

Things other than necessity have led to inventions, historical society learns

By Bill Rea

It's often been said that necessity is the mother of invention, but sometimes things have come about because of luck.

Local author Ken Weber made that point a number of times recently when he addressed the Caledon East and Historical Society, conducting an Historical Tour Through the Amazing World of Invention.

His talk dealt with a number of advancements, from flush toilets to the Barbie Doll to rubber hoses.

He said there were some 'M's when it comes to reviewing inventions.

The first is 'myth,' as he said it's a myth that a man named Thomas Crapper invented the first flush toilet.

Another is 'muddy,' as he said Lewis Waterman improved on the fountain pen, but he did not invent it, as he is sometimes credited.

In terms of 'misleading,' he cited the Wright Brothers, stating they were not the first to fly. 'They were the third, possibly fourth people to fly an airplane,' he said, adding a farmer and tinkerer named Richard Pearse flew approximately 330 metres about nine months before the Wrights' famous flight, which was only roughly 260 metres. Weber added Orville Wright willed their flyer to the Smithsonian Institution, on the condition that there was no mention of any other flyer.

In terms of the 'mother of invention,' Weber said it could sometimes be coincidence, or 'the simple matter of chance.'

He mentioned the example of Percy Spenser, who went to work at Raytheon one day in 1946 with a Tootsie Roll as a snack, but it melted before he had a chance to eat it. He had set it down in front of a magnetron, and the incident led to the discovery of the microwave.

Some inventions come about by accident.

He observed that Alexander Graham Bell is credited with the first voice transmission over wire when he asked his assistant Watson to come into the room. Weber said the reason he needed Watson was he had just spilled acid in his crotch. Bell then ran half a mile to the patent office in Boston, a couple of hours before Elisha Gray showed up to register his version of the telephone.

People credit Charles Goodyear with inventing vulcanized rubber. Weber said Christopher Columbus returned to Europe from his travels with rubber, but no one there knew what to do with it. Goodyear had inadvertently left some rubber on a stove all night, and found it was flexible in the morning. The accidental discovery didn't do him much good. 'He never got one cent out of that,' Weber said.

He also said that Goodyear published a paper on vulcanizing rubber that B.F. Goodrich read. Goodrich had seen a friend's house burn down, with firefighters not being able to do much because the leather hoses they were using froze and cracked in the cold, so he came up with the idea of rubber hoses.

There have been other accidental inventions.

Weber mentioned Jean Baptiste Jolly, who had spent a night playing cards in 1855. Wine had spilled on the table cloth. The maid accidentally spilled kerosene while cleaning up the wine, and that led to the invention of dry cleaning.

Discussing the invention of 'the most successful toy ever invented,' Weber said the inspiration for the Barbie Doll started in 1952 in Germany. A Munich newspaper was running a cartoon about an air-headed girl named Lilli. In 1957, they made a Lilli doll which didn't bend. Around that time, Harold Matson and Elliot Handler were running Mattel, which had started making plastic items, but eventually switched to toys. Matson sold his shares in the company to Handler, who had married a girl named Ruth from the typing pool. The couple had a daughter named Barbie, who enjoyed playing with cut-out dolls that depicted adults.

Mrs. Handler took a trip to Europe and saw Lilli dolls, and wondered if adult dolls could be manufactured.

Jack Ryan, an expert on miniaturization, was working for Mattel (Weber said he was briefly married to Zsa Zsa Gabor) and was asked to make an adult doll that was also 'anatomically almost correct.'

Barbie was the result.

Weber said Ryan also invented Hot Wheels.

Peter Robertson, a Canadian, invented the square-socket (also known as the Roberston) screw. Henry Ford was a big customer because the screw took about two hours off the time needed to make a Model T. Ford had wanted to buy Robertson's company, but Robertson was hoping to sell to Europeans. Weber said the First World War intervened and there was no European market for Robertson. Meanwhile, Ford had talked to a man named Phillips, who had come up with the Phillips screw.

Some inventions have been prompted by the power of an event.

Weber told the story of J. Armand Bombardier. His son died in 1934 of a burst appendix in the middle of a heavy snow storm. He died because they were unable to get through the snow to get him to a hospital, so he said Bombardier set about trying to find a way to move through snow. The result was the invention of the snowmobile. The first one was made by using a bedframe and a Model T

engine.

There were also examples of inventions that might have come along too soon. There were radios mounted on hats in 1931, but they never became popular. This was years before the Walkman.

Pencils and erasures had been around for years, but Weber said it wasn't until 1858 that Hymen Lipman came up with the idea of putting an erasure on the end of the pencil.

Some inventions are impacted by prejudice. Weber told of Charles Drew, who invented the process of storing blood as plasma. He was from North Carolina, and being an African American, there wasn't a lot of interest in his work, so he did his work at McGill University. It wasn't until the Russians developed a model for the process that it started being used in the U.S.

Margaret Knight invented the paper shopping bag in 1894, but Weber said she couldn't get anyone to pay attention because she was a woman.

The reputation of the inventor has sometimes had an impact on how innovations are received. Weber said flush toilets were in use in ancient Rome. But after Rome fell, people lost interest.

Elizabeth I of England had a nephew who had come up with a working flush toilet. Weber said he gave his aunt one, and it was installed at Windsor Castle. The Queen was pleased that it worked. The nephew, however, had a bad side, and had produced a pornographic book.

?He was banished from the kingdom, along with his toilet,? Weber said.

He also said a public flush toilet was installed in London in 1852, and no one used it.

Ignaz Semmelweis was a specialist in obstetrics. He had a very good success rate because of his advocacy of doctors washing their hands. But Weber said he also had tourette syndrome, so he was dismissed as crazy.

As well, he said that Thomas Edison was credited with many invention, but many of them were ones he latched onto from people who worked for him. Weber said the only one he did invent was the phonograph.



Ken Weber recently addressed the Caledon East and District Historical Society.