

POINTS OF VIEW

Inventive kids logging ideas for the future

PROBLEM: A curious fifth-grader wanted to explore the bottom of the old Erie Canal which flowed through his town in central New York State.

SOLUTION: Invent and construct a one-boy submarine that would sink and rise by taking in water and pumping it out. The boat would be made otherwise waterproof by dripping candle wax in the cracks between the boards.

I was that boy. I was fascinated with the canal and what might be on the bottom. Luckily, the sub never made it past the planning stage, although drawings were made and boards, nails and candles were collected.

Such a silly contraption wouldn't stand a chance in the Invent America! competition, even if Invent America! had existed back then.

But Invent America! — a national education program — is around today, the invention of Vice President George Bush in 1987. And kids across the

country are having fun with it.

Since its inception, more than 40,000 school children have formally presented ideas they hope will lead to a better world.

About 50 of those schemes were presented and judged at a local Invent America! competition at the Wooddale Elementary School in the Farmington District last week.

Some of the inventions had the judges — including this Ancient Submariner — saying to themselves, "Hey, now isn't that something?"

Now, in judging Invent America!, you have to remember that it's the idea that counts. Wooddale's first-graders might not be able to build what they imagine, but they can see a need for it, research it, describe its usefulness.

That's just what they've been doing at Wooddale these past few months. And some youthful problems have gotten some youthful solutions.

For example, Kristen Pietila won the first-grade title with her pump toothbrush. You simply squeeze the holder and the toothpaste oozes through a



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tube and up through the bristles.

And kindergartner Evan Rosin became concerned with all the nails on his basement floor during a renovation. His solution: a magnetic "Nail Zapper" that would gather them up.

A lot of the judges liked the "Fire Rings" conceived by third-grader Jessica DiDonato, another winner. It's sort of an enclosed slide that could get you safely out of a burning building.

In the Special Needs category, Brooke Pitchford came up with the "Talking Microwave." Through the

magic of modern electronics, it speaks up and lets you know what's been programmed.

Now, Invent America! isn't all fun-and-games. It's also hours and hours of work, and some of these kids put in more than 60 hours. A ton of serious research is involved.

Lots of important questions have to be asked and answered: Is there a need? Does the product already exist? Would it be practical to build? And, long and always, how much would it cost?

For the first time this year, detailed logs must be kept by the young inventors. Written descriptions and illustrations must be provided. All this grunt work may help instill in the youngsters the discipline and tenacity needed by any successful inventor.

But involved record keeping (in the form of a log) has another use — and it says a lot about the marvelous things that come out of these kids' minds.

Invent America! officials claim that

foreign-looking folks can sometimes be found snapping photos of the inventions at the national competition. Six months later, those inventions are on the market. The log is also a protection.

Invent America! has become a big deal at Wooddale, thanks largely to one Joanna Ratanatharnthorn, a parent who puts in the hours to make the program work. "I just give direction," she says with the modesty that you often find in volunteers. "The kids take that direction and run with it."

Anyway, the winners advance to state or regional competition. I wish them luck.

Who knows? Maybe some inventive youngster will come up with a useful, practical, one-kid submarine in which he/she can plumb the murky depths of the Erie Canal. I'd sure be happy to light a candle if it'd help.

Tom Baer is the editor of *The Farmington Observer*. He can be reached by calling 477-5450.

Conditions mimic those in 1927 state disaster

That New York World Trade Center bombing — five dead, a thousand injured — is being hyped as one of the greatest explosions in American history, but it can't match a Michigan disaster that killed 44.

In May 1927, the same month Charles Lindbergh flew solo across the Atlantic, Andrew P. Kehoe, 56, dynamited the school and his farm buildings in Bath, a tiny village about 10 miles north of Lansing.

Strangely, historians ignore the incident. Willie F. Dunbar, author of the landmark "Michigan: A History of the Wolverine State," never mentioned it. F. Clever Bald, in "Michigan in Four Centuries," kissed it off in a fraction of a sentence:

"In 1927, when a maniac blew up the consolidated school at Bath, Clinton County, killing 38 pupils, Senator (James) Couzens paid for a new building, and money from the Clinton's Fund was used to help care for the injured."

Perhaps we shouldn't be surprised. History books also slide past the fact that 23 Michigan legislators were convicted in 1945 of taking bribes, giving the murder of state Sen. Warren Hooper a sentence or so.

Newspapers bring up the Bath school explosion in Sunday features from time to time, I'm told, but somehow I always missed the articles.

The matter was brought to my attention by a Christmas gift from Gundella the Witch, a lady who has occupied a corner of Michigan for 92 years and taught school for 20 of them. Gundella never had heard of the Bath tragedy until she bumped into "Mayday: The History of a Village Holocaust" in Okemos on an autograph expedition for her book of ghost stories.

Kehoe was a farmer, Democratic political hopeful and embittered member of the Bath board of education. In those days, the school superintendent ran the education end of things. The school trustees personally ran the busi-



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ness end, talking to bus drivers about tire problems and performing maintenance on the building.

Kehoe was an expert mechanic, and other farmers sought his help in blowing out stumps. He had access to the school basement, and no one raised an eyebrow when he purchased large quantities of dynamite.

I said Kehoe was embittered. He didn't think Bath needed to consoli-

date, build a high school, try to meet University of Michigan accreditation standards and raise taxes — particularly when the farm economy was going to pot as Europe recovered from the Great War. Note well: Every single one of those problems exists today except the need for more school construction.

Kehoe timed two explosions to go off simultaneously on a Wednesday morning — one under the school, the other on every building on his farm. Apparently he killed his wife the night before. Unable to sell or give away two horses, Kehoe blew them up, too.

Then he drove his Ford truck to town as rescue work was going on and blew up himself and the hated superintendent.

Author Grant Parker's painstaking work, much gleaned from newspapers, reads like a mystery novel. The explosion occurs halfway through, and the remainder is flashbacks into the twisted psyche of Kehoe, his wife and other

main characters.

From a newspaper friend in Clinton County, I hear Parker's book is considered less than top notch in Bath, though I am too inexperienced to know why. Parker published it himself — unfortunately, because virtually every page has a spelling or grammatical error. Nor is there a word of biography on the author.

Two thoughts from the perspective of a journalist:

■ No one spotted Kehoe's tragic potential in advance, in part, perhaps, because the Bath school board held all its meetings behind closed doors. That was in the days before the Open Meetings Act, now under great attack.

■ The Society of Professional Journalists circulates public service ads which say: "If the press didn't tell you, who would?"

Tim Richard reports regularly on the local implications of state and regional events. His office phone is (313) 349-1700.

Medicine's success rate breeds its own failures

With Tipper Gore pinchhitting for Hillary Rodham Clinton, the national road show of town meetings on health care came to Dearborn last week.

Testimony was serious, thoughtful, sometimes heart-rending.

Our health care system is truly absurd, simultaneously consuming 14.7 percent of our gross domestic product, increasing in cost at nearly triple the base rate of inflation, and leaving more than 35 million Americans without access to medical insurance.

How is such a perverse set of outcomes possible?

Among the culprits, consider the astonishing success of medicine itself. Two examples from my own family make the point.

When my grandfather died in 1954 of a ruptured aneurysm in an artery, there was no such thing as arterial transplant surgery. He just died, and that was all there was to it.

By contrast, my mother suffered from cardiac arrhythmia, corrected for 17 years by a pacemaker. She contracted pericarditis, a life-threatening infection of the heart, and survived thanks to literally quarts of antibiotics. She had Parkinson's Disease, slowed and mitigated by a bit of dopamine drug therapy.

The fact that my mother died at the ripe age of 90 is testimony to the amazing ability of modern medicine to keep almost anyone alive, even without the heroic measures of intensive care units.

All this, of course, is very expensive. But we have arrived at the point where it is conceptually possible to make a kind of gruesome tradeoff: money spent versus death avoided, for a while at least.

Sooner or later, while talking with any thoughtful physician, you'll hear something like: "And you must realize that approximately 60 percent of all health care expenses are undertaken in the last six months of life."

What's that? The biggest part of our health care expenditure stems from the wholly natural instinct to buy at very great cost another few months of life for our loved ones?

This is such a shocking statistic — and so remarkably pervasive among the doctors I have talked with — that I spent considerable time



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rummaging through a lot of medical literature. I found only two relevant studies.

■ A 1984 study on Medicare services reported that those who died made up 6.9 percent of the study group but consumed 28 percent of Medicare expenses. For patients who died, 46 percent of costs were spent in the last 60 days of life.

■ A 1989 study examined people aged 65 and over, making up 12 percent of the U.S. population. They consumed 20 percent of physician contacts, 35 percent of hospital visits (and nearly 50 percent of hospital days), and 33 percent of national expenditures on health care.

If my research is any guide, the factual basis for rational discussion of health care policy is largely lacking.

On one hand, we have hopeful politicians saying we can cut enough health care costs to extend coverage to those who lack it by slashing paper work, waste and so forth.

On the other, we have many, many doctors who assert as fact that getting at health care costs will require us as a society to face, for the first time in human history, the complex moral tradeoff between dollars spent and death avoided.

Phil Power is chairman of the company that publishes this newspaper. He would be pleased to hear from readers who have additional information or other insights on this complicated subject. To leave a voice mail message by Touch-Tone phone, call (313) 953-2047, Ext. 1880.



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