

Great Tie Transition

Next step on my way to becoming a failed inventor and entrepreneur ...



I had already taken the first step on the road to glory. I thought of myself as an inventor. Jim Williams facilitated that by bringing my tow spreader to the attention of the Celanese Patent Department. The next step was to think of myself as an operator and entrepreneur. Wearing a tie did that.

It was 1966. I was working for Ralph Schwab in the knitting lab. This was when double knit fabrics became popular and stretch hosiery was invented. The lab tested how well Celanese fibers performed in various applications. In a typical test, an engineer designed a pattern; a skilled technician set up the machine and produced the fabric, and a product development engineer sent the sample to the dye labs at Archdale Drive then evaluated what came back.

Initially, my job was operating three hosiery knitting machines. Each was about the size of a butter churn and driven by an endless chain whose variable size links served as a mechanical computer telling the machine what to do. The machines occupied a corner of the room that once housed the pillow stuffing operation. My previous job had been to help run those machines. When pillow stuffing went to Archdale Drive, I stayed with the room.

It's possible that they didn't know what to do with me. I had no experience with the hosiery machines; someone else had to set them up. That might have been why Ralph told me to write reports. By this time the Red Clay Reader story had been published and it was assumed that I could write.

I started out ghosting reports for others. Then, I wrote memos and reports in my own name about hosiery yarn projects. I documented every aspect of existing research projects and initiated some minor new projects. Nobody seemed to care. Celanese was very flush; money was being spent on all kinds of exotic engineering tools and toys. I might have been just another indulgence.

As a result of all my reports and memos, I acquired a small reputation. Celanese culture placed a high value on the quantity of material published by its engineers and scientists. People in other parts of the company who had never been to the basement where the labs were located assumed that I was one of the development engineers.

The Great Tie Transition happened when I got invited upstairs to a meeting. I don't know if it was my idea to wear the tie or if someone told me to do it. Celanese at that time was still class conscious. Until 1962, green-suit employees were not allowed in the cafeteria. Even in 1966, it would have been unthinkable to wear a green suit to a meeting attended by top-floor executives.

So I wore a tie for a day. Someone attending the meeting who had read my reports said it was nice to put a face to my name. I smiled knowingly and said, "Yes, isn't that always the way."

The next day, expecting to be told to go home and change, I wore a tie again. No one said anything, not even the other technicians. The next day was the same. Pretty soon all my green uniforms were stacked in my locker, starched and cleaned, with the laundry wrapping intact. I never again wore any of the "Tom" shirts; although, until I got fat, I wore the green pants when mowing the grass

Things changed. Except for high-speed motion picture studies, which I had inherited from Jim Williams, I gradually stopped operating machines. Technicians who knew hosiery knitting machines were hired and because I wore a tie, they looked to me for direction. James Poupoulos, the hosiery yarn marketing coordinator from upstairs came to me with his projects.

Although still a technician I assumed the role of a professional. Being a "professional" at Celanese was a big deal.

I traveled with Franklin McCain, the chemist from the Archdale Drive labs, on visits to hosiery kitting mills in the region.

(I didn't know that Frank was one of the four young black men from NC A&T who had, in 1960, integrated the Woolworth's lunch counter in Greensboro. To me he was just this nice, extremely dignified man with a penchant for black suits. We never talked much about race; although once, standing side-by-side at urinals in the Robert E. Lee hotel in Winston Salem, I made a comment about the historical significance of taking a leak in the Robert E Lee. Frank said that he did not much appreciate that bit of history. And it was

amusing to watch the reaction of the white mill owners when Frank and I walked up to the door.)

I conducted wear tests on the stretch stockings that were being developed in our lab. Protected by my tie, I wandered the entire three-story office building looking for women to wear my hosiery samples. Once a week, I delivered new stockings and picked up worn stockings, taking the soiled hose to my lab where I examined them according to various criteria. The ladies, some young, some older, all seemed to look forward to my visits.

Everything seemed possible. Through my own guile, I had become a Celanese Product Development Engineer in everything but title and salary.

Unfortunately, getting the title and the salary was not possible. I needed a college degree (any kind of degree they said, even an English degree) to move for real into those exalted ranks.

I could not see taking myself out of the picture for two years to finish college so I looked for other ways to achieve what was obviously my manifest destiny.

That was when I invented the tetra triangular building system.

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