

Still Swinging

Lee Trippett's adventures with clacking balls and Bigfoot

In 1967, it was a best seller. Click clack, can you hear it? When it became a national phenomenon the following year, the inventor was asked the inevitable: "Are you the man with the swinging balls?"

Forty years later, Michael Scott from NBC's *The Office* has one on his desk. Television and movies have done wonders to keep the toy with the five swinging steel balls in the public's awareness since Eugene resident Lee Trippett made the first Swinging Wonder in his garage.

Trippett, an electronics engineer, designed the scientific-demonstration toy as an assignment for a class at the UO while earning his certificate to teach physics in the early 1960s. The basic principle for illustrating Newton's Third Law of Motion — for every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction — had been around for years in various and bulky formats, but it was Trippett, who at 31, worked it out mathematically and created the first portable unit.

The assignment was a success, but he gave little thought to his invention after the class ended, until fate intervened. Trippett overheard words that would change his life while spending a memorable afternoon exploring the paranormal at the home of writer Ivan T. Sanderson.

Sanderson let slip that Texas multi-millionaire Tom Slick was offering up to a million dollars for the first authentic photograph, dead or alive, of Bigfoot. Appealing to Trippett's scientific mind and economic sensibilities, the thrill of hunting Bigfoot became his passion in life.

Trippett and his wife, Marlys, looked into a number of schemes and mail order options that would provide both the time and the money to capture Bigfoot for the million dollar check while supporting their 3-year-old son. The answer sat on their shelf at home. Paul Agerter, owner of Eugene Toy and Hobby at the time, suggested that Trippett make more of the Swinging Wonder prototype and sell them through his store in time for Christmas.

The current owners of Eugene Toy and Hobby, brothers Mark and Allen Agerter, were just kids when Trippett carried the first homemade units to the store in brown paper bags that Christmas season. "Incredible," said Mark of the memory. "We sold everything he could bring us. It was a great product, fascinating."

Former appliance salesman Bob Pierce, who worked at Montgomery Ward across from Eugene Toy and Hobby, still owns the Swinging Wonder with the wooden frame he purchased in 1968. "I bought it for the novelty; it was fun, different," Kim Still of Cottage Grove remembers turning 10 that year. "I really, really wanted a Swinging Wonder for my birthday. It was the only thing I wanted, and I kept it on my desk for years. I still have it."

Sales were brisk, but after Christmas they flat-lined. Trippett took his Swinging Wonder to every gift shop in town and was rejected at every turn. Teased with the auspicious beginning, disappointment crept in. Trippett finally left one behind as a display during his last sales call to a gift shop in the Red Lion.

"Call it fate, coincidence or good luck," said Trippett. "Whatever it was, it sent me two traveling salesmen in the furniture business based out of San Francisco." While staying at the Red Lion they noticed the Swinging Wonder in the gift shop. A sticker on the bottom held Trippett's contact information, and before long, the three of them were discussing marketing plans.

Traveling up and down the West Coast, from Seattle to San Diego, the two men showed the scientific toy to their clients, including big retail stores like Macy's. Their efforts resulted in a few orders, about a dozen at a time, until an innovative marketing strategy helped them hit the jackpot. When live models in department store windows began demonstrating the toy, the movement and sound of the steel balls clacking against each other drew attention from the customers.

Suddenly inundated with orders from all over the country, the Trippetts ran out of room and the ability to continue building the Swinging Wonders in their garage. Moving to a warehouse on 7th Avenue, their new company, Scientific

Demonstrators, Inc., employed 100 people and manufactured 1,000 units a day.

Lee and Marlys forgot all about Bigfoot.

Admittedly "naïve," they took their toy with the catchy name to a New York trade show without a patent. In what felt like a "New York" minute, more than 30 competitors had created knockoffs. Larger toy manufacturers accessed their financial records through a credit bureau and feared no lawsuits.

Trippett held an advantage over the competition because of his meticulous design and choice of materials. It took many months for others to discover his method of attaching the special nylon thread used in canvas awnings to the high-carbon-hardened steel balls. His secret was an industrial strength epoxy reserved for repairing ships at sea.

"The separation of the steel balls is critical," he said. "None of the others ever got the alignment and separation just right; none of them worked as cleanly."

Scientific Demonstrators, Inc. sold more than 400,000 of the original Swinging Wonders during its three-year run. Because each unit required five steel

balls, the company used two million of them

and needed more to keep producing. "In the late 1960s, there were very few people making steel balls," Trippett said, "and we bought out their inventory."

Add competitors to the equation, and their sources dried up.

Gaining notoriety by introducing a toy with a scientific principle to the consumer market, Trippett was asked the next obvious question, "What else you got?"

The Harmonograph, a pendulum-based drawing machine that used gravity and colored pens to create curvaceous geometric designs, was his response. Investing all their profits from the Swinging Wonder into the Harmonograph, they unveiled it at trade shows in San Francisco, Seattle and New York.

Buyers expressed great interest, but that quickly waned after they discovered trouble with display and marketing. Unlike the small, noisy Swinging Wonder, the Harmonograph was large, needed support to be hung from the ceiling, and remained silent. People had to be come involved to appreciate it.

Hemorrhaging money during the recession of the early 1970s, the Trippetts hired marketing experts and eventually signed over the rights to their attorney to keep the money flowing. After the Harmonograph venture failed, they made a deal with one of the men who had manufactured the steel balls. The new owner of the Swinging Wonder loaded everything from Scientific Demonstrators, Inc. into his truck and drove the pieces home to Wisconsin.

Lee returned to teaching, and Marlys became a secretary.

Trippett's attention relocated on Bigfoot. Bent on finding a shortcut to bag the illusive creature, Trippett looked to psychics for information and hoped to influence the "man-animal" by setting up a sense of "sympathetic vibrations." As the first to produce a summary report of Bigfoot sightings with dates and locations, he was interviewed by *The San Francisco Chronicle* and *Newsweek*.

Taking early retirement, Trippett has spent considerable effort in exploring alternative energy resources beyond solar and wind, delving into quantum science.

Bigfoot remains a major character in Trippett's life. "This is the most powerful and significant mystery today, and it would be upsetting to both science and religion if Bigfoot were to be proven scientifically." **EW**



PHOTO BY DONALD WEBB

Best-Selling Toys in Eugene

- Eugene Toy & Hobby - "Anything radio controlled."
- Eugene's Holiday Market - "Nontoxic wooden puzzles and trucks hand-made by Tom Savelich and little fairies made by Patty Ferguson."
- Elephant's Trunk - "*The Chronicles of Narnia* pop-up book by Robert Sabuda and the International Karito Kids 18" adventure dolls that come with books."

Hopefully Lee Trippett's clacking balls won't scare Bigfoot away