"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.

CHILDREN ADMIRING SLINKY in Bowers Gift Shop, Brookline

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.

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 airconditioning 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 [illegible] and a cashier [illegible] and cheese [illegible] But [illegible] he would have to do his own selling.