John Boyd Dunlop Biography

John Boyd Dunlop

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Contents

John Boyd Dunlop Biography.....1

Contents.....2

Biography.....3

Biography

John B. Dunlop was born in Aryshire, Scotland. After completing his schooling, Dunlop practiced as a veterinary surgeon first in Edinburgh, Scotland, and then in Belfast, Ireland. In 1887 Dunlop was asked by his young son to think of some way to make the boy's tricycle ride more comfortably on Belfast's cobblestone streets. Dunlop began experimenting with improvements to the tricycle's solid rubber tires. He cut up an old garden hose, made it into a tube, pumped it up with air, and fitted it to the rear wheels of his son's tricycle. Dunlop had reinvented the pneumatic tire, which, unknown to Dunlop, had first been invented by Robert Thomson in 1845.

Dunlop tested and patented his pneumatic tire in Great Britain in 1888, and secured a U.S. patent in 1890. An Irish industrialist named W. H. Du Cros became interested in Dunlop's invention after a cyclist won a Belfast race with his pneumatic-tired bicycle. Du Cros organized a company with Dunlop, which became the Dunlop Rubber Company, eventually a worldwide concern.

Dunlop did not profit greatly from his invention. He sold his patent and interest in the company to Du Cros in 1896 and retired to Dublin, where his only business activity until his death there in 1921 was an interest in a drapery firm.

After its introduction in 1888, Dunlop's pneumatic tires became standard equipment for bicycles since they so well absorbed the direct road shock that bicyclists experienced. The same year as Dunlop's patent, the first automobile was produced by Karl Benz of Mannheim, Germany. The availability of Dunlop's new tires led to experiments by others to produce a thicker-tread tire for motor vehicles, and in 1895 Michelin's first automobile tire appeared. With the growing popularity of the automobile after 1900, the demand for increasingly durable rubber compounds for both bicycles and autos became enormous. Dunlop's invention gave rise to two major industries.