

## What Do You Call a Pleasant Surprise? Serendipity!

*By Irv Sternberg*

What do the Post-It Note, Silly Putty and Velcro have in common? All are fortunate accidents, the results of *serendipity*.

The Post-It Note was conceived after a scientist at the 3M Company produced a weak and seemingly useless adhesive. But a colleague thought it might keep bookmarks in place in a church hymnal. It was successful in church and went on to serve less spiritual purposes as well.

Silly Putty came from a failed attempt to make synthetic rubber, and Velcro was invented when a hunter took a closer look at the cockleburs stuck to his pants. Viewed under a microscope, each burr was covered with tiny hooks. That's what makes Velcro work.

The word *serendipity* has an exotic origin going back to the mid-1700s when English author Horace Walpole coined it to express an odd experience he'd had while researching a coat-of-arms. His research reminded him of a fairy-tale, called *The Three Princes of Serendip*. As the highnesses traveled, they were always making favorable discoveries of things they were not seeking.

The dictionary defines *serendipity* as the occurrence of an unplanned discovery. I would add a *welcome* discovery. And pronouncing the word produces a delightful, even whimsical sound when uttered, sort of like *lickety-split* or *dippety-do*.

If you'll permit a personal example, I'll refer you to the happiest *serendipitous* experience in my life. The year was 1955 and my friends and I decided to spend a long weekend at a resort hotel in Canada's Laurentian Mountains, about twenty miles northwest of Montreal. Coincidentally, a young woman from Montreal also decided to visit the same hotel with a girlfriend.

We were all single and I don't think any of us was consciously thinking we would find a mate there. I was 26 and the young woman was 24. Despite our intentions to just go have some fun for a few days, who is to deny that other forces may have been at work?

Her name was Ann and she told me later that she visited a fortune-teller before leaving Montreal. The fortune-teller told her she was going on a trip where she would meet a tall, wealthy American. Well, she met me, and as I told her: One out of three is not too bad.

Yes, we were married a year later. Was it serendipity that brought us to the same hotel at the same time? Call it what you will, but Ann and I always thought of it as an "unplanned and welcome discovery" that brought 47 years of joy to our lives.