

# "Slinky" ... Walking Wire Coil Brings Fame, Fortune And Headaches To Dick James, It's Discoverer

## 1943 Trial Cruise Responsible For Finding Wire Coil

By JAY MOREHOUSE

A discarded coil of spring wire fell from a desk . . . bounced crazily across the room and Dick James, young Havertown mechanical engineer, bounced with it to fame and fortune.

For that discarded coil swept the nation as "Slinky . . . the walking wire toy." The success story of Richard T. James reads like fiction.

"Strictly speaking, I didn't invent Slinky," says modest, 30-year-old James, who is still somewhat dazed by his success. "He practically walked into my life. Then my two-year-old Tommy and the neighborhood kids gave me ideas about its commercial possibilities."

It all began when Dick, a '39 graduate of Penn State, was working as a "guarantee engineer" in Cramp's Shipyard in 1943. Representing the builders Dick went on trial cruises of battleships and cruisers before they were turned over for sea duty.

In his job Dick was concerned primarily with the delicate but vital performance of marine torsion meters. Marine engineers tried suspending the meters on flexible coil springs to eliminate vibration caused by heavy seas, recoil of gunfire or gigantic steel propeller shafts. Dick experimented with hundreds of coils of various sizes and tensions.



CHILDREN ADMIRING SLINKY in Bowers Gift Shop, Brookline

And then it happened. One of the discarded coils fell from Dick's desk and began its amusing bouncing, tumbling gyrations. Placed on an incline it repeated its silly antics. Naturally Dick took the coil home to amuse his young son, whereupon Tommy literally set the James "ball" rolling.

In the manner of all young males Tommy decided to give his funny toy a nice long ride down the stairs. He put the spring on the top step, pulled the top coil down to the next step, and prepared to enjoy its bouncing. To his gleeful amazement the coil threw itself into a loop, landed on the next step, lifted its tail, and threw itself into another loop, and so on down the long stairway. Tommy repeated the performance many times. Soon every child in the vicinity clamored for a spring that walked down stairs—and Slinky was born.

For two years Dick played with coils of wire. "Our house was a mess while I experimented," he admits. "I concluded that a flat ribbon of wire with no snap, or to be scientific, one with zero tension and

compression, worked best. The coils used on the ship were made of round wire. I wanted to make it colorful, but that idea had to be given up. So Slinky emerged as a plain steel ribbon 75 feet long wound into 98 coils. My wife named him."

By the summer of 1945 he was sure he had something more than a mere set of coils which resembled a stack of piston rings. He persuaded a piston ring company in Philadelphia to make 450, all he could pay for. For three months he held a good job with an air-conditioning firm, but his brainchild teased him into giving it up and taking a chance on marketing Slinky.

Toy buyers, however, did not share his enthusiasm. Their ridicule and skepticism would have downed a less venturesome soul. "It was Jonas' Top Shop that gave me my first break. They agreed to take a dozen or so on consignment," Dick recalls. Then a Philadelphia department store buyer offered him winter space and a cashier to sell and these things he was told he would have to do his own selling.

Came the rainy evening of November 27, 1945, when Dick, a trifle worried and more embarrassed walked into the store with 100 Slinkys neatly boxed. One demonstration of Slinky's crazy trip down an incline, and ubiquitous small boys' curiosity did the rest.

They took Slinky to their hearts and cheered him into a hit. Customers crowded the counter six deep. Soon two counters and two cashiers were going at full speed. The 100 boxed Slinkys at one dollar each were snapped up in a hurry. Meanwhile Dick had sent for the rest of his stock. Part of it was wrapped but not boxed, but that made no difference to the eager buyers. Towards the last, Slinky was grabbed without so much as a bit of brown paper to cover his slithery coils.

In 90 minutes Dick and his wife who had difficulty locating him in the mob, had sold 400 Slinkys, while the crowd, waving dollar bills, begged for more.

"We didn't sleep that night," the young couple admit. "We just marveled and planned. We knew it meant borrowing money if we went on with Slinky." Borrow they did, and by Christmas of that year Slinky's sales ran to 22,000.

Assured now of the success of his toy, Dick decided to go into production on his own. He rented factory space in Germantown. He made his own tools. He borrowed more money and set to work. Today at James Industries Inc., 4932 Portico St., Philadelphia, 8 to 12 employes help Dick send Slinky all over the globe. Six machines, each capable of turning out 100 Slinkys an hour, are in full operation; yet there is a large backlog of orders for more.

Representatives of the James Industries are located in New York, Atlanta, Chicago, San Antonio, San Francisco, Denver and Seattle. In addition, Slinky is manufactured and sold by two licensed companies in this country and one in Canada.



**JAMES** plays with Slinky, his fortune making discovery

Dick estimates that to date two and a half million Slinkys have been put on the market. Patent No. 2415012 protects Dick's rights on all of them.

Stores of all types acclaim Slinky's popularity. Only last week when Mrs. James was searching for a new toy for her hospitalized son she was advised to purchase Slinky. "It is our best seller", the toy salesman told her.

But Slinky is more than a walking spring which every youngster loves. It is used in college physics laboratories to demonstrate transmission of sound, light and electricity in wave lengths. It has therapeutic value in hospitals such as Valley Forge. It is used by decorators and artists in creating effective advertising copy. Extended on a brightly colored base, Slinky sells well as a novel letter file. Mounted on a barrel stave, it makes a roomy tie rack.

Slinky has brought his originator headaches as well as good fortune. The usual horde of human locusts descended on the James scene when success first touched their houses. It has brought letters from all over the world. Many magazines have printed the story of Slinky. Finally Slinky fathered the company which sells

many other hardware items in addition to the animated coil spring.

As president of the James Industries, Dick gives about half of his time to Slinky's interests. The other half he devotes to ideas which pop into his inventive mind. He controls the operation of two vending machines which he perfected, one for hot coffee and the other for soda, both used in Delaware.

But he is not too busy to enjoy life, to indulge his hobby of gardening, to play with six-year-old Tommy and three-year-old Elizabeth. With them and his wife, the former Betty Mattas of Altoona, also a Penn State graduate, he lives on Oxford Rd., Brookline.

He is a member of the United Presbyterian Church, the Idle Hour Tennis Club, the Engineers Club of Philadelphia, the American Society of Mechanical Engineers, Naval Architects, Marine Engineers, and Sigma Phi Alpha. Last but not least, he is a fine example of what work, ingenuity and courage can achieve in the U. S. A. That, we maintain, is a heartening bit of Americana.