Cootie--The 1950's Sensation

By Don Thornton, Correspondent

William Herbert Schaper was the big man behind the small plastic bug that took the toy world by a storm in the 1950s. And that storm has continued for decades, turning the insect critter with six legs and a long curly tongue into one of America's favorite toys, especially among pre-school kids who don't need to read to be able to play.





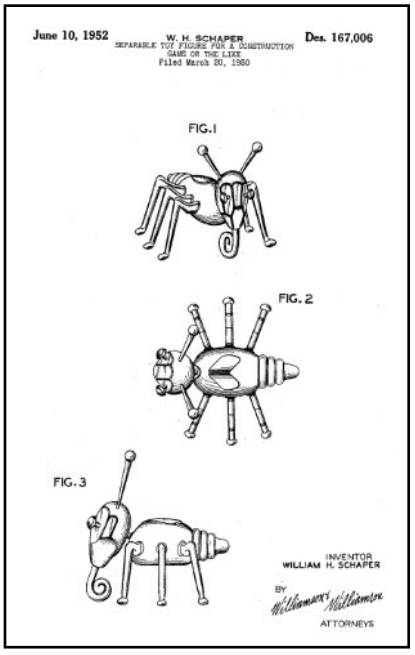
Schaper, known as "Herb" to family and friends, was not trying to invent a toy but came up with the bug idea while whittling fishing lures at his home in Robbinsdale, Minnesota, a suburb of Minneapolis, about 1945. "When you make fishing lures, there's not much you can do to them," Schaper said in a 1978 newspaper interview about how he went from delivering the mail in Minneapolis to becoming a millionaire. "A body is a body. So to give it a different wiggle, I put legs and a head on it and it dawned on me that it was a game."

He thought his creation looked like a louse, a wingless parasitic insect. "I was working in a post office during Christmas with some World War I vets and I asked them whether the lice during World War I bit or tickled. They said, 'We didn't call them lice, we called them cooties.'" And the Cootie game was born (images, above)

COOTIE

Wordmark	COOTIE
Status	LIVE REGISTERED
Goods & services	US 022: GAMES PLAYED WITH DICE, SPINNERS, AND CORRELATED, NUMBERED...
Class	028
Serial	71479992
Owners	HASBRO, INC. (CORPORATION; RHODE ISLAND, USA)

Scraper filed for a trademark (image, left) on the Cootie name February 19, 1945 and it was registered September 20, 1947. It is still active today with the owner listed as Hasbro Inc.



Schaper launched W. H. Schaper Manufacturing (later Schaper Toys) and production began around 1949. It quickly was credited with two firsts in the industry: The first all plastic toy and the first to advertise a toy on television, including a spot on "Captain Kangaroo." In addition to the trademark, he applied for a design patent for a "separable toy figure for a construction game," the Cootie, on March 20, 1950 and it was granted June 10, 1952 (image, right).



Following a nationwide newspaper advertising campaign with chain stores in the month before Christmas in 1952 (price $1.98), 1.2 million games had been sold, but that was only the tip of the iceberg as sales continue, even today. Over the years Schaper offered nearly a dozen other games with catchy names, including Tickle Bee, Sparetime Bowling, Scare Crow, Pickins, Skunk, Stadium Checkers, Don't Break The Ice, Don't Spill The Beans, Ants In The Pants and Hound Dog. However, none came close to the popularity of Cootie.

And its popularity went beyond sales. In honor of the game's 30th anniversary, two streets in Plymouth, Minnesota at the Schaper's headquarters were renamed "Cootie Line" and "Cooti Boulevard." In the early 1970s, he sold out for a total of $7 million and retired. Schaper Toys changed hands several ties, ending up in the Hasbro toy family, which still offers a version of Cootie.

Schaper died of a brain tumor in 1980 at the age of 66. The Hennepin (County) History Museum in Minneapolis, which has three sets of Cootie in its collections, paid tribute to Schaper in a 2019 posting: "He was fondly remembered by his family as a cheerful, kind and generous man. All characteristics that make sense for someone who brought happiness to so many children."



Just who was Herb Schaper? His 1940 World War II draft card listed him as 6-foot-2, 289 pounds and jobless. A ruptured eardrum kept him out of the military.

At the age of 42, he married Frances Cussler, who had three children from a previous marriage. They had met years earlier when they shared a desk and dissected a frog together during a biology class at Minneapolis North High School. She became an executive at the toy company. Following Schaper's death, Frances expressed amazement in a newspaper interview over the success of Cootie. "Who could have known? Even after he carved that little bug, I don't think Herb realized what he had."

If you've forgotten, here are the rules: Players roll a die to move forward. A **1** is needed first to get a body, then a **2** to get a head. A **3** gets an antenna, a **4** for an eye, a **5** for the tongue and a **6** for one of the six legs. As each player adds an eligible part to this COOTIE, he or she gets a free roll to try to add another part. The first complete Cootie is the winner. Schaper was once quoted as saying the game was so simple "a little child could beat you as an adult."