



The Tinkerers: The Amateurs, DIYers, and Inventors Who Make America Great

Alec Foegle

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Having completed her transition from a manufacturing economy, America – it is said – has stopped making things. When there are breakthroughs in engineering and design, it's usually thanks to a team of corporate researchers trying to squeeze out more profit. But once upon a time, the United States was a nation of tinkerers. Amateurs and professionals alike applied their ingenuity and talent to the problems of their day, coming up with innovative solutions that at once channeled the optimistic spirit of America and kept that spirit alive. Guided by the curiosity of an inquiring mind, a desire to know how things work, and a belief that anything can be improved, they laid the foundations for the American century.

When Alexander Graham Bell beat Thomas Edison to the invention of the telephone, Edison fiddled around with the transmitter and receiver until he produced an equally revolutionary machine – the phonograph. When Thomas MacDonal observed the hardship that a lack of good roads imposed on his fellow Iowans, he began a road-building project that eventually morphed into the interstate highway system. Some of the people profiled in this book attended the finest engineering schools in the world; some, like Microsoft's former chief technology officer Nathan Myhrvold, had no formal training in their chosen fields. Some see themselves as solo visionaries; others emphasize the importance of working in teams. What binds them together is an ability to imagine new systems and subvert old ones, to see fresh potential in existing technologies, and to apply technical know-how to the problems of their day.

In *The Tinkerers*, Alec Foege presents a version of American history told through feats of engineering, large and small. He argues that reports of tinkering's death have been greatly exaggerated; since World War II, it has been the guiding force behind projects from corporate-sponsored innovations (the personal computer, Ethernet) to smaller scale inventions with great potential (a machine that can make low-cost eyeglass lenses for people in impoverished countries, a device that uses lasers to shoot malarial mosquitoes out of the sky). Think tanks and companies have recognized the benefits of tinkering and have done their best to harness and institutionalize it. But as systems become more complex, budding inventors may become intimidated. Foege argues that this would be an enormous loss to a nation that achieved its strength largely thanks to the accomplishments of its innovators. He shows us how tinkering remains, in new and unexpected forms, at the heart of American society and culture.

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