

# The Face of Smethport

Wooly Willy voted as a top-40 toy for three decades

by Sharon Watts

**W**E'VE ALL HEARD OF ONE-INDUSTRY TOWNS. Up until last year, the borough of Smethport in McKean County was home to a one-town industry, thanks to the production of a simple toy known to baby boomers as Wooly Willy.

Recently voted one of the top-40 toys from the 1950s through the 1980s, Wooly Willy is an unlikely success story. It consists of a piece of cardboard featuring a funny-looking, bulbous-nosed, bald-headed "everyman" that can be "drawn on" with a magnet, shaping black powder into a

moustache, a goatee, hair or eyebrows.

For nearly six decades, the business of churning out Wooly Willys was as neatly contained within one sprawling building as the magnetite granules vacuum-sealed within the toy itself. Earlier last year, parent company Smethport Specialty Co. filled its last order and closed up shop on Magnetic Avenue. Bought out by Patch Products of Beloit, Wis., in 2008, the new company decided to downsize

locally and move all production west, although not quite as



McKean County

far as China. Not yet, anyway.

## Meet Wooly Willy's Inventor

**JIM HERZOG IS** a tall, amiable fixture in his hometown of Smethport. He is also a one-man Willy-pedia. Along with his brother Don, he stepped into the family business in the early 1950s as a young engineer just out of the service. Other than a stint during World War II when the company subcontracted for Sylvania, making insulators for radio tubes used in proximity fuses to control the height of exploding bombs, the family business was toys, all based on magnets.

One day Herzog was fooling around with leftover iron filings when he had the idea of drawing with a magnet. He enlisted Leonard Mackowsky, a postal employee from nearby Bradford who did art on the side, to design a face, and from that doodle Wooly Willy was born.

The toy was rejected by more than a dozen chain stores before G. C. Murphy placed a small order, just to prove that the toy wouldn't sell. Murphy's sold out within a few days, and the next order was for 12,000 units. Herzog admits that at first the toy company wasn't quite sure how to make them, but that didn't last long.

In what became a soup-to-nuts operation, Herzog stepped into all the roles necessary to man-

ufacture the finished product: finding a consistent source for the magnetite (along with harnessing all of the natural ore's quirks), printing the cardboard packaging, die-cutting and vacuum forming the package, and injection molding, as well as handling sales and distribution of the finished product.

"I had the engineering expertise to do it all, and Smethport supplied a lot of good employees," he says. "There's an abundance of talent in small towns, if you seek it. We also had the right powdered metal, right off the bat, supplied by companies in nearby towns—first from Stackpole Carbon in St. Mary's and then Kane Magnetics in Kane."

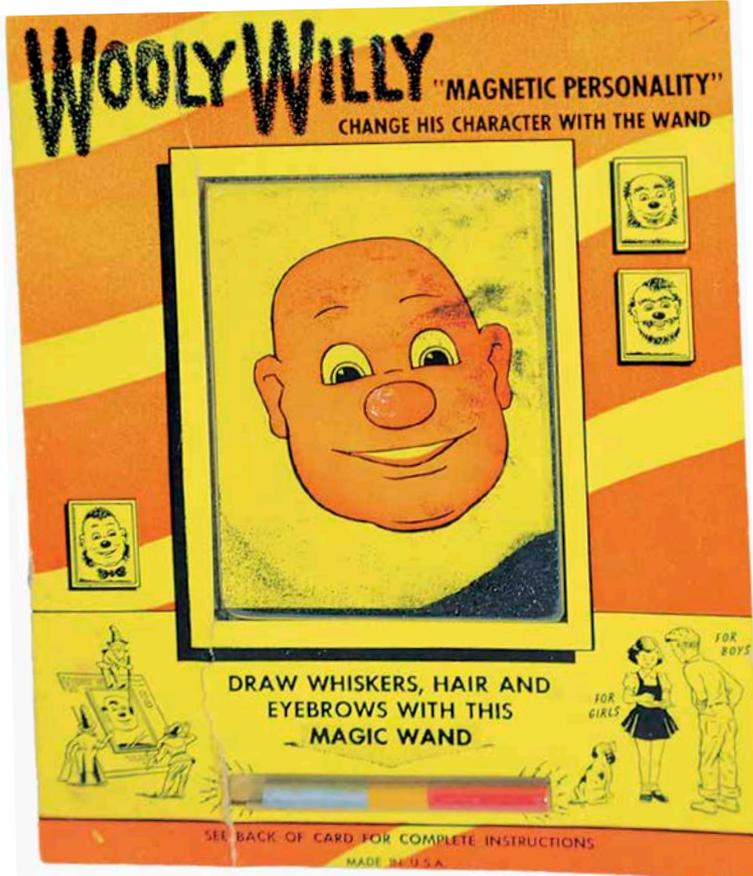
The powder is the same component found on black sand beaches and is quite safe, Herzog reassures.

"It's sort of a science and art toy at the same time," he says, in answer to why the toy found immediate yet enduring popularity. "Anyone can use it and become an instant artist. And it's intriguing how the magnet moves the powder."

It also didn't hurt that it cost just 29 cents when it first came on the market.

## Made in the USA, for Now

**NOT ONLY DID** U.S. Rep. Glenn Thompson play with Wooly Willy as a child, but he has the toy on display and gives the toy as gifts from his congressional office in Washington, D.C. Representing Pennsylvania's 5th District, which includes Smethport,



# ROUND UP

Thompson would visit the factory, place his order in the morning and pick it up later that day. Some people say they see more than a passing resemblance between the congressman and the cartoon.

Wooly Willy spawned similar toys through the 1980s: Dapper Dan, Hair-Do Harriet and others that reflected the changing times. Still, it was Wooly Willy with his “magnetic personality” that became the face of Smethport.

“Once we made it, it was copied all over the world, but no one ever took the time to get it right,” Herzog says. “One set says ‘Made in Smethport, Japan.’ We probably turned out around 200 million tagged with *Smethport, PA*. The best patent has always been good delivery, quality and safety, and that’s still true today. Our safety record was outstanding.”

Smethport Borough President Greg Rounsville had followed his parents’ footsteps into the Wooly Willy manufacturing plant and managed it for 20 years, right up to auctioning off the equipment last spring.

“I really never thought of the place shutting down and being moved,” he says, “but times change. It’s their (Patch Products’) business on how to run things to their financial advantage.”

He ironically notes that he continues to receive phone

calls on a regular basis from the new plant’s employees asking him how to do this or fix that.

Wooly Willy may no longer be manufactured in Smethport, but Herzog is optimistic about keeping the toy production stateside.

“The materials (cardboard, plastic) are actually made here, and with the energy resurgence of natural gas, a lot of things that were going to go overseas will stay here because our supplies are cheaper,” he says.

To celebrate the toy’s popularity, the Wooly Willy Wonderdaze festival became an annual summer event in the center of town, under former Smethport Mayor Ross Porter. His successor, Wayne Foltz, is too young to remember how fascinating it was to shake that black powder and coax it into formation, back when Wooly Willy was a true innovation reflecting local geography, talent and technology.

Since Wooly Willy is no longer produced in Smethport, what excites the mayor now is encouraging new businesses, both mom-and-pop shops and manufacturers, to find homes in this small borough on the edge of the Allegheny Forest. With Wooly Willy’s legacy as a foundation, the magnet is already in place. ♣

—Sharon Watts writes from Beacon, N.Y.



The Tropical Forest Conservatory (at right) and the welcome center (lower right) were the first two renovations completed at Phipps using the concepts of green energy.

## Glass House Goes Green

The latest addition to Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens brings sustainable landscapes and green energy

by Bette McDevitt

**L**IGHT FILLS THE WELCOME CENTER OF Phipps Conservatory and Botanical Gardens in the Oakland area of Pittsburgh where I’m

enjoying coffee with Adam Haas in the Café Phipps. An interpretive specialist, he is about to give me a tour of the newest part of Phipps—the Center



SHARON WATTS