

Years Later, An Inventor Wonders Whether He Tossed Away a Fortune

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IT'S HARD NOT TO FEEL a twinge of regret when a whizzo idea you had years ago, and did nothing to promote, suddenly makes a fortune for its inventors.

For instance, I knew a man who had a chance to get in on the ground floor of pressurized shaving creams. He passed it up, figuring that lathering your face with a shaving brush was too pleasurable ever to go out of style. Even today he occasionally suffers a touch of envy at the thought of what riches might have been his. At such times he's likely to sneer at "push-button" shaving, and deplore the bite that CO(2) powered cans are supposed to be taking out of our ozone layer. But he never mentions the real tragedy—the loss of the old, wooden Yardley lathering bowls, with accompanying badger-bristle brush, two of the most satisfying props civilization ever devised for small boys to rehearse man-of-the-world gestures before a bathroom mirror. Our invention of the Frisbee—30 years before its time—produced no such ambiguous results.

Our version was launched in the summer of 1937. My brother and I lived in upstate New York, surrounded by woods, a spacious though rather rough lawn with a long looping driveway once covered with tons of loose stone. We had no one to play with, except for some cats and an old setter. In those days, though, everybody knew how the impoverished Dean brothers, Dizzy and Daffy, had become star pitchers simply by playing two-man ball on their Missouri farm with a hunk of 2X2 as a bat, and rocks for a ball. Within three years we managed to throw most of the loose stone into the woods, often at high rates of speed. It was when stones became scarce that we invented the Frisbee.

We didn't call it a Frisbee, of course. It was a coffee can top; in those days coffee came in round vacuum-packed tins. With a difference, however. You wound the top off with a key, producing a memorable sigh of escaping air and the delectable smell of fresh coffee. Once removed, the tops were shiny bright, about seven inches in diameter with a sharp quarter-inch-deep edge.

One day, inspired by the need for something new to throw, we took a ball peen hammer to a Beech Nut Coffee can top, and banged along its razor-sharp perimeter for an inch or so. Thus assured of a safe grip, my brother winged the can top across the lawn as hard as he could. Not Archimedes in his bath, or Balboa silent upon his peak in Darien, could have had a bigger thrill.

The top streaked away with a whir like the sound of a small partridge, taking a light hop as it accelerated and sailed close to the ground for 150 feet. Then it slowed, rose slightly, hovered for a second and sank to earth. We raced after it to try again. Naturally it was the narrow rim that gave the top its aerodynamic stability. If you mashed the rim down all the way around, or tossed it wrong-side up, it simply flipped over and crashed. The slight hop and the final hover were characteristic of a modern Frisbee. Except that even toward the end of the flight, a coffee can top wasn't something you wanted to snatch out of the air.

By urging family and neighbors to drink more coffee, we acquired a small fleet of missiles. Coffee can tops became the rage. But after a few euphoric weeks, distractions set in. The best of these entailed attaching a three-inch firecracker to the undercarriage of a homemade flying-scale model Nieuport Scout, winding the plane up, lighting the firecracker and launching from the roof ridge just at dusk. The cracker spewed out what looked like exhaust flames. The Nieuport sputtered away over the darkening lawn. Then there came one glorious and very final explosion.

After awhile coffee can tops lay about in the long grass or under the shadows of the lilac hedge. Then my brother went back to school, and I embarked on even more rewarding throwing adventures.

The first, though memorable, was brief. One morning in early fall I was helping a man named Leamon Hornbeck hoe potatoes. Whenever he worked he always carried a bottle of Gordon's Dry Gin (the old bottle that had a ferocious boar's head on it and a glass stopper rimmed with cork). He would set it down carefully in the nearby woods to keep it cool. When the work got too hot, he would straighten up, find the bottle and, with marvelous deliberation unstop it and drink long, satisfying swigs, wiping his mouth afterward with the back of his hand. (I was offered some, too, of course, with the result that for quite a few of my younger years I thought all Gordon's gin tasted like cold spring water.)

It was after just such a drink, on that potato-digging day, that Mr. Hornbeck looked at me appraisingly and said, "We've worked pretty good, today. Now I'm going to show you some fun." Taking his jackknife and quickly cutting a branch about as thick as my thumb from a young hard maple, he began trimming off the twigs. I was 10 at the time, and the sight of a man cutting what looked like a switch was not entirely promising. The matter was serious, I could see, because for this part of the operation he had put on his Foxy Grampaw glasses, a ritual usually reserved for things like examining the edge of a scythe he had just sharpened. At a fork where the maple branched, he lopped it off, sharpening both short tines until he had a fine forked stick about three-feet long, apparently suitable for impaling marshmallows.

Back in the field, he scabbled around in the ravaged potato hills until he found a very small potato. Impaling it on the stick's forked tip, he then raised the stick behind his head and snapped it forward like a man cracking a whip. The potato took off like a comet.

I still look back on that day as one of the great moments of my throwing education. With hoe and eager fingers I grubbed around for mini-potatoes and sent them whistling into the woods. You could lay out your ammunition in a row and fire off a 10-spud barrage at the dark ranks of attacking trees. Snapped hard and released high, they would travel for what seemed like a mile. Snapped underhand, with an up twist, they flew away in a fine parabola. Best was straightest, though—an accurate shot, released straight forward, like the forward cast of a fly rod. As with a fly rod, the stiffer the rod the better.

It was glorious. I might be out there still, in fact, but the supply of potatoes ran out.

It was while waiting for the next year's crop to mature that—again with a bit of inspiration from Mr. Hornbeck—I stumbled on a yet more gratifying invention. Or rather, reinvention. The device in question was a slingshot. Not the boring kind, made of a stubby forked stick and a heavy elastic band cut from the red rubber rings then used to seal mason jars—the kind, in short, that sometimes mashed your thumb into the very rock you wanted to launch. No. What I had was a full-fledged sling.

It was homemade, of course. You cut about a 3X2-inch patch of softish leather, punched two tiny holes at opposite edges and tied a 3-foot length of tough twine into each hole. One piece of twine had a slipknot at the end to fit tight over your middle finger like the string of a yo-yo. Placing a stone in the leather pouch and firmly holding the tip of the other length of twine between thumb and forefinger, you whirled the stone in a circle. Centrifugal force kept the stone in place. When you had it whirling fast enough and headed in the right direction—that step was particularly important—you let the twine go.

When a stone thus propelled hits a hardwood tree, it produces a wonderful sharp crack. I had always had doubts about David vs. Goliath. But after watching a few good stones hum off into the woods I became true believer.

The truth is, coffee can tops just couldn't compare with such a sling. Oh, there are times when I think of the millions of dollars that Frisbees eventually made for somebody, not to mention the millions of man-,woman-,and dog-hours of play they provide every year. I have no regrets, though. We lacked the technology and marketing expertise. Not much could have been done

with the potato flinger, either. Even back then, not many people had access to a hill of potatoes.

The sling, though, was something else again. War was just around the corner, but we were still in the pacifist '30s. On maneuvers the U.S. Army sometimes had to use broomsticks for guns. As for small boys, their weaponry was woefully inadequate: mock Frontier Revolvers made of wood and put together from kits, plus a handful of Buck Rogers Rocket pistols and few decrepit Daisy Air rifles.

Even today, what with all the talk about the need to reemphasize conventional arms, I'm somewhat teased by the thought that, commercially, such a slingshot might still be successful. In place of scarce (and dangerous) stones, city kids could use bubble gum or some softish, marble-sized projectile, specially designed to explode harmlessly upon impact, releasing fake smoke or a fortune-cookie ribbon with an appropriate sentiment. (Make love not war?) The stone sack would not be made of leather, but out of thin plastic, stamped with a catchy suitable for TV product name: TV: SLINGIN SAM perhaps, or SLAM BANG! Or maybe something truly awful like L'IL DAVID.

On second thought, maybe not. Better if all those flying stones just keep zinging their way into the woods of memory.