



THE SLINKY: IT HAPPENED IN BROOKLINE

By Kathy Case

Stories told over years are likely to wander from the truth. Such has been the case with the story of Richard and Betty James and the invention of the Slinky, as revealed in HTHS' apparently unique history file of old local contemporary accounts.

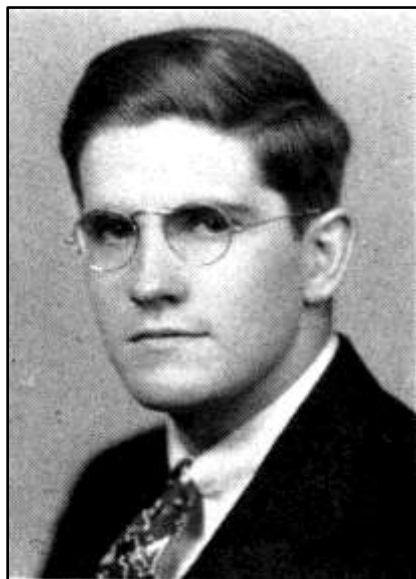
Richard James grew up in Chester Heights, attended the Westtown School and went to Penn State to study mechanical engineering. There he met and married fellow student Betty Mattas, who dropped out in her sophomore year to start a family.

(Thus, she was not a Penn State graduate, as other accounts incorrectly state).



Reproduction "Collector Edition" of original Slinky on display at HTHS

Richard graduated in 1939 (see photo), and in 1942 he and Betty bought a house on Ivy Rock Lane in Westgate Hills. In 1943 they bought and moved to 307 Oxford Road in Brookline (see photo). The 1943 deed lists the Jameses as being from Westgate Hills in Haverford Township. They did not live in Clifton Heights or Philadelphia when the Slinky was invented, as is often reported.



Richard James' Penn State
Yearbook Photo

In 1943, Richard was working at Cramp's Shipyard, in the Fishtown section of Philadelphia, which had been reactivated for World War II. He was trying to use springs to isolate delicate meters on ships from unwanted vibrations and movements, and had been experimenting with sizes and wire shapes. According to a 1950 *Philadelphia Inquirer* interview with Richard, he had already decided that he needed a coil made from flat wire, rather than round wire, and had had one made. It was on a shelf or his desk (accounts differ) with other test springs and fell off, bouncing end-over-end down a series of stacked books to the floor. (His desk was not likely to have been on a ship, even though a 1948 Delaware County *Daily Times* article indicated he had been on a trial cruise testing coils.) After seeing the odd, lively behavior of this coil spring, he took it home so his son Tommy could play with it.

Home was 307 Oxford Road in Haverford Township. From 1943 to 1945, Betty and Richard, their children, and neighborhood children

tested and played with a succession of coil springs, in what Richard referred to as a home laboratory, which apparently included their kitchen table, until he perfected his ultimate design for play value and patented it. "Our house was a mess while I experimented," Richard told the *Daily Times* in 1948. He and Betty looked for a product name, and she came up with the word "slinky" after a Swedish word for sinuous. One famous photograph shows Richard and son Tommy, who later helped his mother run the Slinky business, sending Slinkys off down the stairway in their Oxford Road home.

The Jameses pooled resources and contracted a Philadelphia piston ring manufacturer to produce 450 Slinkys to Richard's specifications. According to Richard, the first toy shop to take some of the Slinkys was Jonas' Top Shop, location unknown. They did not sell, primarily because a spring in a box was not very impressive. Next the Jameses took them to Gimbels, where they also did not sell until Richard and Betty started demonstrating the action of the coil. They sold out in less than 2 hours, and the Slinky enterprise was born. The development work, the patenting and the packaging had all occurred at 307 Oxford Road in Haverford Township, as did Richard's work to design a machine to manufacture Slinkys from large raw coils of the flat spring wire. The manufacturing initially took place in Germantown, then in Clifton Heights, Paoli, and eventually in Hollidaysburg (near Altoona), where Betty and her family moved in 1961.



Wilbur Hall photograph of 307 Oxford Road, ca. 1900-1910

Betty was supportive of Richard giving up his engineering job to devote full time to Slinky, but most accounts agree that the rapid commercial and financial success ended up putting a strain on the James marriage. After a 1952 move from Oxford Road and Haverford Township to a larger multi-acre home in the Bryn Mawr area, Richard started questioning the value of affluence and its trappings. He became involved with the Wycliffe Bible Translators and gave away large sums of money, which put both the family finances and the Slinky enterprise into a tailspin. In 1960, Richard left Betty, their six children and a pile of debt to move to Bolivia with the bible society. Betty disclosed in later years that he repeatedly wrote to her, warning her that she and the children should join him in Bolivia or they would face divine retribution.

Betty James' subsequent taking of the helm of the Slinky business and rebuilding it into a major enterprise, with an estimated 300 million Slinkys sold in her lifetime, is a well-known success story. She moved her children and then the Slinky production equipment to her home town of Hollidaysburg, where she could rely on the support of family members and knew there was an experienced pool of mechanically inclined workers as well.

Today the Slinky is enshrined in the National Toy Hall of Fame. Betty, respected by her peers, was inducted into the Toy Industry Hall of Fame in 2001. In that same year, a bill to make Slinky the official Pennsylvania state toy was introduced, but it was not passed. Betty never remarried, raised her six children, ran the business hands-on, and died in 2008, revered by the town of Hollidaysburg and toy enthusiasts everywhere. Richard died in Bolivia in 1974.

The current owners of the house at 307 Oxford have collected articles about the Jameses and their house's role in the Slinky story. They have photographed their own child sending a Slinky down the stairs, where Tommy James played with Slinkys in the 1940s.

The Oxford Road house predates the neighborhood that now surrounds it. It was built in 1854 by Samuel Johnson and may have more stories to tell. In past years, local students and neighbors were taken to see a small cave or passageway at the house, variously said to have been used by smugglers or as an Underground Railroad station. There is as yet no proof of either role, and little remains of this feature today.

In spite of the many conflicting Slinky stories today, we know one thing is true: The Slinky started its stairway journey to toy fame at 307 Oxford Road in the Brookline neighborhood of Haverford Township.

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