

CAPE RESIDENT SOMEHOW DISCOVERS ENERGY SECRET

Brewster farmer Bob Slemmis is a genius. At least Madge, his wife of 55 years, thinks so. "He may not be much to look at, but his invention is the talk of the town," says an admiring Madge as she serves a visitor crumb cake and decaf in the family living room. "All that hassle about wind farms .. who needs them?"

Madge Slemmis is referring to her husband's discovery - some say accidental, some say carefully thought out - of an apparent source of unlimited clean energy, the kind that has been powering the Slemmis farm on Flepquish Lane north of route 6A for several months now. "It's a sort of combination wind power and solar power little gizmo that I kind of tinkered around with last winter between football and baseball season," chuckles Slemmis, whose mantelpiece is adorned with photos of his younger self in various team uniforms. "I had read one or two articles on that wind farm they've been talking about putting into Nantucket Sound, and it seemed like a good idea, but then one day I went over to the Ladies' Library and had a quick read through a few of those technology magazines, the ones that try to sell you brine shrimp in tiny print in the back. I came home and did some heavy thinking, and then went out into the shed to see what I could come up with. And this was it."

Slemmis' conversion device looks to the untutored eye much like a pizza box spray-painted silver. It's attached by wires and cables of different colors to what appears to be a child's pinwheel, which is inserted through a hole drilled in Slemmis' deck railing right under a bird feeder - "it's the windiest spot on the lot," he explains - and has what looks like a D battery secured by duct tape to the shaft right under the propellor. To prevent the entire top-heavy apparatus from keeling over, Slemmis employs what could be wire hangers to act as struts; a complicated arrangement involving plant hangers and nylon fishing line is also involved in keeping the pinwheel upright. A visitor notices several clothes-pins wrapped in tinfoil attached in seemingly random locations along the fishing line, but Slemmis refuses to discuss their function beyond alluding to something he calls "heliovental dynamism". "I can't go into detail, but I can tell you that they kind of enhance the D battery's function in the photonic conversion protocol," explains Slemmis. "It's pretty basic, but believe you me, it's no fun when you're out here in twenty-degree weather trying to locate and replace the bum focus units" - presumably the clothespins - "that have caused bad ol' Mister Discontinuity to show up in the quark-lepton condensate ratio. With mittens on, would you believe!"

At the other end inside the house, the transmission cable from the pizza box - resembling in its orange-and-black color motif a Sears extension cord that has been sliced and patched up few dozen times - is draped over the refrigerator, dangles perilously close to the sink, and is finally plugged into an ordinary household outlet, next to the plug for the Slemmis' toaster. "That's where Bob's juice gets into the rest of the house," says Madge Slemmis helpfully as she prepares a Jello mold for Bob's lunch. The power system plug is an old-fashioned two-prong type because, as Slemmis explains, "we were losing too much juice out the grounding prong. Took me a while to figure that one out, didn't it, Madge?" Every so often, the cable begins to

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vibrate and the sections wrapped in electrician's tape begin to smoke, but neither Bob nor Madge seem overly concerned, although Bob points a comically accusing finger at the pizza box. "I get damn tired of messing around with the inverse rheonic voltage capacitors in that thing ... always seems to carry on around lunch time," says Bob with a chuckle. "I know Louie's been holding a new one for me down at his junk yard - off a '96 Chevy, he says, but you know Louie - but I just haven't had the time to get over there yet."

As astoundingly unlikely as it may be, Slemmis' jury-rigged device actually seems to work; the Slemmis' house has been disconnected from the local power grid for three months now, and there is no evidence of use of any fossil fuel or natural gas ("We've got tropical fish in our fireplace now!" Madge Slemmis proclaims with an unexplained blush). According to her husband, both MIT and various Woods Hole institutions, alerted by Brewster residents who are acquainted with the Slemmises, have sent observers to study his invention, and he has even received an inquiry from the State House asking for permission to examine his "gizmo". "I told 'em sure, come on down," says Slemmis, "but I've got to be careful and not tell these government types too much until I get everything patented. I sent all the drawings and stuff down to Washington a few weeks ago, but of course I haven't heard back from them yet."

Dr. Ordley Plimsoll, chairman of the Department of Electrical Engineering at MIT, remains in a state of disbelief but did confirm Slemmis' assertions. "Yeah, we sent Jimmy and Dennis, a couple of grad students, down there during the Summer to check this thing out. They volunteered, figuring it would be a total waste of time, but seeing an opportunity to goof off a little, check out a pub or two, maybe grab a bucket of steamers - all in the name of Science, of course - off they went. Four hours went by - I figured I'd hear from after two, tops - and when they did finally check in with me, they could hardly talk. 'We've never seen anything like it,' said Jimmy after he got his babbling under control. 'This guy has rigged this pinwheel thing to a pizza box and he's generating ...he's gener ...' At that point Jimmy fainted - you could hear him go 'Ooooh' and drop the phone. Then I heard Dennis' voice, small and weird, like he was very far away. 'Doc, we're talking megawatts here...I know it sounds nuts, but we checked our instruments three or four times and came up with the same readings each time. They nearly melted, for cripes sake! This guy can put out enough power from that bleeping pinwheel to keep the whole Cape going for years. No, we don't know how he does it - he won't show us the inside of the box where what he calls 'the good stuff' is all located. I did get a quick look inside when he was busy talking to Jimmy and I swear to God I saw a couple of old vacuum tubes and part of a Slinky in there ... no, I don't know what to make of it. I just want to go home and have a triple Jameson's and go to sleep and maybe wake up and none of this will have happened. But first I have to get Jimmy to a hospital - he bumped his head pretty badly when he passed out ...'"

Others in the electrical power industry are understandably skeptical about Slemmis' apparent ability to generate huge amounts of energy in his back yard. "I don't care what those guys from MIT think they observed," said Edwin Battaglia, spokesperson

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for the WLWFIYBY (We'd Like Wind Farms in Your Back Yard) Coalition. "Our own calculations tell us that we'd have to have 3,776 power towers, each one eighty stories tall, working in constant winds of 72 miles per hour, to generate in a year what this Slemmis guy is supposed to be generating every hour from his pinwheel. How can that make any sense? We contacted Slemmis to see if he'd show us how he's generating any power at all - much less the megawatts that the MIT guys claim they found - and his wife, who sounds like a real charmer, more or less told us we could all drop dead. When we finally made contact with her husband, he started talking about readjusting the focus units to increase something or other and maybe we could wait a few days until he saw if they worked, and if they didn't he have to drive down to the Stop & Shop and pick up some new ones, unless of course Job Lot had them on sale. He said something too about crumb cake, and waste materials contaminating the heliovental system from his bird-feeder, then we heard his wife laughing in the background, and when we finished the conversation - it was on speaker-phone in the senior engineer's office - we were all convinced that our boy Slemmis was a total whacko. Then a few days later we read the story in the paper about the Woods Hole gang that went over to see his gizmo and came away convinced like the MIT guys that it really did what Slemmis was claiming it could do. But I gotta tell you, we still don't believe it."

Len Doppelganger, planning coordinator for the Cape Light Compact, is cautiously optimistic. "If this thing is for real, and we can somehow hook the entire Cape into Slemmis' system, we're in great shape," he commented. "We've already talked to Slemmis and he's told us that we can have the power for no charge, as long as we replace the D battery once in a while and maybe get a few new clothespins for him when the springs start to go on the old ones. We offered to supply the transmission facilities to get the electricity out of his back yard, but he told us to hold off, that he's planning on working this winter on a way of 'pumping out the juice' - that's how he refers to the transmission process - over telephone lines, 'so you don't have to put up any of those horrible towers. What the hell,' he said to us, 'most everybody has a phone these days, so why don't we use the wires and things that are already there to get the juice into folks' homes and offices?' We asked him if we could help in the research, but he said he didn't need any help quote as long as I have my box wrench Nellie Belle and Olaf my soldering iron at my side unquote. We looked at each other and couldn't figure out if he was for real or just pulling our legs .. either way it was pretty scary, so we left cards and told him to call us when he had anything to show us. We never even tasted the crumb cake his wife had brought out for us."

According to sources, the sheer improbability of Slemmis' invention being real will require an unprecedented amount of research over the coming months. "It's going to be interesting," said CLC's Doppelganger. "And if it's real, we're ready!"