# The Achievers

## Central California's Engineering Pioneers



Central Coast History Foundation

Edited by Tod Rafferty

These sample pages illustrate the style and substance of *The Achievers,* a 9 x 12-inch hardbound volume to be published in 2003. Other subjects to be included are:

*The Railroads, cause and effect*
*Cal Poly's engineering history*
*Central Coast's geography of opportunity*
*Blacksmiths, aviators and astronauts*
*New vocational educators*
*Harvesting on land and sea*
*Paso Robles' charcoal industry*
*Motorsports as a performing art*
*Future energies and hardware*

*The Achievers* is the inaugural publishing project of the Central Coast History Foundation. We intend itto be the first in a continuing series covering the history of the arts and sciences in Central California. Its success will determine the nature and scope of similar efforts in the future.

The book's future depends largely on the tax-deductible contributions of organizations and individuals with a common interest – preserving and presenting the stories of those who contributed to the region's social, economic and cultural development. Our communities are connected by the themes of scientific inquiry, the work of artists, craftsmen and women, and their graphic expressions in daily life. *The Achievers* is a working history of 20th century life in Central California.

Anyone interested in contributing to this endeavor, creatively, financially or by reserving books for themselves or friends, is welcome to contact the Foundation through any of the contacts listed below. Your support is genuinely appreciated.


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# Introduction

Engineering has been defined as a "profession concerned explicitly with the scientific planning, design, creation, and economical operation of physical structures or 'engines' – stationary or moving, military or civilian."

The word engineer derives from the Latin *ingenium* –meaning invention, natural capacity – which comes from gignere – to produce. "Engineering is essentially a useful or applied art, as distinguished from a fine art; and, potentially, it involves the application of factual data systematized by every branch of science. Experience with the practical needs of life, and native wit or common sense in the application of scientific knowledge, are the characteristics required of those who devote their lives to the art of engineering."*

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The people profiled in this book all share those elements of common sense and native wit (albeit in widely varied ratios) that made them them either engineers or ultimate users of systematized factual data. We have attempted to cover a broad range of disciplines, although some branches of engineering have necessarily been precluded by the demands of time and space. The Central Coast History Foundation hopes to chronicle other applied sciences (and arts) in future titles.

For the purposes of this book, California's Central Coast is bordered by Monterey in the north and Santa Barbara in the south. San Luis Obispo County is the nexus in this geographic span and also home to California Polytechnic State University, with the largest primarily undergraduate engineering college west of the Rocky Mountains. Our survey originates with the region's pioneer designers, builders and purveyors in transportation, agriculture, energy and electrical power. Many of these often unschooled engineers made their livings as ranchers, mechanics, farmers, blacksmiths and in related trades. Cal Poly was the result of their perception of the coming need for advanced training in agriculture and the sciences, a prospect made tangible by the arrival of the railroad.

The decades between those efforts and today's counterparts in space travel, energy research, motor racing and digital development have been widely called the *American Century.* The achievements of some of the people who contributed to this swift rise in technical prominence are featured here, with the hope that present and future achievers may benefit from their work.

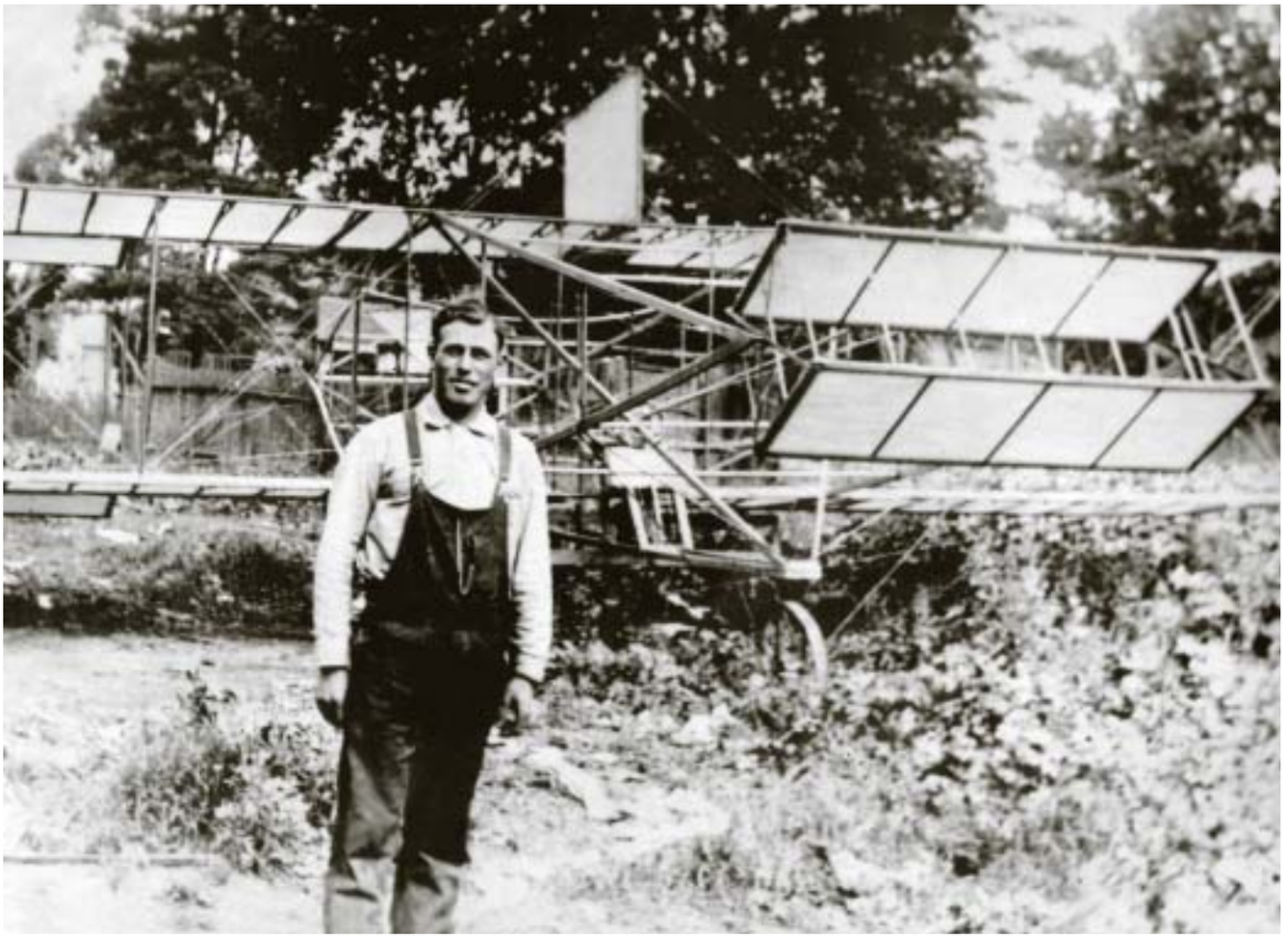
—Tod Rafferty, Editor



*The engine planned for William Paulsen's flying machine eventually found its way to this harvester, the first gasoline-powered device of its kind on the Central Coast. The harvester now resides in the Monterey Country Agricultural and Rural Life Museum in King City.*

# William Paulsen's Dream Flyer

In 1908, William Paulsen was working as a mechanic in San Jose, California. Born in 1886 in the farming community of Jolón, Paulsen had grown up in a ranching family, but his mechanical abilities led him to move north where jobs were easier to find, especially in the growing enterprise of automobile repair. Like many other young men, William was captivated with the accomplishments of the Wright brothers and of Glenn Curtiss. So in his spare time, behind the auto repair shop, Paulsen built himself an airplane.



*Though William Paulsen's airplane never flew, his engine drove the area's first gas-powered harvester*

His craftsmanship was apparent in the plane's construction, which followed closely the prevailing designs of the day. But Paulsen was without an engine to power the aircraft and decided to build his own. As it turned out, the massive two-cylinder iron block with pistons cast by Paulsen himself, would never be called upon to get the machine airborne. Given the size and weight of the power plant, most observers considered this a fortuitous event.

Friends of the Paulsen family in Jolón had recently devised a harvesting machine, designed to use a gasoline engine. While the wagon assembly itself would still be horse-drawn, the working parts would be the first in the region to employ other than steam power. When his family asked William to contribute his engine to the enterprise, he agreed.

The original harvester now resides at the Monterey Country Agricultural & Rural Life Museum in King City. Ironically, William Paulsen

*(Continued on page 19)*



*Rusted and decayed parts of Achilles Tognini's wave-motion generation machine were still around many years after the death of the inventor. This clever device was many years ahead of its time; wave generation machines of today use similar actions, though they might be found encased in more impressive structures.*

# Achilles Tognini's wave motion generator

When Achilles Tognini arrived from Switzerland in the early 1880s, Cayucos had few more than a dozen houses. But the shipping port, founded by Englishman James Cass in 1867, was a thriving enterprise. The growing commerce between local farmers with the markets in San Francisco and Los Angeles, and the need for imported building materials and household goods, quickly made Cayucos a busy port of call.

Tognini opened a general store in partnership with Charles Ghezzi, selling food, household items and hardware. As Cayucos grew the mercantile did well and Achilles began plans for his wave motion generator, intended to provide electrical power to the village. At Bruce's Cove, on the north end of the bay, he and a small crew began work on the foundation for his design. Construction was necessarily conducted at low tide, requiring some work at odd hours.



*Achilles Tognini stands beside his Wave Motion Generator in 1915.*

Achilles was not a trained engineer, but was convinced that his proposal for converting the ocean's energy into electricity was entirely feasible. And no one in the region could say that Tognini didn't know beans. In fact he was so well versed in the planting, harvesting and preparation of legumes in their multitude of varieties that it provided his nickname in the community – *Beans Tognini.*

Naturally there was some skepticism among his neighbors over the concept of electricity from the ocean. Nonetheless, Tognini filed his patent application in 1913, had it granted in 1915, and spent more than $20,000 of his own savings on the project. Most of the expense involved cutting a long channel through the rocks, intended to funnel the waves. At its mouth two concrete pillars supported a paddle wheel, its axle floated in slots on each side to rise and fall with the tides. But the first strong swells destroyed the wheel and some of the mechanism.

Tognini then replaced the cast iron gears with steel units and rebuilt the paddle wheel with stronger materials. The first heavy tide brought the same results, but the intrepid inventor wasn't prepared to give up. Next he rigged a pump to send water up…

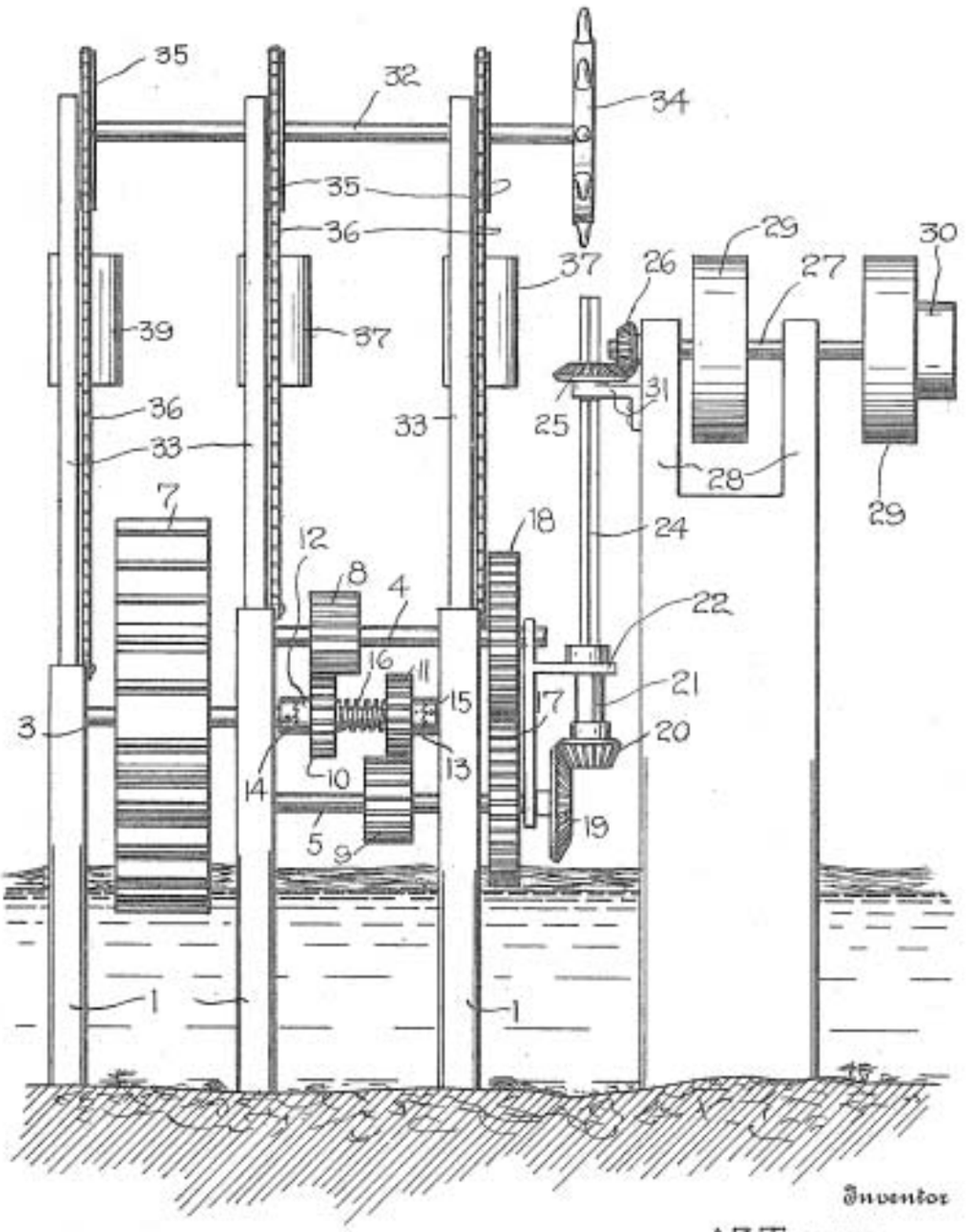
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A. B. TOGNINI.

TRANSMISSION GEARING.

APPLICATION FILED MAY 7, 1913.

**1,127,945.** Patented Feb. 9, 1915.




Witnesses
Robert M. Sutphen
A. L. Hind.

By Watson E. Coleman
Attorney

# UNITED STATES PATENT OFFICE.

ACHILLES B. TOGNINI, OF CAYUCOS, CALIFORNIA.

## TRANSMISSION-GEARING.

1,127,945. Specification of Letters Patent. Patented Feb. 9, 1915.

Application filed May 7, 1913. Serial No. 766,154.

*To all whom it may concern:*

Be it known that I, ACHILLES B. TOGNINI, a citizen of the United States, residing at Cayucos, in the county of San Luis Obispo and State of California, have invented certain new and useful Improvements in Transmission-Gearing, of which the following is a specification, reference being had to the accompanying drawings.

This invention comprehends certain new and useful improvements in wave motors and has for its primary object to provide a wave motor which will be of such construction that it will be readily and positively operated by the waves as they advance in and recede.

Another object is to provide a device of this character, the operative parts of which may be mounted in such manner as to be readily raised and lowered as the tide rises and falls to retain the paddle wheel in proper position according to the depth of the water.

A further object is to provide a wave motor which will be of comparatively simple construction and highly efficient and effective in operation.

A further object is to generally improve and simplify the construction and operation of devices of this character and increase the efficiency and durability of the same.

With the above and other objects in view, my invention consists in certain novel constructions, combinations and arrangements of parts to be hereinafter more fully described, claimed and illustrated in the accompanying drawing, in which, the figure is a side elevation of my complete motor.

Referring to the drawing, the numeral 1 designates the supporting piers or standards having guideways (not shown) in their upper ends, in which are mounted the bearings for the rotary and vertically movable horizontal shafts 3, 4, and 5. Upon the shaft 3, between two of the supporting walls, is mounted the paddle wheel 7 which constitutes a power transmitter and is adapted to be operated by the water in either direction, and thereby rotate the shaft 3 in one direction and then the other to drive the shaft 5 steadily in one direction only, through mechanism which will be later clearly and fully described.

It will be understood that the shafts 4 and 5 and the portion of the shaft 3 therebetween are parallel and in substantially the same vertical plane, the purpose of which will presently appear. The shaft 4, has the wide gear 8 mounted thereon while a similar gear wheel 9 is mounted upon the shaft 5 and offset from the gear 8. Upon the portion of the shaft 3 between the shafts 4 and 5 are loosely mounted spaced relatively narrow gear wheels 10 and 11, having the clutch members 12 and 13, respectively formed upon their outer faces and resiliently retained in engagement with the spaced clutch members 14 and 15 rigid with the shaft 3 by a coiled spring 16 encircling the shaft 3, and bearing at its ends against the opposed faces of the gears 10 and 11.

The gear 10 is continually in engagement with the wide gear 8 upon the shaft while the gear 11 is continually in engagement with the wide gear 9 upon the shaft 5. It will be understood that the teeth of the clutch member 14 extend in one direction while the teeth upon the clutch member 15 extend in the reverse direction and that the teeth of the clutch members 12 and 13 are formed for engagement with the teeth of the opposed clutch members 14 and 15, whereby when the shaft 3 is rotated in one direction, the clutch member 14 will turn the clutch member 12 and gear 10, thereby rotating the shaft 4 in one direction while a reverse rotation of the shaft 3 will cause the clutch member 15 to drive the clutch member 13 and gear wheel 11, thereby rotating the gear 9 and shaft 5 in the opposite direction. As the shaft 5 has a large gear wheel 17 mounted thereon which is continually in mesh with the large gear wheel 18 upon the shaft 4, the shaft 5 will be rotated in the same direction when the clutch member 14 drives the clutch member 12, as when the clutch member 15 drives the clutch member 13. It will therefore be seen that the shaft 5 is always rotated in the same direction.

One end of the shaft 5 is extended beyond the gear 17 and has the bevel gear 19 mounted thereon which is engaged by the bevel pinion 20 formed upon one end of the stub shaft 21 which is rotatably mounted in a bracket member 22, mounted on the projecting ends of the shafts 4 and 5, and having a squared opening (not shown) formed in its upper end in which is secured the lower end of a square shaft 24, the upper end of which is slidably engaged through a bevel gear 25 which meshes with a bevel pinion




*Local racer Fred Luelling prepares to compete at Exposition Park, San Luis Obispo's one-mile dirt track. Located where Meadow Park is today, the circuit was billed as the nation's fastest dirt oval in the early '20s.*

# Exposition Park

## San Luis Obispo's championship race track – 1922

The first organized motor races on the Central Coast were held on the city streets of Lompoc, Santa Maria and San Luis Obispo in 1911. With the wide availability of the Ford Model T, and the growing after-market in high-performance engine accessories, contests of speed and daring grew quickly as public entertainment.

Henry Ford had won his first and only automobile race in 1902. His competitor's larger and faster machine expired half-way through the contest, so Henry had only to keep his car running to win the event. At the end he vowed to "never again" be a racing driver, and by all accounts stuck to his word. But his engineering and management skills effectively created the American automobile industry, and with it the dreams of backyard mechanics and racers for generations to come.

California's climate ensured the state's popularity among builders, tuners and racers who could roll out their latest creations throughout the year. Horse racing tracks at local fairgrounds, the dry lake beds in southern California, city streets and country roads all became testing grounds for "speed equipment." Only the advent of U.S. involvement in World War 1 would slow the growth of motor racing, and with its conclusion the sport picked up where it left off, with one difference. The cars were considerably faster.

Increasing speeds, and their attendant danger to the general populace, had worked to discourage racing contests on the city streets. So aspiring entrepreneurs gathered like-minded investors to create purpose-built racing facilities in or near major cities. San Luis Obispo was hardly a metropolis in 1921, but developer Jack Lowe figured that a professional track half way between Los Angeles and San Francisco was sure to succeed. Indianapolis Raceway Park had established itself as the premier venue in the midwest; Lowe saw no reason that San Luis Obispo couldn't have the "fastest dirt track in the country."




Local driver Johnnie Holmes came to experience the dangers of motor racing first-hand. "Those Model T specials used to get up to a hundred miles an hour at

*(Continued on page 17)*



# The Varian Brothers

## The Dreamer, the Doer and the Klystron tube

by Bob Behme

Two brothers from Halcyon can be credited with significantly improving and changing life in the Twentieth Century. One idea gave England an edge in the Battle of Britain, helping track incoming airplanes, providing advanced warning, reducing deaths, keeping Adolph Hitler's dreaded Luftwaffe at bay. The same device, first designed and built in Arroyo Grande, served the Allies in World War II and was adapted to make nighttime and fog-bound landings safe and practical. A post war invention revolutionized medicine, increasing our odds in the fight against cancer. Other concepts have helped to make our current high-tech life style possible, even palatable. The brothers? Russell and Sigurd Varian.

"[The] Varians' famous Klystron vacuum tube proved crucial to the development of radar, which in turn triggered breakthroughs in such areas as defense and telecommunications. [Another] innovation, the first medical linear accelerator, has become the preferred means of delivering high-energy X-rays used in cancer treatment," said William P. Barnett, an Associate Professor in Stanford's Graduate School of Business. Dr. Barnett's tribute was given on the 50th anniversary of Varian Associates, a unique company that grew out of the brothers' early work. From childhood, Russell could solve complex math problems in his head and dream-up inventions while watching someone make bread. Sigurd was the opposite, adventurous, practical and instantly handy with his hands. Theirs was a poor family and their father, John, believed that someday one of Russell's inventions would save them all. Sigurd shared the dream but with one proviso: if Russell would ever conjure-up a family-saving invention, Sigurd would be there to build it. At the depth of the Great Depression, when jobs were the only thing harder to find than money, Sigurd predicted, "The way to be independent is to cash in on one of Russell's ideas." He was right. All it would take would be faith, persistence and time.

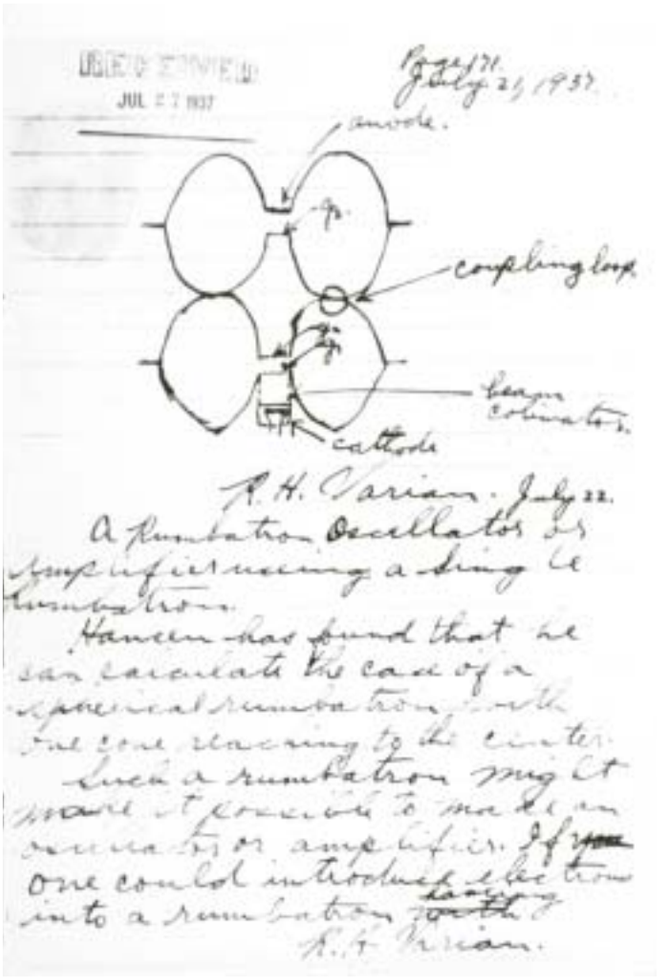
*Left: The Brothers Varian. Sigurd, top, and Russell, below, stand with a working model of the Klystron tube at one of Stanford University's physics laboratories. The inventions of the Varians had impact on military, medical and industrial electronic systems, and established their company for the long-term. Today, Varian produces CAT scanners and other sophisticated electronic devices from offices in Palo Alto, California, Texas, and Massachusetts.*

### The early years

The Varian name, though firmly planted in Ireland, has a broader history. A genealogist traced its roots to the Middle East, early Rome and France. One of New York's first Dutch settlers, a Varian, was mayor. Members of another line fought with Cromwell and emigrated to Ireland. Russell and Sigurd could trace their heritage to an Isaac Varian who lived in Cork, Ireland, about 1723. Our story begins in Ireland in the late 1800s. John Varian, their father, was the genuine article, a redhead as Irish as the Kerry Hills, as citified as Dublin where his parents ran a brushmaking business. Their mother, Agnes Dickson, was also Irish. Her family had migrated to Australia.

### The Halcyon days

Russell, about 16, thought Halcyon was paradise. He dug potatoes and cut wood while Sigurd picked apricots and worked on nearby farms. Between jobs, Russell enjoyed hiking, liked camping on the Oceano Dunes and was interested in scientific subjects. Fourteen-year old Sigurd had an interest in mechanical things. He repaired donkey carts and auto engines and experimented with electricity. The boys attended Oceano Grammar School. Russell completed the eighth grade in December, 1914, and attended Arroyo Grande High School. Sigurd followed one and one half years later. Before they were old enough to have driver's licenses the two were racing around town in homemade cars with wooden frames and open engines, seats bolted to two-by-

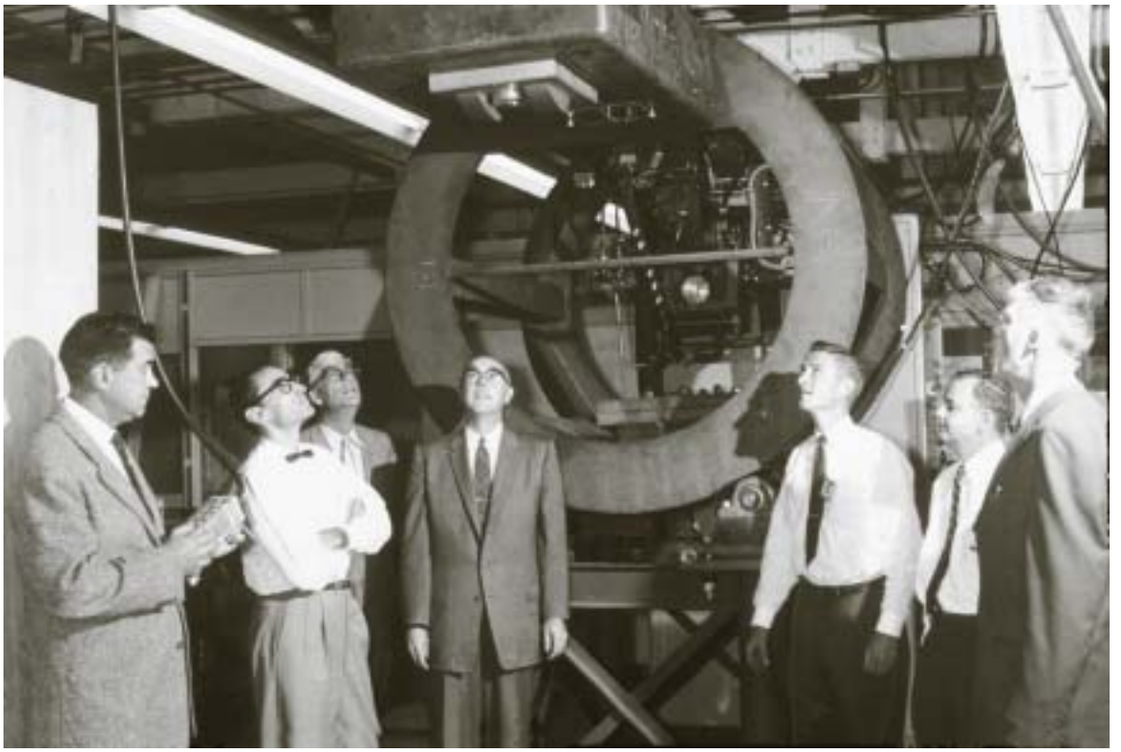



*Russell Varian's original 1937 drawing and notes for the Klystron tube.*

fours. They ranged through open fields and across dunes shooting rabbits and collecting clams, activities that were marginally legal. In high school, Russell could solve difficult mathematical problems, savant-like, in his head. He was becoming more knowledgeable than sociable, a condition today's society might term "nerd-like." In 1916, Russell came down with Chicken Pox and convalesced reading books on acoustics, electricity, heat and light. While thumbing through a copy of the *Electrical Experimenter,* he spotted an article about a vacuum tube that could be used as an amplifier.

Russell's friend, Henry Cowell, had become interested in music and was searching for a way to produce vowel and consonant sounds mechanically. Russell wrote to him saying that he had a solution, explaining the tube and its functions. Years later, in 1931, Cowell approached a Russian inventor, Leo Theremin, with a similar request. Theremin's eventual solution was surprisingly similar to the one suggested by Russell Varian when he was just 18. This was possibly Russell's first introduction to vacuum tubes.

*(Continued on page 18)*



*Above, the Varians stand with other scientists at Stanford to observe the Really Big Electromagnet (RBE), which powered their high-voltage vacuum tube experiments into the 1950s. This magnet carried them through their invention of the magnetic resonance scanner, now known as the MRI device, which can scan the internal organs of the human body without surgical intrusion.*

# Vic Hickey, the original off-roader

## From Baja California to the surface of the Moon

*"...you wind up the Vic Hickey doll and it smiles disarmingly and strikes up an immediate friendship. Or it invents something."* — Bob Thomas, *Motor Trend,* 1969

If any one person could rightfully be designated the father of the American off-road vehicle, it would have to be Vic Hickey. By the time he reached Cal Poly for Navy pre-flight training in 1943, the Ohio-born Hickey had grown up in Southern California, learned his mechanical skills building dry lakes roadsters in high school, and earned his pilot's license at age 19.

The university had adopted the national Civilian Pilot Training program in 1939, conducting ground and flight training at San Luis Obispo Airport. As of January 1942 more than 100 pilots had graduated



*Vic Hickey stands for the photographer as two NASA and GM engineers measure the Lunar Rover Trainer's ability to handle slopes in the background. Some of the all-terrain capabilities of the Lunar Rover were incorporated into the Humvee, also designed by Hickey.*

and a third of them had joined the military air corps. The first 200 cadets in Poly's Naval Flight Preparation School arrived in January of 1943. By the end of the year the university was designated a Fleet School by the Navy, and Victor Francis Hickey was among the 840 Navy and Marine recruits who arrived for flight training. By 1944 the Navy had effectively taken over Cal Poly's curricula, shifting most civilian classes to evening sessions.

"Roy Metz was in charge of the aviation class at that time," Hickey recalls. "He was my hero. He was real great with wrenches and was one of the first certified airplane mechanics in the country. He was a self-made man."

The war had accelerated national defense efforts on all fronts. San Luis Obispo's "College of Agriculture and Industry" was training students in the arts and sciences of efficient methods of food production, preservation and conservation, in addition to its commitment to military requirements. Many students whose education was interrupted by the war would return to Cal Poly at its conclusion, Vic Hickey among them.

"Those were tough times," Hickey says. "I worked for several local outfits, including the Hearst Corporation, but I still couldn't afford to go to school." Returning to this hometown of Southgate, the aspiring engineer was building hot rods once again and Novi racing cars with Bud Winfield. "We built that Indy car called *City of Tacoma* that was driven by Hal Cole in 1950 and '51. Ed Kurtiss built the body.

"That's about the time I came up with the dual-wheel adapters for the Jeep, and they helped the Army out in Korea." During his Navy stint, Hickey had devised a mechanism to launch aircraft torpedos from a PT boat.

After the Korean war, the American hot rod scene grew far more diverse. The sports of dirt track and drag racing exploded across the country, and a few of the veteran throttle-jockeys started thinking about off-road racing. Thousand of GIs had experienced the adventurous cross-country capabilities of the Jeep, and were keen to translate the functionali-



*The Lunar Rover suspension was designed by a team led by Vic Hickey at General Motors.*
*This unit was used for training on Earth; several Rovers like it made the trip to the Moon, and are still there.*



*James Garner, Vic Hickey and Steve McQueen at the Baja Race*

ty into civilian applications – primarily fishing, hunting and of course racing.

Vic was convinced he could build a better Jeep. Persuading everyone else would be more of a problem, but anyone who had emerged from a rough-and-tumble youth in South Los Angeles, especially with a moniker like Red Hickey, had to be tough.

While having his own "speed shop" and working on street rods, midgets, dry lakes racers and Indy cars was more fun than work, it didn't generate sufficient income for a growing family. Fortunately Vic's wife Leona provided moral support for his automotive adventures.

By 1957, Hickey had fairly complete sketches of a new off-road machine for which his father had selected the name – *Trailblazer.* Through his friend Bill Yeager, who worked for Chevrolet, Vic had heard about a new six-cylinder, horizontally-opposed air-cooled engine under development at General Motors. Although the Corvair was still two years in the future, Yeager convinced GM general manager Ed Cole that Hickey's project car deserved one of the prototype engines.

"That was a good example of being in the right place at the right time," Vic recalls. "That engine was exactly right for the vehicle I had in mind. But I was surprised when they decided to give me one."

Vic's rectangular steel frame was fitted with Jeep differentials at both ends, independent suspension with torsion bars, centerpoint steering and inboard disc brakes contributed by Frank and Bob Airheart. A Jeep 3-speed transmission was mated to the Corvair engine and the custom transfer case carried four gears to compensate for the motor's counter-clockwise rotation. The Trailblazer had 50/50 weight distribution and weighed 2240 pounds. The body, built by future customizer George Barris, was made of fiberglass.

In 1959, when Ed Cole stopped by to check on his engine, Hickey took him for a ride in the Los Angeles River bed. After this seat-of-the-pants demonstration of the Trailblazer's performance, and driving it himself, Cole offered Vic $25,000 for the car and the name. A year later General Motors, with Cole now president, hired Hickey as a research and development engineer, which would send his career to the Moon.




*The Baja Boot, built in 30 days as an after-hours project when Hickey worked for General Motors, made its first appearance in the Baja 1000. Built in George Hurst's shop, the Boot had a Chevy engine in the rear and Oldsmobile Toronado driveline components.*

*(Continued on page 62)*

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# The Achievers

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