

*Mousetrap manufacturer A. E. Kness (left) and son, Arnie, discuss expansion plans. The unusual Iowa factory is in Albia.*

## The Man Who Built the Better Mousetrap

*An inventive school janitor not only found a solution to the mouse problem, but also a profitable business*

*Photos & Story by DRAKE MABRY*

A STUBBORN, life-loving breed of mice who inhabited the Audubon High School in 1926 made the janitor so mad that he designed and built what is truly a better mousetrap.

The janitor's name was A. E. Kness. The mice were nameless, but that did not stop them from cultivating the messy and sometimes odorous habit of dragging the usual wooden mousetrap behind radiators and down ventilators.

The original trap Kness built was a crude affair made from an used oil can, a tobacco can, bits of wire, a smattering

of nuts and bolts and heaps of ingenuity. But it worked. The first night the trap caught seven mice.

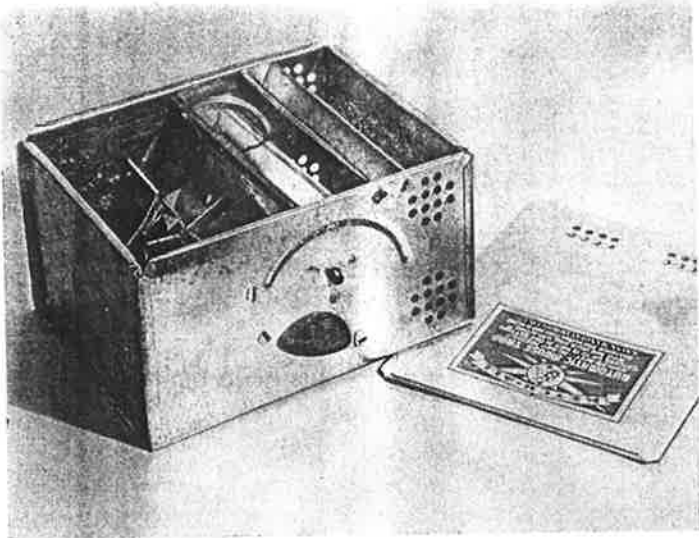
Kness traps have been catching mice ever since.

Today Kness and his three sons — Arnold, Marvin and Lester — turn out about 10,000 traps annually in their white, barn-like factory not far from the Monroe County Courthouse in Albia.

The Kness traps attracts the natural curiosity of the mouse. This curiosity, says Les, is inherent. "Mice just have to see what's on the inside of something.

They'll go in any opening." The mechanical trap is placed about two inches from a wall or a big object where mice tend to run. The trap arouses their curiosity and they stop to investigate.

The trap, a square metal box with two holes in it just large enough for a mouse to enter, is seven inches wide, nine inches long and five inches deep. Inside there is a spring mechanism that operates a type of paddle wheel. When the mouse enters the box through one of the two holes, a spring is tripped, activating the paddle wheel and literally



*Kness trap lures mice in side hole. A spring releases paddle wheel.*



*An experimental rat trap is examined by inventor Kness.*

"spanking" the mouse into the other end of the box so he cannot escape.

The trapped mouse attracts other mice who just can't resist the temptation to see what's inside the box. After the trap is full of mice — it can hold as many as 15 — the whole thing is dunked into a bucket of water, drowning the mice.

"This method is recognized by the National Humane Society as the best way to kill mice," Les claims. "In fact, our trap won an award as the most humane trap in use."

The operation of the trap-making business is strictly a family affair. A. E. is president and acts as general supervisor. "He keeps his finger on all of us," the sons say.

"I have let up a bit in the last few years and let the boys do most of the work," the 65 year-old president claims. "But I can still kick, don't worry about that."

Arnold is the machinist of the family. He designs and builds the dies needed in converting raw materials into parts for the trap. He handles maintenance and sees that the equipment is kept in good shape.

Marvin—called "Mike" by the others—is in charge of stock and production. He sees that the raw materials are in good supply and production is on schedule. It is his responsibility to see that the traps are built.

Les acts as business manager. He runs the office, handles sales, advertising, bookkeeping and the actual buying and ordering of the raw materials.

There are three helpers outside the Kness family — two production and assembly men and a secretary. As many as eight additional workmen are hired during peak production periods.

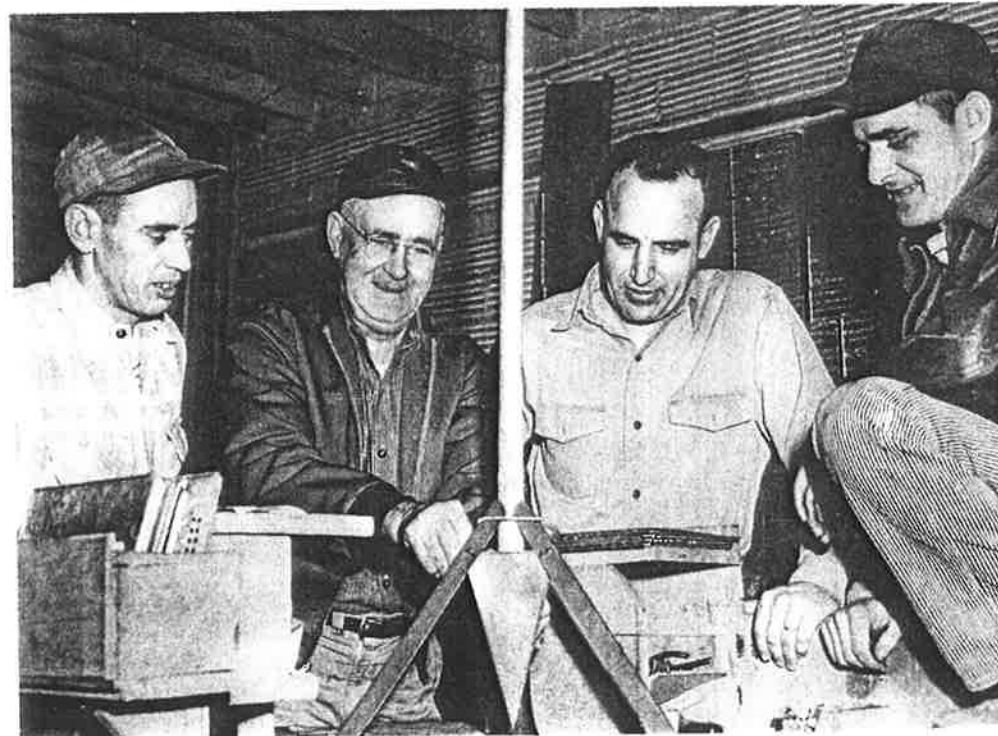
Besides representing a personal conquest over the mice of Audubon, the

*(Continued on page 36)*



*Mike (left), Arnie, A. E. Kness work in basement. A. E. holds one of firm's hoes.*

*Arnie (left), A. E., Les and Mike examine Christmas tree stand, a new product.*



## Better Mousetrap

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trap has provided Kness, his family and associates with financial success, for the factory in Albia supports six families. A salesman working in Wisconsin made more than \$4,000 in commissions within three months, selling the trap to farmers, feed store operators and warehouses.

However, the jump from Kness' first try — the original hand-hewn trap — to the present professional product was not an easy one. There were two serious financial setbacks, revisions in the first production plans, merchandising problems and unnumbered hours of labor.

After a couple of false starts at the manufacturing game, Kness began making his trap regularly in the basement of a secondhand store in Audubon in 1938, turning out about 150 a week.

In 1944, the now defunct Albia Boosters Club brought Kness, his family, factory and mousetrap to Albia. The club gave them the present building rent-free for three years and arranged for liberal credit at a local bank.

"We're not a bit sorry we came to Albia," says A. E., "and we hope Albia isn't sorry we came."

The mousetrap isn't the only product manufactured by the Kness clan. They expect to distribute about 30 to 40 thousand garden hoes in 1955. A large-sized mailbox has also been selling well in the Midwest. They hope 1955 buyers will see a new type Christmas tree stand

and an orchard pruning saw bearing the Kness label, too.

A rattap is currently in the experimental stage.

"But rats present a different problem," says Les. "While mice attract each other, rats repel. When a rat is trapped, experts say they give off an odor that drives other rats away.

"So our present traps can't be enlarged for rats. We have to figure a way to beat the smell. We do have a rattap, but it is so large we can't produce it at a profit."

But the mousetrap, as designed by A. E. in 1926, remains the principal item and the big money-maker, for the traps are distributed internationally, and are in operation in Europe, South America, Malaya, India and Canada. One gets the impression that the mousetrap is the sentimental favorite in the family, too, because the business started with it.

The factory which is not far from the business district in Albia has a full basement and "plenty of room for expansion."

Inside the "Home of the World's Best Mouse Trap" rests an assortment of new and old machinery, handmade dies and jigs, (only the ones used in precision work are made for the Knesses), hoe handles and sheet metal. There are five punch presses, a six-foot power shear, complete welding outfits, two metal lathes, a milling machine and three drill presses — all basic to the production end of manufacturing.

The die that is used to stamp the runway in the trap is made of wood. An old bottle capper is used to insert a clip in the winding knob and a sewing machine base serves as a spring winder.

"The trap is assembled mainly by hand," says Arnie. "There are about 16 different operations in the assembly procedure. We can turn out around 20 traps an hour with a five-man crew."

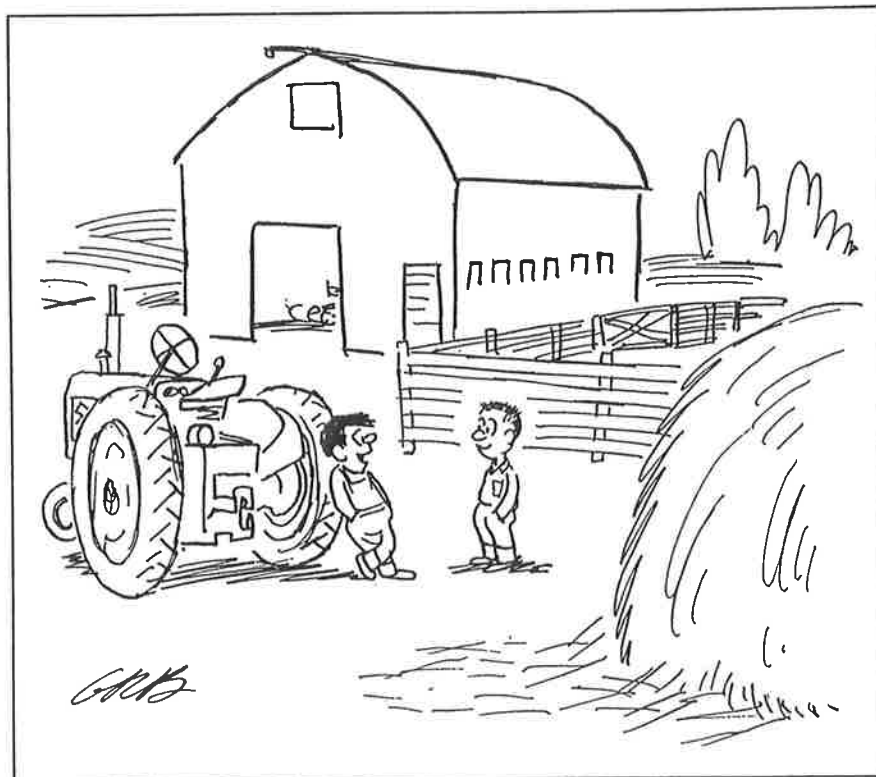
The family has tried almost every conceivable means of merchandising the traps and have found that "the thing just sells itself" best.

Salesmen in Oregon, Washington, California and the midwest do a large share of the field work. Sometimes Les will hit the road when sales are lagging. Feed and seed stores, food processing plants, warehouses and farmers are the main users of the trap, says Les. Advertising is done in feed and seed catalogs and by direct mail.

Eastern sales are handled by Albia Products Company in New York City. "The eastern outfit was named for the town here," Les says, "because they got their start from our mousetrap."

The casual and friendly atmosphere in Albia appeals to the Knesses. "It's a fine place to raise a family," Les declares.

"If we want to take time for a coffee break, we go ahead. If somebody wants to drop in and chat a bit, we take time for that, too. We want to enjoy life as well as make our 'better mousetrap.'"



"Wow! My old man just told me the facts about hybrid corn."

## Iowa's Coming Events

### APRIL

- Thru the 17th—Eugene Ludins, Stuart Edie paintings, DM Art Center
- 10-27 Public School Art Exhibit, Sanford Museum, Cherokee
- 15 Catfish season opens
- 21-May 15—S. Carl Fracassini (paintings, drawings, ceramics) DM Art Center
- 24-May 30—American-Jewish Tercentenary, Des Moines Art Center

### MAY

- 1 African Violet Show, DM Art Center
- 1-21 Alabama State Group (watercolors & prints) Sanford Museum, Cherokee
- 12 Frog and bullfrog season opens
- 12-14 Veishea, Iowa State College
- 15 Non-nesting fishing season opens. Wall-eyed pike, white and yellow bass and northern pike
- 28 State H.S. Track Meet, Ames
- 30 Season opens on largemouth, smallmouth and rock bass