



Lanny Smoot

HIDDEN HERO OF HISTORY

Listen to the story: <https://jonincharacter.com/lanny-smoot/>

Lanny Smoot is an inventor, an electrical engineer, and the creator of over 100 inventions. He is one of the most famous inventors in the United States.

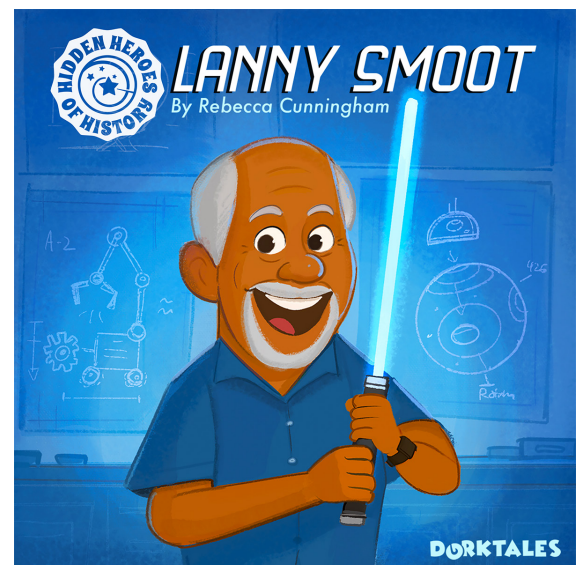
He was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1955. Lanny didn't grow up with a lot of money, but he had a big imagination and a serious love for science. His dad, while not a professional inventor, loved to invent things himself. He would bring home bells, batteries, wires, and lightbulbs, and show Lanny how to use science to ring the bell or make the bulb light up. Lanny was amazed. He often says that the lightbulb lit the way for his entire career. Lanny became obsessed with anything electric. He would study an object to figure out how it worked, then take it apart and build something new. He was the perfect example of an innovative spirit.

When he was twelve, Lanny saw someone riding a unicycle and really wanted to give it a try. But because his parents didn't have a lot of money, he didn't feel right asking for one. So, he decided he would make himself a unicycle. He took a wheel and pedals from the front of a tricycle and hammered a pipe onto the top of the wheel. Then he added a bicycle seat to the top of the pipe. It didn't ride super well, but that didn't matter, because after seeing him ride the unicycle he made, his dad decided to buy one for him.

Lanny went on to attend Brooklyn Tech High School, one of the best high schools in New York City, and then Columbia University. After graduating, he worked at Bell Labs. There, he helped design some of the very first video-on-demand systems 40 years ago. That was the beginning stages of what we now call streaming. While at Bell Labs, he also invented the Electronic Panning Camera, which allowed viewers to choose which angle they were looking at on the screen. That invention got him noticed by the Walt Disney Company.

Disney hired Lanny to be an Imagineer, a job that combines imagination and engineering. Lanny likes to describe imagineering as using technology to make people happy. He has been working at Disney for over 25 years and holds the most patents of anyone in Disney history: 106!

Among his many inventions, one favorite is the real-life lightsaber. Inspired by the Star Wars movies, Lanny figured out a way to make a lightsaber that doesn't hurt anyone. Now people can experience them in Disney parks.



Another example is the HoloTile Floor. It lets you walk in any direction without actually going anywhere. With a VR headset, you could feel like you're walking through a jungle or a castle, but when you take it off, you're still standing in the same spot. Even if many people are using it at once, each person can walk their own way without bumping into anyone.

Lanny's inventions bring joy, but he has also opened doors. He often says he never saw another Black engineer until he was about to become one. His father was a great inspiration, showing him what was possible even without official recognition.

One of Lanny's biggest achievements was being inducted into the National Inventors Hall of Fame. He was the second Disney employee ever to receive this honor. The first was Walt Disney himself.

Glossary

Inventor – A person who comes up with new ideas and creates things that have never existed before.

Electrical engineer – Someone who studies and works with electricity to build and improve things like lights, gadgets, and machines.

Innovative – Coming up with brand-new ideas or using old things in new ways.

Unicycle – A one-wheeled bicycle that takes a lot of balance to ride.

Brooklyn Tech High School – A special high school in New York City where students focus on science, math, and technology.

Columbia University – A college in New York City where people study many different subjects.

Bell Labs – A famous science and technology company where lots of important inventions, like lasers and satellites, were created.

Video-on-demand – Technology that lets you watch shows or movies whenever you want instead of waiting for them to be on TV.

Streaming – Watching videos, shows, or movies over the internet without having to download them first.

Electronic Panning Camera – A special camera that lets viewers choose what angle or direction they want to see on a screen.

Imagineer – A mix of “imagination” and “engineer.” Imagineers invent rides, shows, and attractions to make Disney parks magical.

Patent – A legal document that says an invention belongs to you, so no one else can copy it without your permission.

Lightsaber – A glowing, sword-like weapon from Star Wars. Lanny made a safe, real-life version for people to try.

HoloTile Floor – A special moving floor that lets you walk in any direction but still stay in the same place.

VR Headset – Short for “virtual reality headset.” It’s like a pair of special goggles that make you feel like you’re inside a video game or another world.

National Inventors Hall of Fame – A special group that honors the most creative and important inventors in history.

Give it Some Thought

- What part of Lanny’s story did you like the most? Why?
- Lanny invented things to solve problems. What’s a problem you’d like to solve?
- If you could try one of his inventions, like the lightsaber or HoloTile Floor, which one would you choose?
- Lanny kept working hard even when things were difficult. Can you think of a time when you didn’t give up?
- Lanny’s dad inspired him. Who inspires you to try new things?
- If you could invent something to make people happy, what would it be?

Use Your Imagination

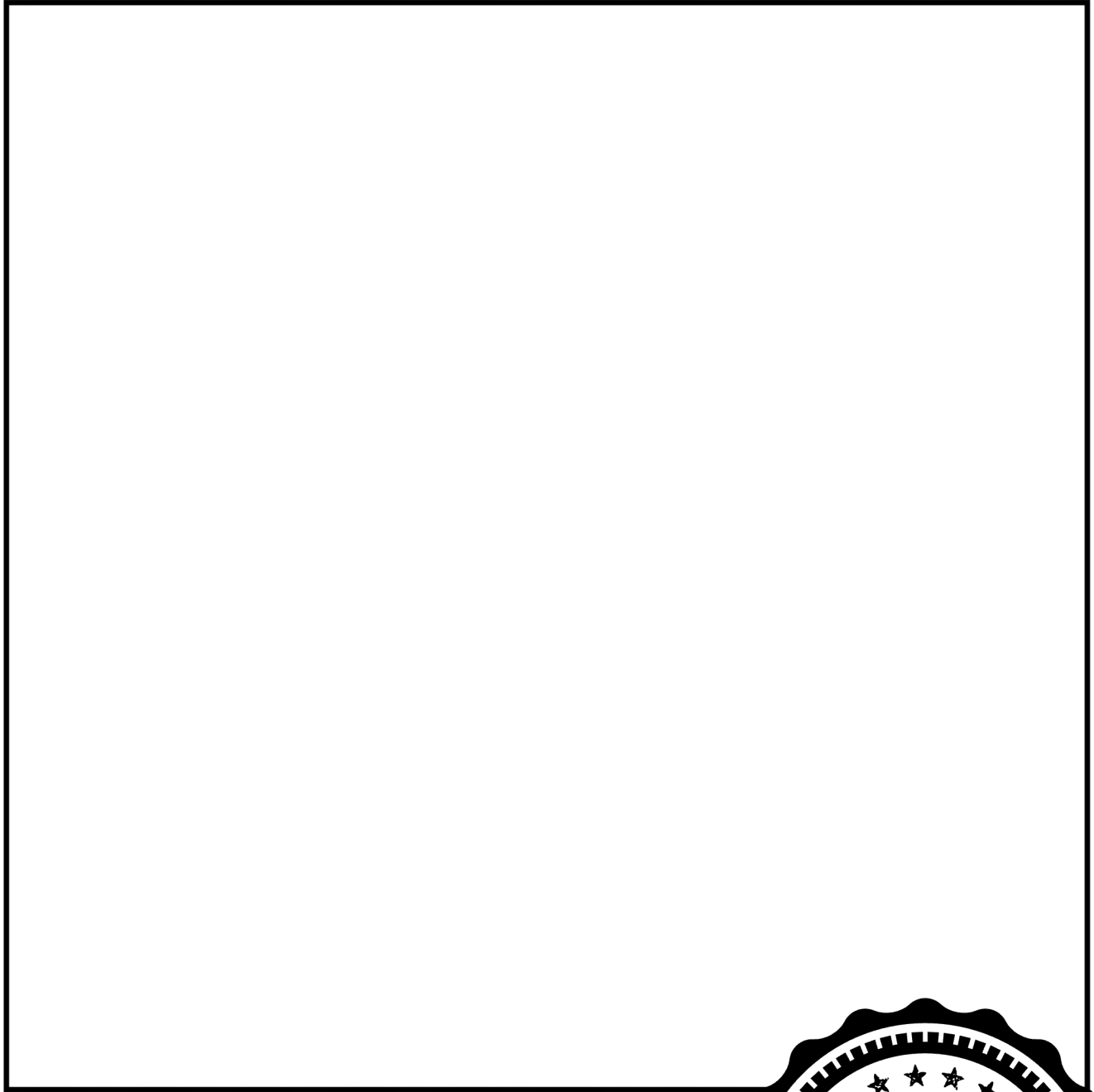
Inspired by the episode on Lanny Smoot, a real-life inventor and Disney Imagineer, now it's your turn to think like an inventor!

Use the worksheet on the next page to:

- Create your own invention and give it a name.
- Draw it in the big box, then
- Explain what it does and how it helps people.
- Don't forget to sign your name in the "Patent Seal" to make it officially yours.

Patent Your Invention!

Inspired by Dorktales episode 118 on Lanny Smoot, create your own amazing invention and give it a name. Draw it in the big box, then explain what it does and how it helps people. Don't forget to sign your name in the "Patent Seal" to make it officially yours.



Name of Invention: _____

What does it do? _____

