

Pen Inventor Doesn't Wait for a Patent's Ink to Dry

■ **Entrepreneur:** Paul C. Fisher, 83, has built an \$8-million-a-year company on the strength of his active, inquisitive nature.

By ANGIE BLUETHMAN
ASSOCIATED PRESS

BOULDER CITY, Nev.—Digging his hand into his pants pocket, the gray-haired host pulls out a pen, its silver smudged by the fingerprints of a millionaire who has a story or two to tell about his remarkable life.

"I've learned the key to success—be lucky instead of smart. I've also learned the key to long life—keep breathing," says Paul C. Fisher, president of Fisher Space Pen Co.

At 83, Fisher is accomplishing a lot more than just breathing.

His "space pens," which write upside down and through oil and grease, have been used on manned space flights since 1967. They also serve as the official "Star Wars" and "Star Trek" pens.

No one would guess that this man who drives a secondhand station wagon and wears plain blue suits owns an \$8-million-a-year company.

His life story is captured in a walk through his spartan apartment located upstairs from his company in this modest desert town in the shadow of Hoover Dam.

Pictures and letters from astronauts and presidents line the walls. There are also news articles about Fisher, who made two bids for Congress and even ran against John F. Kennedy in the 1960 New Hampshire primary.

Growing up in Ellsworth, Kan., the son of a Methodist minister, Fisher was an ingenious kid who once made a radio out of an oatmeal box, wires and a crystal.

"I'm curious and I've got an inventive mind," Fisher said, toying with a spinach omelet at his favorite diner, just around the corner from his office.

Fisher attended college in Kan-

sas and Iowa. Early jobs included bread store manager, truck driver, accountant and manager of a ball bearing company.

In October 1945, he passed up the opportunity to join a Chicago ball-point pen company, saying the pen leaked. But the pen was an instant success, making \$5 million in three months.

Fisher went on to open a machine shop, but he was ever mindful of the leaky pen's success and in 1948 founded the Fisher Pen Co.

One night in a dream, Fisher envisioned the company's first product—the chrome-plated bullet pen.

The pen wasn't perfect; the ink still leaked a bit. But Fisher continued to work on it.

"The scientific technique is simply trial and error. I've made at least 10,000 pens that didn't work," he said.

Retailing for \$17.50, the bullet continues to be the best-selling pen in company history and has been exhibited for years by New York's Museum of Modern Art as an example of industrial art.

Fisher made his first million dollars off the patented "One-For-All" refill, designed to fit most pens.

Blocked due to copyright.
See full page image or microfilm.

Paul C. Fisher, shown displaying some of his company's products, is the inventor of the "space pen."

Associated Press

Today, Fisher Space Pen Co. sits atop a hill in Boulder, some 22 miles southeast of Las Vegas, housed in a nondescript orange building with sign to match. He moved here from Los Angeles 20 years ago to get away from the smog.

A most unlikely millionaire, Fisher has no office of his own, sharing space with two other employees.

Walking through his factory, Fisher knows all his 70 employees by name. Two of his seven children and one of his 12 grandchildren work at the company.

"He's a great guy," said general manager Donald Wong, 57. "Everyone feels like they're part of this company, part of him. It's a pretty good feeling."

During a tour of the plant, Fisher pulls a pen from his pocket and tells the story of the space pen.

"When man started to fly in space, it occurred to me that they would need a pen that would work in the vacuum of space. It had to be sealed and pressurized."

In 1965, Fisher sent his space pen to Houston Space Center and NASA began testing it. Since 1967, Fisher's space pens have been on all manned space flights.

"Even the Russians use my pens," he joked.

The space pen has the ability to write at temperatures ranging from minus 50 to 400 degrees Fahrenheit. It can write underwater and over grease because of a tungsten-carbide ball and a thick ink constantly being pushed out by a pressurized cartridge.

"The fact that our pens are used in space has given us publicity. The reason why they sell is dependability," he said.

Charlie Walker, who has spent a total of 21 days in space aboard three Shuttle missions, said astronauts take as many pens as they want on missions. "The Fisher pen worked just perfectly," Walker said.

Space pens can be found at department stores and specialty gift shops, ranging in price from \$3.50 to \$250. The "trophy" pen, with a titanium-nitride finish, sells for \$1,000.

With no hint of retirement in sight, Fisher is still inventing pens, like his latest, the Millennium, guaranteed to write for a thousand years.

"When I get old, I'm going to take up golf," he says. "I have no desire to retire. I'll probably die with my boots on."