

Yankee Ingenuity in the Green Mountains

When we look back at the 1700s and 1800s, most of us imagine a time when men, women and children **toiled** without the aid of machines. This is not completely true. Granted, our ancestors couldn't drive to the supermarket in a sports car, cook dinner in a microwave oven or record television programs on a VCR. But they had mills that ground their corn, cut their lumber and carded their wool. Mechanical churns, cheese presses and apple peelers were among the many machines that made farm and household chores easier. Vermonters designed and manufactured all sorts of labor-saving tools to make their work less time-consuming and their backs less sore.

They were **self-sufficient** men and women living in a place and a time where one either made do or did without.

Most inventors had no formal training. They used common sense to create or improve upon gadgets for their homes and farms. Few of these inventions, however, were ever patented or made available to others by sale.

Vermonters invented out of necessity, although chance, as in the case of Springfield inventor David Smith, sometimes played a role. Smith came up with the idea for hooks and eyes, a type of clothing closure, while bending two pieces of wire one afternoon.

Many of the devices invented by our Vermont ancestors are still used today. We can thank Thaddeus Fairbanks, of St. Johnsbury, for inventing the platform scale. Without it we'd never know the exact weight of the things we buy or the loads we carry. When we ride in an elevator, we can't help but be grateful to Halifax's Elisha Otis for the safety mechanism he developed that stops an elevator from dropping if the cables break. If you have ever been given **nitrous oxide** by your dentist so you wouldn't feel the drilling of a tooth, a word of thanks is due to Horace Wells, of Hartford, who had the idea to use the gas as an **anesthetic**. And who can ignore the contribution of Thomas Davenport, of Brandon, whose invention of the electric motor has **minimized** the work necessary for so many of our chores.

Of course, not all inventions originated in Vermont. Many out-of-state discoveries affected the lives of Vermonters as much as those they developed locally. Consider the difference matches made. Invented in 1827, they were introduced into Vermont some years later. Although still a luxury item, they meant family members would not have to go to a neighboring farm (perhaps two miles away) to get hot coals when their own fire had gone out.



Legend has it that blacksmith and inventor Thomas Davenport of Brandon insulated the magnet for his electric motor with strips of silk torn from his wife's wedding dress.
Illustration courtesy of National Life Insurance Company

Other inventions had similar impact on our ancestors' daily lives. Conveniences we now take for granted, like indoor plumbing, caused quite a commotion when first available to Vermonters. Some looked upon the modernization with delight while others would have nothing to do with the newfangled

contraptions. We can only imagine what Vermonters must have thought when they learned that President John Adams had a mechanical **privy** installed *inside* the White House. Unbelievable as it was to many, the legendary "John" became available in Vermont about the time of the Civil War and would eventually become a standard **fixture** in almost all homes.

How will our great-grandchildren look back on our lives? Will they think the tools and machines we use now are primitive and backward? Will today's new inventions become everyday conveniences for our children's children's children?

Well, don't just sit there. Make history. Start inventing.

VOCABULARY

toil - to work hard

self-sufficient - able to provide for oneself

nitrous oxide - colorless gas used as an anesthetic; sometimes called "laughing gas"

anesthetic - any substance that causes a loss of feeling in the body

minimize - to make smaller

privy - an outhouse or latrine

fixture - something securely fixed in place