

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.

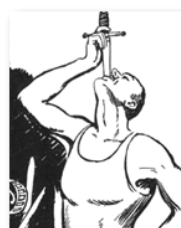
Robots are not just boxes on our tabletops; they are being integrated into cars and appliances. The Tesla company may have invented the most futuristic cars yet. They are fully electric and boast self-driving features. Refrigerators are even getting into the robot game: not only do some fridges boast 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

Adoum Z.	01/01
Dorothy T.	01/06
Lillian S.	01/07
Susan W.	01/14
Deborah J.	01/16
Susan B.	01/18
Dennis B.	01/19
Oleva C.	01/25
Linda N.	01/26
Joan C.	01/28
Megan S.	01/28

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.

February 2019



Celebrating February

Haiku Writing Month

Mend a Broken Heart Month

Library Lovers Month

Bubble Gum Day

February 1

Groundhog Day

February 2

Celebration of Love Week

February 10–16

Valentine's Day

February 14

Love Your Pet Day

February 20

Tooth Fairy Day

February 28



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."

The Year of the Pig



Xin nián kuài lè! That means “Happy New Year” in Chinese. February 5 ushers in the Year of the Pig, a very auspicious year in Chinese culture. Why does the pig represent wealth and good fortune? Perhaps

the chubbiness of the pig indicates prosperity. Or maybe it is because wild boars are known to be fearless and will run headlong into any situation, usually winning out in the end. With pigs held in such high esteem, it may be surprising to learn that the pig is the very last animal of the Chinese zodiac and the legend concerning the pig is not very flattering.

The legend states that when the Jade Emperor declared that he was selecting animals for the zodiac, all the animals rushed to his palace to be included. But the pig journeyed slowly, and when he arrived, the gates were shut. However, the other animals pleaded with the Jade Emperor to let him in. He conceded, and the pig was allowed to enter but was made the last sign of the zodiac. Perhaps the pig’s connection to good fortune stems from this tale: Despite the pig’s hardships, he still triumphed and was added to the zodiac.

The Chinese New Year’s celebration lasts not for one day, but for two whole weeks. There are many traditions and superstitions to observe. For example, on New Year’s Day, it is commonplace to set off firecrackers, yet it is forbidden to sweep because you may sweep away good luck. Two days later is the Day of the Rat, the day when rats were created. On this day, people leave out crumbs of grain or crackers to share with rats. Celebrations continue to February 19, which culminates in the five-day-long Lantern Festival. The displaying of lanterns is a major event, and one of the most popular pastimes of the Lantern Festival is guessing at lantern riddles. Riddles are written on lanterns, and the answers to these riddles often involve blessings for the family and good fortune, reinforcing the major themes of the Chinese New Year.

A Sneeze for the Ages

Among his many scientific achievements, Thomas Edison is also known to have opened the very first film recording studio on February 1, 1893, in West Orange, New Jersey. His Black Maria studio (named after the cramped, dark police paddy wagons known colloquially as “black marias”) was the testing ground and laboratory for his kinetograph, a forerunner to the movie camera. His first famous film recording is known as *Fred Ott’s Sneeze*; he filmed a mere four silent seconds of Fred Ott rearing his head backward in a hearty *kerchoo*. Once his marvelous film was released to the public, Edison was contacted by a number of performers begging him to capture their work for posterity. The kinetograph’s popularity was short-lived, though, lasting only about 10 years. In that brief span, kinetograph theaters known as kinetoscopes opened across the country in New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, but ironically not in Hollywood.

Underwater Weddings



With Valentine’s Day falling in the middle of February, it is no wonder this month is known as Wedding Month. The city of Trang in Thailand has capitalized on lovers yearning to tie the knot on Valentine’s Day by offering a unique setting for a wedding—under water! Every year from February 13 to 15, couples flock to this tropical seaside destination to take part in an underwater group wedding ceremony. On the 13th, couples are greeted at the airport by Thai dancers in traditional dress and then paraded through the streets of Trang to the cheers of spectators. On Valentine’s Day, couples are boated to the island of Koh Kradan, where they take part in a traditional Thai wedding ceremony and are blessed with the pouring of water over their heads from a conch shell. Then—for qualified divers only—comes the big event. Tuxedoed grooms and brides dressed in white don their scuba kits for the underwater ceremony in the protected, pristine waters of Thailand’s Andaman Coast.

The Original Castaway

On February 1, 1709, Alexander Selkirk was rescued from an island after being stranded there for four years. Upon his return to England, journalists portrayed his last four years in extraordinary detail, making Selkirk a celebrity and inspiring the novelist Daniel Defoe to write his masterpiece *Robinson Crusoe*.



Selkirk was a hot-tempered navigator of a privateering ship called the *Cinque Ports*—a legalized pirate ship plundering for the British Crown. When conditions on board got bad, Selkirk tried to raise a mutiny against the ship’s young captain by begging to be left alone on an island with the crew. Unfortunately for Selkirk, none of the other crew members wanted to stay behind with him, so he was abandoned on Más a Tierra island off the coast of Chile. Selkirk expected another friendly ship to arrive, perhaps within days, but again he miscalculated, and another ship did not arrive for four years and four months. Amazingly, Selkirk survived. He ate fish, crayfish, and the many goats that inhabited the island. He grew so fleet of foot that he could catch them with his bare hands. Food and shelter came relatively easy. Keeping his sanity was his most difficult task. When a ship arrived on the horizon to save him, it was navigated by none other than William Dampier, a buccaneer under whom Selkirk had sailed on the *Cinque Ports*. Selkirk attempted to tell his story to Dampier, but he could barely remember the English language. Selkirk found it difficult to reintegrate into society, often thinking that he was happiest when he had nothing on the island.

Daniel Defoe was intrigued with Selkirk’s story and so wrote a romanticized version of it in *Robinson Crusoe*. Perhaps, however, this story should not be celebrated, for it has often been criticized as a tale of one colonialist’s suppression and enslavement of an indigenous culture. Crusoe may have been a hero in 18th-century England, but today his accomplishments seem rather brutish. Perhaps instead, we should celebrate February 1 as Alexander Selkirk Day and forget Robinson Crusoe.

Drawing the Short Straw

February 22 is Skip the Straw Day. Banning straws has certainly been a hot topic. More and more companies and communities are outright banning these seemingly harmless modern conveniences. This is because Americans, on average, use one million plastic straws each day, and many of those plastic bits are ending up in landfills and our oceans. For those who still want straws or need them for medical reasons, some companies now provide customers with biodegradable or compostable straws, including paper straws. People used to sip drinks through long hollow reeds of ryegrass. That all changed in 1888 when inventor Marvin Stone patented a spiral winding process for paper and created the first paper straw. His straws were far superior to ryegrass straws, for they did not impart a grassy taste to the beverage. So it seems that we have come full circle, back to Stone’s original invention. But will banning plastic straws actually save the environment? Not entirely. Plastic straws are just a tiny percentage of plastic pollution. But the anti-straw movement might raise awareness about the harms of plastic to our planet.

Many Happy Returns



February is Return Shopping Carts to the Supermarket Month. Shopping carts are abandoned in the strangest of places: alongside roads, in ditches, under bridges. Today is the day to put those shopping carts back where they belong. It is estimated that two million shopping carts are taken from supermarkets each year, and with one shopping cart valued at \$100, that’s \$200 million rolling away. If pushing a shopping cart back to a supermarket all the way from a highway is too much to ask, you can start by returning shopping carts from the parking lot. Unattended carts can do a lot of damage to cars. Furthermore, studies show that abandoned shopping carts lead to people throwing other trash into parking lots. Returning carts fosters good citizenship!