

MONEY

OBSERVER DISPATCH

Protect that idea

First step for your invention — patents

Inventors: Be forewarned that a good invention does not guarantee fabulous wealth.

From staff and wire reports

Back in the early 1980s, John Dove of Dove Electronics in Rome came up with an idea for compact discs and video discs.

That was the easy part. The difficulties arose when he tried to get others interested in his idea and tried to get the money to start up a company.

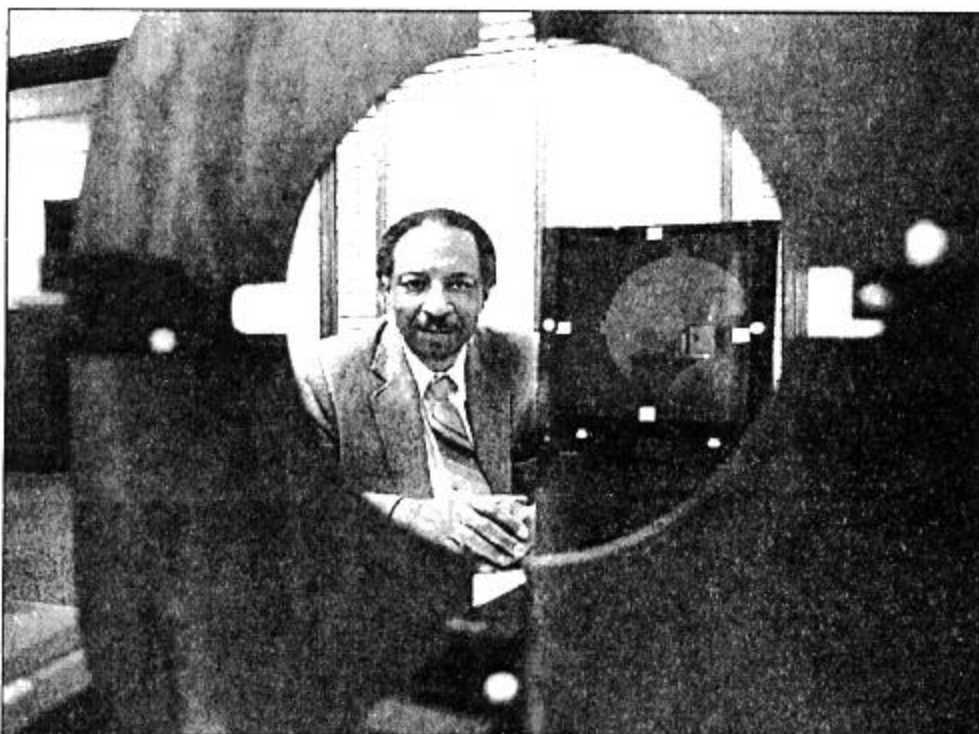
One thing about Dove and other Americans, they're always looking for a better way to do things. We are a nation of tinkers and inventors. Countless hours are spent in garages creating thousands of inventions every year.

If you are one of those clever souls who have discovered something new or improved, how can you find a way to make a tidy profit from your labors?

"People think they are going to get rich by coming up with a great invention," warns Suzanne Bell, attorney with the Palo Alto, Calif., law firm, Wilson, Sonsini, Goodrich & Rosati, which represents many Silicon Valley companies. "The reality is that unless you protect your invention, and then can develop and get it to market, other people may make far more money than you."

This sad fact often frustrates inventors who think that a good idea, or a good invention, should guarantee fabulous wealth. It doesn't.

The first — and best — protec-



By GERRY RAYMONDA, Observer-Dispatch

John Dove peers through the prototype of a holodar, another device he invented and is now producing. The device is an atmosphere sensor measuring a change or disturbance in the atmosphere. The Army has ordered some holodars, which they want to use to check wind conditions when testing ballistic devices.

Inventor pitfalls

- Being viewed as a "crank" by overselling and becoming embittered.
- Getting an inadequate patent.
- Relying too heavily on the patent rather than building a strong company or strategic relationship.
- Not anticipating how much money the process takes.
- Going it alone rather than building a strong team.

tion is a patent.

"You should get your idea patented as soon as possible," advised Dove. "It can be very expensive, but at least get the patent application done."

A patent confers exclusive rights to make, use and sell an invention for 17 years. You'll need a good patent lawyer to

help you prepare the paperwork and deal with the process, which can cost \$5,000 to \$30,000 and take at least one to two years.

Don't confuse a patent with a trademark, which is far less costly to obtain. Trademarks offer no protection to an invention.

Even if you get a strong patent, what are you going to do with it?

Common options are: manufacture, market, and distribute it yourself; contract out manufacturing while you market and distribute; you manufacture and another company markets and distributes; or license your patent to another company that manufactures, markets, and distributes.

Dove said it's almost impossible to get a product onto the market. He said an individual or a small company can have problems trying to convince a lawyer to take on its case.

Dove advises anyone with an invention or idea to be patient, work hard and have a lot of financial backing. He also said inventors should do a market survey to be sure there are people who want your product.