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Our 'Goofy Ideas' Just Might Benefit Mankind

IN HIS book, "The Discoverers," Daniel Boorstin, Library of Congress librarian, says the first grand discovery made by mankind was time. Many of us might have cited other discoveries such as fire, agriculture or the wheel.

"Only by marking off months, weeks and years, days and hours, minutes and seconds would mankind be liberated from the cyclical monotony of nature," Boorstin wrote.

He also asked: "Why didn't the Chinese discover Europe or America?" and "Why did it take so long for people to learn that the earth goes around the sun?"

A book by Roger von Och, Ph.D., president of Creative Think, a company specializing in innovation in

California's Silicon Valley, took a different approach to the production of new ideas. It is titled "A Whack on the Side of the Head."

Van Och tries to stimulate readers to think up what might be called "goofy ideas," different ways of doing things. He asks: "What if animals became more intelligent than people?" "What if people didn't need to sleep?" and "What if human life expectancy were 200 years?"

Probably there are no quick or easy answers to these questions. Thinkers might respond with surprising comments, but such questions have led to marvelous discoveries.

Look at Leonardo da Vinci, one of the world's greatest inventors. He thought up the parachute and heli-

copter centuries before the world was ready for them. They were regarded as "goofy ideas" during his lifetime, although many of his other inventions had immediate applications.

Thomas Jefferson is noted for his part in writing some of our historic documents. He should be known also for inventing the 3-stick folding camp stool, revolving chair, portable copying desk and a "ciphering wheel" to unscramble coded messages.

He is one of many Americans whose inventions have made life easier for all of us. Thomas A. Edison, our most prolific inventor, obtained more than 1,000 patents.

The Smithsonian Institution says "Invention had reached such a pitch

by the middle of the 19th century that it became an instrument of international competition and prestige — almost a substitute for the more dangerous force of war."

Most of us never invent anything because we don't put our minds to problems and needs that may exist around us. We leave it to somebody else to think up solutions.

An old joke about inventors is the so-far futile effort to invent "petpetual motion," a machine that will keep itself operating. Scientists regard this as an impossibility.

It might be, unless somebody produces a weird idea that contradicts existing knowledge. Then it just might happen. If so, it wouldn't be the first "goofy idea" to save energy that the world has laughed at.