

Meeting with Slater Harrison

By Jean-Yves

In June 2006, on our way to visit the American family we (my wife and I) made a small detour with the car (small at the country scale. 500 miles in fact.) and we spent a couple of days in Pennsylvania. Close to Williamsport lives Slater Harrison (www.sciencetoysmaker.org) and he was the one we were going to visit. I knew Slater (thanks to pop-pop engine) through Internet. In 15 months we had exchanged tenths of Emails. This was our first meeting.

Williamsport is deep America. There is nothing less than 60 miles around. It is a 30000 inhabitant town where the most important thing to see is a small museum reminding the history of this town which was rich between 1880 and 1900 thanks to forest exploitation, and then which declined during one century when there were no more trees. (Today the forest exists again.)

Neither Slater's house, nor his family, nor his way of life are representative of America. Slater didn't choose easiness. He lives with Naomi (his Japanese wife) and their 6 children on the hillside in a big wooden house at a few minutes from Williamsport. In spite of his handicap (muscular degeneration due to a disease got in Bangladesh where he was volunteer 25 years ago) he tries to do everything by himself. Slater owns 16 acres of forest on the hillside. He manages that as well as possible according to his ecological convictions. He cuts the old trees and those which are sick or dead. He makes himself his beams, planks...and he cuts wood for heating. To do this he uses mechanical digger, chain saw, surface planer.... (There are limits to ecology). With his machines he leveled a piece of land, made a vegetable garden, dug two ponds, and built his house. Not a garden hut. A big house on three levels. The basement is the living room. In the middle, a very big furnace (visible on Slater's web site) and a big table. Around, a kitchen corner, a sanitary corner, and computers used by the kids all along the day. Upstairs: the sleeping arrangements. By the side of the house (left on the picture) Slater is building a garage with on the top a room to receive his visitors.



No pets but a cat and 3 chickens (who sleep indoor). The other animals were eaten by predators (bears, foxes, coyotes, birds of prey...).

In the house, every one lives his own life. As soon as a computer is free somebody else uses it. When one is hungry he snacks. At the dining table comes who wants when he wants. The little house mistress is active all along the day.

On the education side, there is a family competitive spirit or important tacit incitation. For instance, on the walls of the living room approximately 50 excellence diplomas got by the kids are displayed.

Slater is something as a technology teacher for pupils about 12. We have no real equivalent in France. Slater says he his not a scientist, but his approach of the pop-pop boat indicates the opposite. To reach the optimization of the little boat described on his web site he built 300 prototypes. (Three hundred !) I was said by Naomi that there were pop-pop boats all over the houses. And the result is there. For a few quarters (and even less) you can build a pop-pop boat which looks like an American trawler and which works better than most of the pop-pop boat sold in shops.



When using the back side (aluminized) of a fruit juice pack, here is what you can get.

In fact, you only need to buy silicone filler and glue. All the rest is recovery materials: a pack of milk or fruit juice for the hull, two straws and a piece of tin sheet cut in a bier or soda can to build the engine. Super, isn't it ?

This picture of a boat without the upper part shows the recovery materials.



For more details see www.sciencetoymaker.org/boat/index.htm. Don't hesitate to visit the site. There is no hidden commercial business. Other ideas for scientific toys are waiting for you.