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# Serendipity in the Laboratory

Ron Snider

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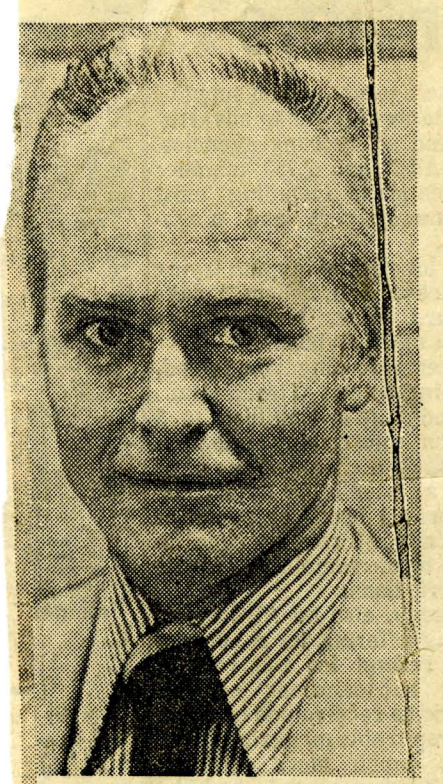
## Business Profile

# Serendipity in the Laboratory



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Statitrol President

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By Ron Snider
Special to The Washington Star

Workers for Statitrol Co. were looking for something else when they developed a new type of residential smoke detector.

This bit of serendipity occurred as company researchers were using a radioactive source attached to a small battery in an effort to detect static electricity on commercial photo negatives.

"The researchers found that when they were smoking, the needle on the unit's meter went wild," Statitrol President Duane D. Pearsall recalled in a recent interview.

**"WE QUIT THE** search for a static detector, put an alarm in the circuit instead of a meter and had a smoke detector."

And Pearsall believes that the residential smoke detector may become the sales success story of the decade.

"Currently the industry is selling 5 million detectors a year," Pearsall said. "We project that it will rise to 10 million units in the next two years."

He said the success of the products, which retail at prices between $25 and $50, is due to an increasing list of cities requiring detectors in apartments and awareness of the public of their value in saving lives.

Publicity about smoke detectors also has made them more acceptable to consumers, Pearsall said.

"Two years ago," he said, "only 2 percent of the adult population was aware of the product. Now that awareness figure has climbed to 60 percent."

**EVEN WITH** zooming sales of smoke detectors, Pearsall said he doesn't expect the market to become saturated for a long time.

"New housing starts and expansion of building and fire codes to require hotels and motels to install detectors will keep sales at a high level," he said.

Also, the industry already is finding that people with houses two stories or more are buying more than one detector.

"We expect that codes soon will require smoke detectors on each level," Pearsall said. "We have found that with a detector on one level, a family has a 35 percent chance to escape with three minutes of time. With one on each level, that rises to an 89 percent chance."

He said the industry estimates that with every 12,000 detectors installed each year, the life of one person is saved.

"Five million will be sold this year," Pearsall said, "and that will make a big dent (approximately 416) in the number of persons killed in home fires each year."

Pearsall said Statitrol, which recently was purchased by Emerson Electric Co., takes partial credit for the invention of ionization type of residential smoke detectors — a Swiss firm developed an ionization detector 12 years earlier, but it required high-voltage — but full credit for the development of the industry.

**"WE, IN EFFECT,** had the first low-voltage smoke detector," he said.

The Statitrol "Smoke Guard" went into the Sears, Roebuck catalog in 1972, and Pearsall said sales took off.

"Then the photo cell detectors (which are connected to house current) began to come into the residential market," he said. "But it wasn't until a couple years ago when General Electric, Gillette and Water Pick put out detectors backed by heavy television advertising that sales boomed."

Pearsall said currently about a dozen manufacturers are producing more than 50 brands of smoke detectors and that a "shake out" is expected in the next few years.

However, he said with rising production and sales prices of the detectors will decline and more sophisticated units will be available.

"There are detectors on the market that will call the fire department," he said. "And in future years we can see combinations of ionization and photo electric models into a single unit powered by both battery and house current."

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