Alums Prove Chemistry Can Pay

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June Welch describes a two-in-one specialty and chemical business conducted in a New England

A N ENGINEERING process company and a specialty gift package, "S'prise of the Month," constitute the two-in-one business combination of Dr. and Mrs. Richard E. Benson. Under the roof of a three-story New England barn, the young couple are proving that chemistry can pay.

Dr. Benson conducts research on anti-oxidants. Mrs. Benson creates new ideas for her children's specialty business.

While Dr. and Mrs. Benson attended Iowa State. Dr. Benson received his doctor of philosophy degree in chemical engineering in 1940. Mrs. Benson, the daughter of Bethel S. Pickett, head of the Department of Horticulture, graduated as a child development major in 1939.

While a graduate student, Dr. Benson developed a new method of manufacturing water softening chemicals and was granted patents for several plastic compounds. When employed by a dye company in Buffalo, N. Y., he added to his experience in working with chemicals.

With a pioneering spirit, Dr. Benson decided to establish his own chemical industry. He chose a small farm in Hamburg Township, N. Y., as the site for the Benson Process Engineering Co.

The barn houses well-equipped laboratories where new concoctions boil and bubble. Preparations are "cooked" in a big tank-like kettle which rests on stilts on the ground floor. Pipes and coils rise over the kettle into the hay-mow above.

Manufacturing an anti-oxidant for the rubber industry is Dr. Benson's chief project. Anti-oxidants are valuable in slowing down deterioration in rubber tires. Orders flow in for the product from several companies in the United States and abroad.

In THE Benson's cozy farmhouse, Mrs. Benson operates her children's specialty business. The Gay Benson Specialties feature a "S'prise of the Month," which parents order for their children while aunts and uncles subscribe for their young nieces and nephews. Each child receives a surprise gift each month for a year.

Most of the specialties have a chemical background. When Dr. Benson was employed by the dye company, he occasionally spilled chemicals on his white shirts. When washing them, Mrs. Benson noticed a pink color appear. When the shirts were rinsed, the pink color would vanish. This washday phenomenon was explained when Dr. Benson investigated the matter and found that the alkali in the soap acted as a color indicator with chemical dye.

Mrs. Benson used this discovery in making magic wash cloths. The harmless dye which changed color in soapy water was impregnated in clever designs on cotton wash cloths. When children rub soap on the cloths, a bright colored Mickey Mouse or Scotty dog appears.

Another specialty is the little Dutch Boy who predicts what the day's weather will be. Hanging on a porch wall, his pants will turn rosy red if rainy weather is coming. Bright blue pants indicate a sunny day and wonderful picnic weather.

Minerals which grow into a chemical flower garden are an additional feature. When planted in a chemical solution, they blossom in a matter of minutes into an array of tiny colored marine plants.

For the amateur Dick Tracy, there are special inks which become visible when the paper on which they are used is warmed over a 60 watt bulb. The reader can make the writing disappear simply by breathing on the paper.

Besides making toys for the "S'prise of the Month," Mrs. Benson creates novel specialties for young people and adults. These includes sets of luminous paints, Christmas tree ornaments and color-producing chemicals for the fire.