

The Museum of Unworkable Devices

The strange place where broken is beautiful

Jack Mc Guinn, Senior Editor

Albert Einstein, it is said, defined insanity as “doing the same thing over and over again, expecting a different result.” My favorite variation (*Anon*) on those words of wisdom is “someone who hits one’s self in the head with a hammer until it stops hurting.”

Somewhere between those two worldviews resides the plucky spirit behind The Museum of Unworkable Devices (www.lhup.edu/~dsimanek/museum/unwork.htm).

This museum, quite simply (quoting from its Website) — “is a celebration of fascinating devices that don’t work.” Continuing, in downright humorous, if snarky, fashion — it “houses” “diverse examples of the perverse genius of inventors who (*I love this part*) refused to let their thinking become intimidated by the laws of nature — remaining optimistic in the face of repeated failures.”

While *PTE* is indeed a magazine devoted to power transmission, we’re thrilled to report that there is nevertheless no shortage of ill-fated, once-and-no-future gizmos “on display” (it’s virtual, people) at the “museum” whose creator (more later) seriously intended to help move earth if not heaven as well — *if only they had worked*. (And somewhere, Rube Goldberg must be grinning his ass off.) Popular at this repository are “intricate perpetual motion machines that have remained *steadfastly unmoving* (my ital) since their inception.” It is also good to know that, like all museums, the Museum of Unworkable Devices considers itself a “work in progress” — signaling a recognition that Man’s talent for the stupid continues to evolve, unchecked.

Let us read, for example, the museum listing for this water wheel/pump “system”, cited from a 1927 tome by engineer/inventor of some note Gardner D. Hiscox — *Mechanical Appliances and Novelties of Construction*:

“Water wheel and pump—a prin-

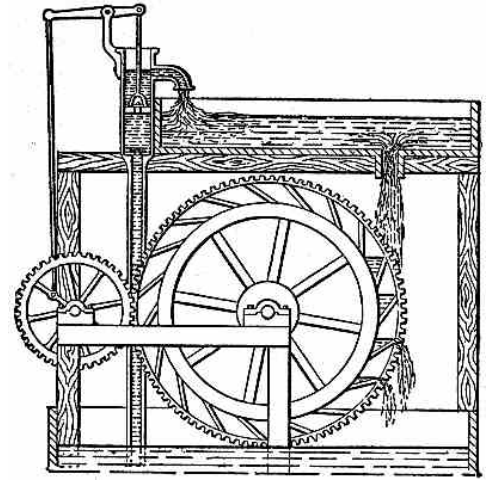
ciple so often employed for the production of self-moving machines that it ranks next to that of perpetual eccentric weights in its delusive power upon the minds of inventors. The attempt to compel a water wheel to raise the water that drives it is in one form or other perpetually recurring in devices upon which our counsel and opinion are sought.

“The worst of the matter is that in most cases our advice to drop such absurd projects is received as evidence of want of sagacity and knowledge, and our would-be client becomes the dupe of some not over-conscientious patent agent, who pockets his fees and laughs in his sleeve at the greenness of the applicant.

“The device illustrated is one submitted by one of those enthusiastic individuals, who, without understanding the first principles of mechanics, believes he is about to revolutionize the industry of the world by his grand discovery; and as honor, and not pecuniary reward, is his object, he seeks to make public his invention through the wide circulation of some journal. He is quite willing we should adversely criticize the device, because its merits are so great that no amount of skepticism resulting from our blind prejudice can, he thinks, influence candid minds against a principle so obviously sound and sublimely simple.

“Even if you could completely eliminate friction and viscosity in the pump and gears, this device requires the pump to lift water above the open reservoir, that is, higher than the pressure head of the reservoir, requiring more work than one can gain from the falling water. *Even if that minor (!) flaw were fixed, the work done in carrying the water around a closed loop is zero.* Exercise for the student: If viscosity and friction were zero, and this device were primed and started running, how and when would it come to a stop?”

Okay then! In closing, let me men-



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tion the list (below; go to the site for the links) of various “galleries” available for viewing — don’t touch! — at the museum. Just the titles for some of these tell you all you need to know as to what they’re all about, such as: “Whatever Were They Thinking?” — (*deep thoughts, obviously*); “The Gallery of Ingenious, but Impractical Devices” — (*just what our economy needs*); “The Basement Mechanic’s Guide to Building Perpetual Motion Machines” — (*there is no way I’m hanging out with some “basement mechanic” who is building “perpetual motion machines, no way, no how*”; “The Basement Mechanic’s Guide to Testing Perpetual Motion Machines” — (*see above!!*))

So take a day trip in your PJs or BVDs. Pack a lunch. Chill some beverage. Pull up a chair to your favorite desktop or laptop, and prepare to immerse your brain in a totally useless but decidedly diverting pastime. (*Note: The Museum of Unworkable Devices is the 1994 brainchild of Dr. Donald E. Simanek, Professor Emeritus, Lock Haven University of Pennsylvania. Space did not permit a fair telling of his story. We hope to address that with the next Power Play in the October issue of PTE.*) **PTE**