

Much Ado About Nothing

For over 50 years, the Do Nothing Machine has entertained the public eye with its complex machinery, a mountain of over 700 gears put together for the express purpose of doing nothing.

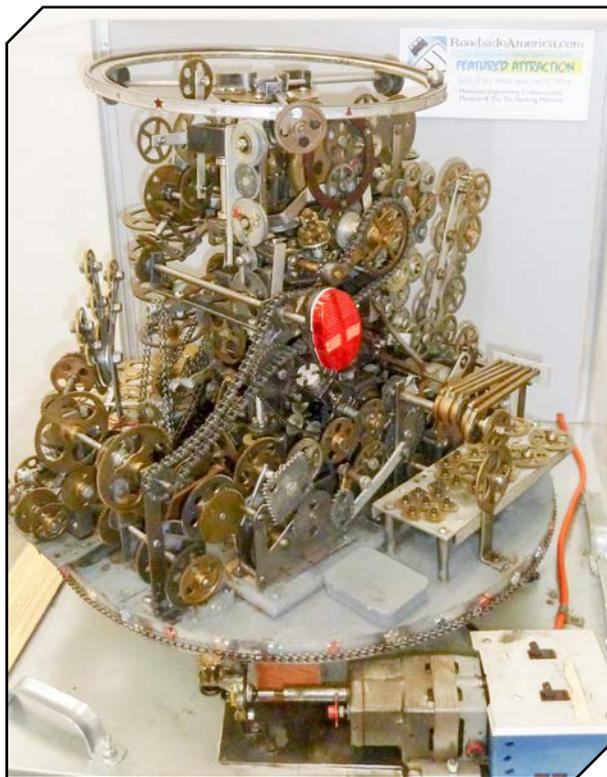
Alex Cannella, Associate Editor

There's an argument to be made that the simplest tool to execute a job is the best one. But we've always been entranced by wild, mechanically verbose contraptions like Rube Goldberg machines, which have always been more about the journey than the destination, so to speak. But even Rube Goldberg machines eventually manage to accomplish something at the end. The Do Nothing Machine? Its creator, Lawrence Wahlstrom, cheekily dubbed it a flying saucer detector, smog eradicator or any number of other fanciful names, but with the official title it bears today, it probably goes without saying what its function is.

Wahlstrom, a retired clock maker, started working on the Do Nothing Machine as a repair job. He found a surplus WWII bomb sight and repaired its complex gear train. Once other people started seeing it, however, he quickly realized that his audience was more interested in being entertained by the device's complexity than studying it.

And so Wahlstrom turned his bomb sight into an art piece. He made the Do Nothing Machine more and more complicated over a 15-year period starting in 1948 with the goal of adding at least 50 gears each year. By the time he was finished with it, Wahlstrom's monster had become a mountain of moving parts that eventually consisted of over 700 gears, dozens of outlandish gear trains and, bizarrely enough, an oil pump from a Volkswagen, a ball bearing on an oscillating track and a red light.

The machine became a minor celebrity of its own in the '50s. It and its creator found their way into the pages of *Popular Mechanics*, *Mechanix Illustrated* and even *Life* magazine, and made more than 25 television appearances, including on the Garry Moore, Art Linkletter and Bob Hope shows. And during that entire time, it continued to grow and evolve until it eventually fell out of the limelight.



Wahlstrom's machine wouldn't resurface until 2003 when it was purchased by Earl Wolf in an auction. Wolf, in a sense, carried on Wahlstrom's legacy, restoring the machine to its former glory and immediately taking it on the road to show off to the public at local fairs and shows. But even restored, the machine took a fair amount of work to maintain, with errant parts constantly breaking down. Ever since, the machine has seemingly required a technician's full attention all on its own to keep it maintained.

Eventually, the Do Nothing Machine changed hands again, this time being gifted to the Miniature Engineering Craftsmanship Museum in Carlsbad, Calif., where it has remained on display today. The machine has gotten long in the tooth and temperamental, but curators and engineers of the museum work persistently to keep the needy beast maintained. Their efforts keep the Do Nothing Machine in working order, and the machine continues to delight those who walk through the museum's doors today.

So perhaps the Do Nothing Machine is a bit of a misnomer. After half a century of entertaining the masses with its inscrutable systems, surely, it's accomplished its creator's original mission. ⚙️

For more information:

The Miniature Engineering Craftsmanship Museum
Phone: (760) 727-9492
www.craftsmanshipmuseum.com/index.html

