity. When the tow bar **100** is in the fully extended position, the tail section **108** engages the walls of the collar sections **70** to establish a load bearing pivotal connection with the housing.

The head section **110** includes a base **112** having rearwardly inwardly inclined sidewalls **114** forming a tapered wedge adapted to conformally nest with the frontal walls **74** of the housing to center the tow probe **40** at and proximate to the retracted position. A through hole **116** is formed in the base **112** and is coaxial with the bore **76** in the housing to permit movement of the lock bolt between positions.

A vertical slot **120** is formed in the center of the head section. A longitudinal bore **122** is formed in the front end of the head section and intersects the slot **120**. The hitch eyelet **102** includes a cylindrical hook **130** having a vertical opening **132**, a base **134** rearwardly terminating with a threaded stud **136**. In assembly, the stud **136** is inserted through the hole **122** and the nut **104** threaded thereon to clamp the eyelet **102** to the probe head **110**. The assembled condition is maintained by a cotter pin **140** assembled in a conventional manner through radial slots and cross holes in the nut **104** and stud **136**, respectively.

It will be appreciated that the tow probe horizontally floats without fixed pivots within the confines of cavity to provide a wide zone of articulation throughout movement between the retracted and extended positions. This provides for a large strike zone for the eyelet to enable coupling with a prox-

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mately positioned pintle thereby obviating the need for tedious positioning of the towing vehicle and manual position of the trailer tongue.

As representatively shown in FIGS. **4** and **5**, the vehicle **12** may be positioned at an angle with respect to the trailer and longitudinally separated, from a normal coupling position. To achieve coupling notwithstanding such misalignment, the handle **84** is raised in the slot **90** and rotated to the side notch **91** to provide a detented unlocked condition withdrawing the lock bolt from the tow arm. The tow probe **42** is then manually telescopically withdrawn and the eyelet **130** coupled with the pintle hook **18**. After withdrawal, the handle **84** may be released thereby biasing the lock bolt **82** against the top surface of the center section **106**.

Final coupling may be accomplished in plural ways. In a direct method, the vehicle **12** may be directly backed toward the trailer. Before movement the latch handle **84** may be rotated into the slot and biased against the top surface of the tow probe. Rearward vehicle movement will drive the tow probe toward a retracted position whereat the cavity wall and opposed collar **70** are engaged thereby generating an aligning torque moving the tongue of the trailer toward longitudinal alignment with the tow bar. As the tow bar approaches the retracted position and the cavity wall become transverse to movement, the guide walls **114** of the head section **112** coast with the front walls **74** to provide a continuing aligning torque to accurately longitudinally align the tow probe in the cavity. When alignment is complete, the spring **88** biases the lock bolt through the opening **116** in the tow bar to effect without manual assistance the locked condition thereby permitting full transporting of the trailored vehicle **14**.

In the indirect method, the towing vehicle **12** is moved forwardly thereby fully extending the tow probe and establishing the load bearing pivotal connection at the collar with the tail section **108**. Further forward movement will establish an aligning torque on the tongue to longitudinally align the tow probe. When aligned the towing vehicle is backed until the tow probe is in the nested fully retracted position and the lock bolt actuated to the locked position.

The hitch assembly **10** may be integrated in various ways with the desired vehicle, for example by mechanical or welded attachment at the rear, or by integration into the towing tongue, or other suitable means.

Depending of the relative configuration of the housing components, a desired amount of extension and pivoting of the tow bar assembly can be provided. In actual use, a 30 inch extension with a 30 inch lateral swivel span has been successfully integrated into MTRV truck/trailer units.

Referring to FIGS. **11** and **12**, there is illustrated another embodiment of the invention for use with lighter weight vehicles, such as trucks and automobiles. The hitch assembly **200** comprises two subassemblies: a housing assembly **202** and a telescoping and swiveling tow bar or probe assembly **204**.

The housing assembly **202** includes a lock assembly **206** having a rearwardly extending coupling arm **208** formed or rectangular tube. As shown in FIG. **18**, the coupling arm **208** is telescopically removably coupled with a hitch box **210** and the towing vehicle by pin **214** inserted through transverse hole **219** in the coupling arm. The hitch box **210** is preferably a rectangular socket-type coupled commonly referred to a "Reese" hitch. The probe assembly **204** is provided with a ball member **216** for coupling with the hitch on the towed vehicle. As such, no further modification to the vehicle is necessary. It will, however, be apparent that the hitch may be mounted by other conventional methods to the selected vehicle.

As in the prior embodiment, the lock assembly 206 in the unlatched condition provides the probe assembly 204 with free horizontal and pivotal movement, which in combination with the pivoting of the trailer tongue on the towed vehicle permits the ready and safe coupling therebetween.

Referring to FIGS. 13 through 15, the housing assembly 200 comprises a rectangular center guide block 220, a rectangular top cover plate 222 and a rectangular bottom cover plate 224. Preferably, the plates 222, 224 are peripherally welded to the guide block 220 to provide a unitized assembly. A top reinforcing plate is welded to the top cover plate 222 at the forward end thereof. A bottom reinforcing plate 228 is welded to the bottom cover plate at the forward end thereof.

As shown in FIG. 16, the guide block 220 comprises a unitary body 230 having a base 232 and forwardly extending laterally spaced arms 234. The inner surfaces of the base 232 and the arms 234 provide a generally U-shaped forwardly opening slot forming a cavity 236 in assembly. The cavity 236 is defined by a continuous inner wall comprising a U-shaped, forwardly opening parabolic base wall 238 and laterally spaced center walls 240. The arms 234 frontally terminate with a pair of laterally spaced, apex opposed triangular collars 242, one of which is the removable stop collar 222. The stop collar 222 is removably assembled with the fasteners 244 (FIG. 11). The inner tips of the triangular collars 222, 242 establish a constricted frontal throat. The collars 222, 242 have outwardly diverging planar front guide surfaces 246 and rear guide surfaces. The front guide surfaces 246 form, in assembly, a forwardly opening wedge shaped, tapered socket. Vertical through holes are drilled through the housing assembly 202 and the stop collar 222 for the shanks of the fasteners 244 thereby providing for ready assembly and replacement of the collar 222. Triangular passages 248 are formed in the base 232 and the arms 234 for reducing the weight of the housing assembly

Referring to FIG. 17, the probe assembly 204 comprises an elongated tow bar 250 welded at an outer end to a face plate 252 that is connected to a hitch eyelet 254 by fasteners 256 (FIG. 11). The hitch eyelet 254 terminates with a horizontally projecting arm 258 having an aperture 259 for receiving the shank for the ball 216. The tow bar 250 includes straight rectangular center section 260 narrower in width than the throat in the guide block 220 having an enlarged circular tail section 262 at the rear end and an enlarged generally triangular head section 264 at the front end. When the tow bar 250 is in the fully retracted position, the tail section 262 engages the base wall of the guide block 220, nesting at the base wall 238. When the tow bar 250 is in the fully extended position, the tail section 262 engages the rear guide surfaces 247 of the collars 222, 242 to establish a load bearing pivotal connection with the housing assembly 202.

The head section 264 includes rearwardly inwardly inclined sidewalls 272 forming a tapered wedge adapted to nest with the front guide walls 246 in the guide block socket to center the tow probe 204 proximate to and at the retracted position. A through hole 274 is formed in the base 270 for permitting movement of the lock assembly 206 between locked and unlocked positions, between positions, as described below.

Referring to FIGS. 13 through 15, the lock assembly 206 includes a vertical lock block 280 attached to the top plate and connected to the coupling arm 208 at an upper end. The lock block 280 has a vertical bore aligned with aperture 274 to the arm 260 and corresponding apertures in the plate 224, 228. A cylindrical lock bolt 282 is slidably supported in the bore. The lock bolt 282 includes a reduced diameter shaft 284 at an upper end. A transverse actuating handle 286 is attached the

upper end of the shaft 284. A compression spring 290 is carried on the shaft 284 and compressively retained between the lock bolt and a retaining cap 292 at the upper end of the lock block 280. Accordingly, the lock bolt 282 is compressively biased to the locked position shown in FIGS. 13 and 15 wherein the lock bolt passes through the aperture 274 in the tow arm 260. The handle 286 is raised against the biasing of the spring 290 to an unlocked position whereat the probe assembly 204 may be extended. Thereafter, the lock bolt rides against the top surface of the tow bar until aligned with the tow bar aperture for automatic self biasing to the locked position.

In operation, the towing vehicle is backed proximate the hitch of the towed vehicle. The actuating handle 286 is raised to the unlocked position and the tow bar 260 manually extended, and aligned with and coupled in a conventional manner with the towed vehicle hitch box 210. Thereafter if a considerable misalignment between the vehicles exists, the towing vehicle may be moved forwardly to longitudinally align the tow bar at the pivotal connection between the collars 242, 222 and the tail section 262. Then the vehicle is reversed causing the tow bar tail 262 to engage the rearwardly converging surfaces of the base wall for further alignment and the head to nest in the front housing socket thereby achieving an aligned position whereat the lock assembly is actuated to the locked condition. For lesser misalignments, the towing vehicle may be backed toward the towed vehicle whereby the tail 262 reacts initially with the side walls 240 to begin aligning pivotal movement of the tongue and subsequently reacts with the converging surface of the base wall for final alignment.

While in most instances, it is preferable to align the towing and towed vehicle before retracting and recoupling the hitch to avoid undue stresses in overcoming misalignment, there are other instances where such capability is desired or required such limited maneuvering room or conditions requiring immediate removal, mere convenience and the like. An embodiment of the hitch assembly providing improved misalignment retraction capabilities is shown in FIGS. 19 through 24.

FIG. 19 shows a hitch assembly 300 wherein the top plate and latching mechanism are removed for clarity, but these components are otherwise consistent with the descriptions above. The hitch assembly may be adapted for mounting on the towing or towed vehicle. The hitch assembly 300 includes a housing assembly 302 in which a tow bar or probe assembly 304 is operatively disposed, and movable between a retracted position shown in FIG. 19, an extended towing position shown in FIG. 20, a partially retracted swiveled position shown in FIG. 21, and an extended swiveled towing position shown in FIG. 22.

Referring additionally to FIG. 23, the housing assembly 300 includes a forwardly opening internal probe cavity 306 of a uniform height established by the top and bottom plates. Referring additionally to FIG. 22, the perimeter of the cavity is defined by a transverse base wall 310, a pair of symmetrical laterally spaced linear longitudinal side walls 312. The side walls 312 include parallel linear rear sections 313 forwardly terminating at curvilinear shoulders 314 with an enlarged frontal section having outwardly and frontally extending linear front sections 316. The rear sections may also be curvilinear as described above or converging to assist further in the longitudinal alignment during retraction. The front sections 316 terminate at transverse front walls 318 with load bearing surfaces in the form of rounded inner corners 320. The perimeter thus defines a rear rectangular section 322 and a front truncated triangular neck section 324 having an included

angle "A" between the walls 316 and corners 320. An angle "A" of about 30° is preferred. As the alignment is effected primarily at the corners, the front sections may take various appropriate configurations.

A pair of laterally spaced vertical cylindrical stop pins 326 are partially recessed into the frontal portion of the rear sections of the side walls 312 and form a restricted throat or opening "W" for the probe 304. The top and bottom plates of the housing 300 include aligned vertical bores 328 for receiving, as shown in FIG. 19, a locking pin 329 in the retracted and latched condition of the hitch assembly, as described above.

Referring to FIG. 24, the probe assembly 304 comprises a semicircular tail section 330, a forwardly and outwardly flared center section 332, and an enlarged front section 334. The tail section 330 includes opposed semicircular curved sections 336 having an overall width greater than the opening "W" in the housing assembly for sliding movement in the housing with the rear sections 312 of the side walls 312. Other projecting surfaces such as described above may be used for the opening. The curved sections 336 are restrained and pivotally supported at the pins 326 for swiveling movement at the extended position as shown in FIG. 22 with an angle provided by the front sections 316 and the corners 320. The tail section 330 rearwardly terminates with a transverse rear wall 337. The curved sections 336 are blended at the center section 332 at a radius. The center section 332 is narrower than the opening and includes outwardly diverging side walls 338 blending at gradually outwardly curved curvilinear sections 340 terminating at notches 342 at rear corners of the front section 334. The front section 334 includes mounting holes 344 for attaching a hitch component for coupling with a complementary hitch component on the other vehicle. The forward end of the center section includes a through hole 346 for receiving the lock pin in the retracted latched condition.

In the retracted position shown in FIG. 19, the probe 304 is longitudinally centered in the cavity, with the rear wall 337 engaging the rear base wall 310 of the housing 302, and the front corners 320 of the housing nesting at the notches 342 and laterally and longitudinally centering the probe for alignment with the locking pin.

In the extended positions of FIG. 19, the tail section 330 of the probe assembly 204 engages the stop pins 326 to restrict telescopic movement, and establish a pivotal connection thereat to permit swiveling movement within the confines of the neck section 324 as shown in FIG. 22. At the extended position, the corner 320 of the housing assembly is at the curvilinear section 340 of the probe assembly.

Referring to FIG. 21, as the probe assembly 304 is retracted by reverse movement of the towing vehicle, the tail section 330 slides rearwardly and the front inner corner 320 of the housing slides along the engaged curvilinear section 340 creating a torsional reaction gradually and progressively aligning the longitudinal axis of the probe assembly 304 with the longitudinal axis of the housing assembly 302. As mentioned above, by curving or converging the rear sections 312 additional torsional react may be provided. Final aligning is provided by the base 337 of the tail section camming against the rear wall 310 and thereby allowing the head section 334 to nest at the notches 343.

In the retracted position, the locking mechanism of the hitch assembly may be actuated to latch the probe assembly to the vehicle for resuming forward movement.

Having thus described a presently preferred embodiment of the present invention, it will now be appreciated that the objects of the invention have been fully achieved, and it will be understood by those skilled in the art that many changes in construction and widely differing embodiments and applica-

tions of the invention will suggest themselves without departing from the spirit and scope of the present invention. The disclosures and description herein are intended to be illustrative and are not in any sense limiting of the invention, which is defined solely in accordance with the following claims.

What is claimed:

1. The hitch assembly comprising: a housing assembly and a tow bar assembly, said housing assembly having a longitudinally extending forwardly opening cavity therein, said cavity being defined by a transverse base wall and laterally spaced, longitudinally extending side walls, said side walls including rear sections and a forwardly and outwardly diverging front section frontally terminating at laterally spaced load bearing surfaces;

inwardly extending stop surfaces on said side walls forming a restricted opening having a width less than the lateral spacing between said rear sections of said side walls; a tow bar assembly having a rear section and a front section connected by a center section, said rear section including an enlarged curved section having a width greater than said restricted opening and being disposed for sliding movement between said rear sections of said side walls, said curved section establishing a pivotal connection at said stop surfaces in an extended position and located adjacent said base wall is a retracted position, said center section having side walls having a width less than said restricted opening, said center section frontally terminating with frontally outwardly diverging curvilinear surfaces, one of said curvilinear surfaces coacting with an opposed load bearing surface of said housing assembly in a pivoted condition of said tow bar assembly such that movement to said retracted position effects longitudinal alignment between said housing assembly and said probe assembly; nestable surfaces formed on housing assembly and said tow bar assembly interengaging as said probe assembly approaches said retracted position to effect mechanical longitudinal alignment of said tow bar assembly with said housing assembly; and latching means permitting movement of said tow bar assembly between said retracted position and said extended position in an unlatched condition and fixedly connecting the tow bar assembly to said housing assembly in a latched condition; and actuating means for selectively moving said latching means between said unlatched condition and said latched condition.

2. The hitch assembly as recited in claim 1 wherein said tail section of said tow bar assembly includes a transverse rear wall coacting with said base wall of said housing assembly to further effect said mechanical alignment at said retracted position.

3. The hitch assembly as recited in claim 2 wherein said rear wall and said base wall are transverse and linear.

4. The hitch assembly as recited in claim 1 wherein said rear sections of said side walls are linear and parallel.

5. The hitch assembly as recited in claim 1 wherein said stop surfaces are cylindrical pins partially recessed into said side walls.

6. The hitch assembly as recited in claim 1 wherein said curved surfaces are semicircular.

7. The hitch assembly as recited in claim 1 wherein said nestable surfaces include said corners engaging corresponding recesses in said front section of said tow bar assembly.

8. The hitch assembly as recited in claim 1 further including: a top plate and bottom plate overlying said cavity and a lock block vertically connected to said top plate wherein said lock block and said plates have coaxially aligned passages

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and aligned with a passage in said tow bar assembly in said retracted position; a lock bolt slidably carried in the passage in said lock block and slidable between a raised position above said tow bar assembly and a lowered position extending through said passages in said probe assembly and said plates to thereby lock said tow bar assembly to said housing assembly.

9. The hitch assembly as recited in claim 8 including a rearwardly projecting sleeve on said lock block adapted for establishing a coupling relationship with a socket member mounted on a towing vehicle; and said tow bar assembly is adapted for coupling with a towed vehicle.

10. The hitch assembly as recited in claim 1 wherein the angle between said front section includes outwardly diverging linear sections having an angle of about 30° and wherein said load bearing surfaces are rounded corners.

11. A hitch assembly for mounting on a towing tongue of a towed vehicle and coupling at a hitch connection of a tow vehicle variably longitudinally and laterally spaced with respect thereto, said hitch assembly comprising: a housing assembly having a center member, a top plate and a bottom plate having frontal side walls, said housing assembly adapted to be affixed to the towing tongue; a forwardly opening cavity formed in said center member, said cavity defined a transverse base and laterally spaced longitudinally extending side walls including linear and parallel rear sections and outwardly extend front sections frontally terminating at rounded corners; inwardly projecting surfaces at the front portion of said rear sections spaced to form a restricted passage therebetween; an elongated tow bar member having a head section and a tail section interconnected by a center section, said center section having a width narrower than said restricted passage and extending therethrough with said tail section located in said cavity rearward of said restricted open-

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ing, said tail section being cylindrical and larger than said restricted opening, said tail section engaging said projecting surfaces in an extended position to form a pivotal connection therewith and engaging said base of said cavity in a retracted position; said center section including outwardly diverging curvilinear surfaces engaging said corners to limit pivotal movement of said tow bar assembly, said corners progressively engaging said curvilinear surfaces during movement of said probe assembly to effect longitudinal alignment with said housing assembly upon movement to said retracted position; nestable surfaces including said corners and recesses formed on said head section and said throat section interengaging as said tow bar member approaches said retracted position to effect mechanical longitudinal alignment of said tow bar member with said housing member; a hitch component on said head section for coupling with said hitch connection of said tow vehicle; a first vertical passage formed through said top plate and said bottom plate adjacent said restricted passage; a second passage formed in said tow bar member and coaxially aligned with said first passage when said tow bar member is in said retracted position; a lock block vertically connected to said top plate and having a third passage coaxial with said first passage; a lock bolt slidably carried in said third passage and slidable between a raised position above said restricted passage and a lowered position extending through said first and second passages to thereby lock said tow bar member to said housing member; an actuating member operatively connected to said lock bolt for moving said lock bolt from said lowered position to said raised position; detent means operatively associated with said lock bolt and said lock block for maintaining said lock bolt in said raised position; and spring means carried in said third passage for biasing said lock bolt to said lowered position.

* * * * *

UNITED STATES PATENT AND TRADEMARK OFFICE
CERTIFICATE OF CORRECTION

PATENT NO. : 7,584,984 B1
APPLICATION NO. : 11/624965
DATED : September 8, 2009
INVENTOR(S) : Williams, Jr.

Page 1 of 1

It is certified that error appears in the above-identified patent and that said Letters Patent is hereby corrected as shown below:

Column 7, Line 11: Please correct "top reinforcing plate is"
to read -- top reinforcing plate 226 is --

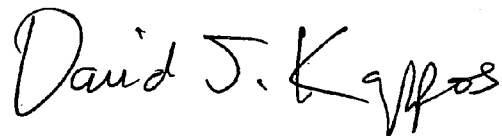
Column 7, Line 13: Please correct "bottom cover plate at"
to read -- bottom cover plate 224 at --

Column 11, Claim 8, Line 5: Please correct "probe" to read -- tow bar --

Column 12, Claim 11, Line 9: Please correct "probe" to read -- tow bar --

Signed and Sealed this

Sixth Day of April, 2010



David J. Kappos
Director of the United States Patent and Trademark Office