

Say 'American' and you visualize a white person

This happened a few years before I retired. I don't remember whether we were going to or coming from an after-school meeting. I don't remember how many of us were riding in the van. What I do remember is the anger directed at me because I used the hyphenated word "African-American."

The teacher driving the van erupted and exclaimed "Why can't we all just call ourselves Americans?!"

I've heard that heated question asked by whites many times since that day. And the answer remains the same. Say "American" and you automatically visualize a white person.

For example, examine this short list of American inventors: Meredith Gourdine, Norbert Rillieux, Jan E. Matzeliger and Sarah E. Goode. Ninety-nine percent of Americans – red, brown, yellow, black and white – would automatically assume that those inventors were white. Actually, they were African-American inventors. So to give credit where credit is due, hyphenated names are necessary.

Imitating the style of the TV show Jeopardy: Leo Gertsten-

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zang invented the Q-tip, Ole Evenrude invented the outboard motor and Charles Strite invented the automatic toaster. Question: Who are the three white inventors who produced these very useful inventions?

Next category. African-American Inventors. Garrett A. Morgan, Elijah McCoy and Otis Boykin.

Morgan invented the earliest type of gas mask in 1912, an airtight canvas hood connected to a special breathing tube. It was an effective inhalator, the forerunner of the modern gas mask. In 1916, Morgan used his gas mask to rescue more than 20 workers trapped in a smoke-filled sunken tunnel shaft beneath Lake Erie. The city of Cleveland awarded a gold medal to Morgan for his heroic deed. But Morgan was plagued with nightmarish memories of that tunnel disaster until

his death at age 86, in 1963.

Police departments and fire departments nationwide bought Morgan's gas mask but some canceled their orders when they learned that Morgan was African-American.

During the Desert Storm War not only troops but also civilians had to put on gas masks. During that war a camera man filmed a mother struggling to put a miniature gas mask on her young frightened child; a very sad sight. The people in that village were anticipating a missile attack.

Think of Garrett Morgan also as you wait at a traffic light. He invented the first automatic traffic signal. It had stop-and-go arms which systematically raised and lowered. Another model had red, yellow and green lights. Eventually, Morgan sold the rights to his invention to General Electric for \$40,000.

Elijah McCoy's inventions were very important and greatly appreciated in the world of me-

chanical engineering. That is not my world. Nevertheless, I was curious and wanted to find out the origin of the expression, "The Real McCoy."

It began with McCoy's first invention – an automated device that self-lubricated moving parts on trains and other machines.

McCoy studied mechanical engineering in Scotland, but back in America he worked as a fireman on several trains. His job was to oil the trains' moving parts – after the trains

stopped.

Performing that task sparked the idea that led to McCoy's invention of the lubricating cup that could continuously supply lubricants to moving parts of machines. Thanks to McCoy, machines didn't have to be stopped anymore in order to be oiled. The phrase, "The Real McCoy," probably originated with the machinery buyers who insisted that their new equipment have only McCoy lubricators.

Inventor Otis Boykin was an

electronic scientist who had 26 patents. One of his 26 inventions was the electrical resistor used in many computers, radios, television sets and other electronically controlled devices like guided missiles. But Boykin's best known invention, the control unit for an artificial heart stimulator, is also called a pacemaker. This device is inserted into the body to deliver small regular shocks to stimulate the heart to beat in a normal rhythm.

"A pacemaker saved my life," a friend told me. "Well," I warned her, "stay away from microwaves." My friend informed me that microwaves are not a problem anymore. And now you can have your pacemaker checked and listened to over the phone! At airports, however, you still need to tell the authorities you're wearing a pacemaker, she said.

Blacks have been inventing things from slavery times to now, but there are no African-American inventors in the National Inventors Hall of Fame – in spite of all the contributions they have made to American daily life.

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Apr 1
2003