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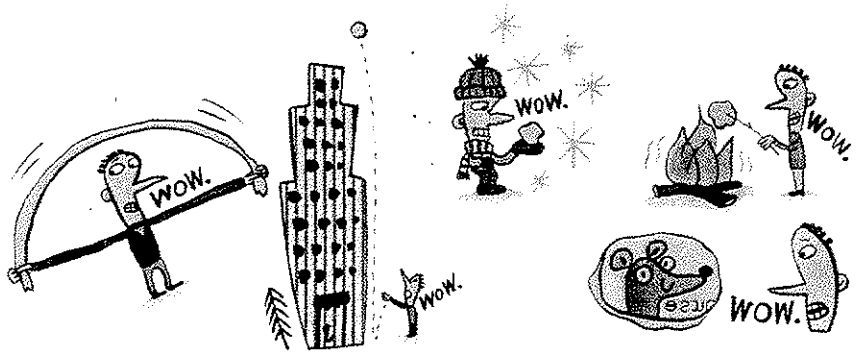
Silly Putty

In 1942, during World War II, the United States was experiencing a severe shortage of natural rubber. A synthetic form was desperately needed for the production of gas masks, boots, and tires. The military turned to the General Electric Company for an answer.

At the company's lab in New Haven, Connecticut, James Wright went to work on the project. He tried every chemical combination he could think of. But nothing produced the effect he needed until he mixed boric acid and silicone oil. Together, the substances became a soft, rubbery compound.

Excited, Wright began experimenting with his creation. He discovered that when tossed on the floor, the plastic putty didn't just bounce—it bounced better and

higher than rubber. It also stretched farther, didn't decay, withstood extreme cold without cracking, and could take the highest temperatures without melting. And craziest of all was its ability to lift words and images off the pages of newspapers and comic books.

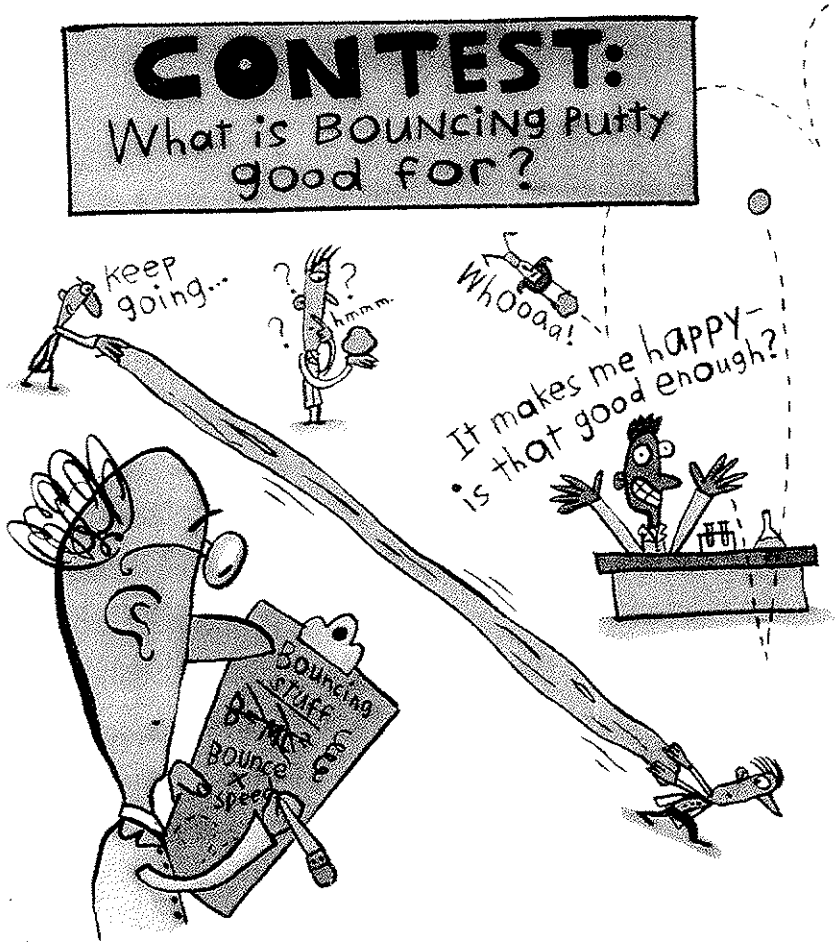


Great stuff. Absolutely fantastic, in fact. Almost anything could be done with it—except the one thing it was supposed to do: serve as a substitute for rubber. It simply didn't get hard enough.

Nutty Putty. Bouncing Putty. Bouncing Blubber. Around the General Electric lab, the curious compound picked up all sorts of names. And it became a company joke; as did James Wright, who, for a time, was thought to be the creator of the most interesting and most worthless invention in the company's history.

Years passed, the war ended, and Wright's fascinating flop was all but forgotten. But one day his boss surprised him by suggesting that there must be some sort of use for the strange putty he had created.

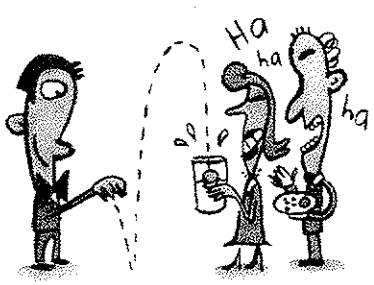
An informal contest was held. All the engineers at the lab were given a shot at figuring out a practical purpose for the substance. Not one decent idea was offered. Nevertheless, James and his boss kept at it. Whenever visitors came by the lab, a demonstration was put on—and the question put forward as to what the putty might be used for. The query was always greeted with silence.



Still unwilling to accept failure, the company made one last try; samples were mailed to several of the world's top scientists, challenging them to figure out a practical application for Bouncing Putty (as it was then commonly known).

Same result. It seemed even the best scientists in the world couldn't come up with a worthwhile use for the substance.

One evening in 1948 an engineer from General Electric went to a party. Coming straight from work, he happened to have a glob of Bouncing Putty with him. For laughs, he started showing others at the party some of the fascinating things it could do. Everyone thought it was interesting. A woman named Ruth Falgatter thought it was more than interesting: it was a toy!

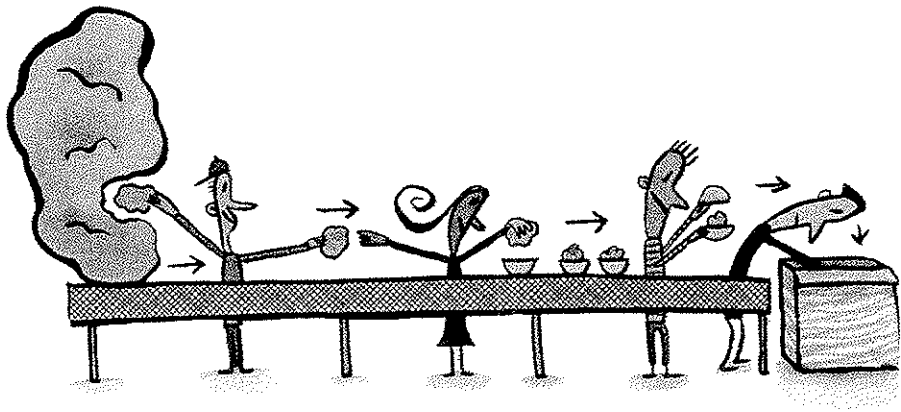


Finally, someone had seen the putty for what it was, for what it had really been all along—a silly novelty that was as intriguing to adults as it was to kids. Not surprisingly, Ruth Falgatter was a toy-store owner. Accompanying her at the party was Peter Hodgson, a friend who helped her write sales and advertising material for her shop.

A few days later, Peter and Ruth met to put together her holiday catalogue. After talking it over, they decided to include Bouncing Putty on a page spotlighting gifts

for adults. The ad read: *"Do a thousand nutty things* with *Bouncing Putty.* Comes in a handy clear plastic case. A guaranteed hoot at parties! Price: Only $2.00!"

Surprisingly enough, Bouncing Putty sold better than almost everything else in the catalogue. Ruth continued stocking the product in her store, but she had no interest in manufacturing and marketing it. But Peter Hodgson did. It so happened that he was over $12,000 in debt; the crazy new product might be just the thing to turn his fortunes around. He made an agreement with General Electric, and then with borrowed money ($147), bought a lot of Bouncing Putty from the company. With his last few dollars, he hired students from Yale University to separate it into one-ounce balls and package it in plastic



eggs. Because "bouncing" described only one of the many different things the substance could do, Hodgson changed the name to something catchier—Silly Putty.

With high hopes and boxes full of Silly Putty eggs, Hodgson headed off to the 1950 New York Toy Fair. Hardly anyone paid Peter and his putty any attention. He was ready to pack it in when he worked out a contract with Doubleday Bookstores. Doubleday planned to carry Silly Putty in their stores.

A few months later a writer for *The New Yorker* bought some Silly Putty at one of the bookseller's outlets in Manhattan. He was so excited by its strange properties that he took it to work with him the next day, plunked it down next to his typewriter, and wrote a column about Silly Putty for the magazine. Incredibly, within three days, orders for Silly Putty had topped a quarter of a million—with more coming in by the minute.

Just like that, Peter Hodgson became a success story. As for Silly Putty, it was soon all over America. Children (and a lot of adults) played with Silly Putty—the substance that had bombed so badly for the military only to bounce back as a best-selling toy.

- Silly Putty has hardly changed since it was first invented, but the process used to print color comics has. The result: Silly Putty no longer does a very good job lifting images off the pages of the Sunday funnies.

- Silly Putty was originally only available in peachy pink. During the 1960s, other colors were offered. Fluorescent shades of Silly Putty were added in 1990, with a glow-in-the-dark version introduced the following year.
- Ironically, after becoming a popular toy, many practical uses have been found for Silly Putty. Mechanics use it to clean equipment, dry cleaners to remove lint, and zookeepers to make casts of animal footprints for purposes of identification.