

Inventing the Future



What would we do without the innovative imaginations of the inventors of the world? We can honor inventors and their great achievements on February 11, Inventors Day. When we think of inventors, sometimes the first who come to mind are people like Thomas Edison, who invented the lightbulb, or Leonardo da Vinci, who conceived of marvelous devices like airplanes and parachutes. But inventors are not only people of the past. Truly, it seems as if new inventions are flooding the market every day, thanks to strides in technology and computing.

Robots and artificial intelligence are all the rage in today's tech sector. Personal robots, such as Amazon's Alexa and Google's Home, are like personal assistants, helping us make calls, maintain schedules, and purchase items. A new home robot named Jibo is attempting to make the home assistant more personal and lifelike. Jibo looks like a little cartoon, with a squat white body and a glowing "head" with eyes and a mouth. The body swivels and turns to face you as it speaks, making it seem all the more human.

Robots are not just boxes on our tabletops; they are being integrated into cars and appliances. The Tesla company may have invented the most futuristic cars yet. They are fully electric and boast self-driving features. Refrigerators are even getting into the robot game: not only do some fridges boast interactive screens that give you updates on the fridge's contents, but Panasonic has just designed a voice-controlled mini-fridge on wheels that will come to you when its called. You no longer have to get up from the couch to get a cold drink—your fridge will bring it to you!

Inventors are not just focused on robotics. Some are also focused on improving ice cream. That's right, the Halo Top company has invented a flavorful, low-sugar ice cream that is only 360 calories per pint. Their motto is "Go ahead, eat the whole pint." It's good to know that inventors have their priorities straight.

February Birthdays

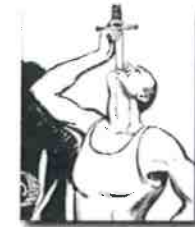
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Hard to Swallow



The last Saturday in February is International Sword Swallowers Day, a holiday not for the faint of heart or throat. Sword swallowing is not an illusion or trick, but an incredibly dangerous feat that takes years of practice. If done incorrectly, it can end with hospitalization or even death. Professionals, however, only suffer the occasional sore, or "sword," throat. The key to sword swallowing is to not swallow at all! One must completely relax the throat and esophagus and suppress the gag reflex, not an easy feat considering our throats have built-in nerves designed to eject foreign objects in our esophagus. Sword swallowers do not start with swords but practice with spoons, knitting needles, and coat hangers. Out of the world's 7.5 billion people, only about 100 dare to swallow swords. What originated as a divine ritual 4,000 years ago is today a shocking and sensational demonstration of willpower.

Palm Garden Post

Palm Garden of Tampa 3612 E. 138TH Avenue Tampa Florida 33613 (813) 972-8775



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Once Upon a Time

Once upon a time, it was decreed that February 26 would forevermore be Fairy Tale Day. Whether you fancy woodland sprites, fire-breathing dragons, princesses locked in high towers, or talking animals, fairy tales and the lessons they impart are integral parts of every culture.

Scientists have traced the first fairy tales back to an era before the written word. An old folktale entitled "The Smith and the Devil," which is about a blacksmith selling his soul to the devil in order to gain magical abilities, dates back to the Bronze Age—6,000 years ago. Researchers from the New University of Lisbon in Portugal believe that this ancient tale was shared orally in a language that does not exist today. It is no surprise that fairy tales are so old. The purpose of these stories, after all, is to teach children clear distinctions between good and evil and right and wrong. Fairy tales are, in essence, morality tales filled with magic and wonder as a means to attract the attention of a young audience. Yet, adults are no less in need of morality tales.

The brothers Wilhelm and Jakob Grimm, famous for their collection of fairy tales, also believed that many of the stories they found had existed for centuries before they wrote them down. They listened to old-timers tell the beloved tales "Little Red Riding Hood," "Cinderella," "Hansel and Gretel," and "Snow White" and then transcribed their versions of the tales into print. The Brothers Grimm were the first scientists of folklore. They even took positions as librarians and historians at the University of Göttingen in Germany.

It would be wise on Fairy Tale Day to choose a story collected by Wilhelm Grimm, for this brother's birthday falls on February 24. If you've grown tired of the same old tales, then perhaps you can read a new tale, such as "The King of the Golden Mountain," "Hans My Hedgehog," or "Cat and Mouse in Partnership."