

Insights: Publications

Comment: Lessons learned from Charles Goodyear and the Committee on Patents and Related Matters

July 2, 2024

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In 1839, Charles Goodyear was on the verge of a momentous discovery. Natural rubber is useful within only a narrow temperature window—it becomes a foul-smelling goo at slightly elevated temperatures and hard and brittle at low temperatures. Chemists in the US and abroad had been searching for decades for a way to solve this problem. Goodyear was obsessed with finding a solution. He tried everything he could think of, frequently working out of his home kitchen. Eventually, he fell on hard times, getting evicted from his home and making several trips to debtors' prison. In a fortuitous stroke of luck, Goodyear happened to drop a mixture of natural rubber, sulfur, and white lead onto a hot stove. When he picked it up, expecting the rubber to be a molten mess, he found that it was soft and pliable like leather. He immediately realized he had stumbled onto something great—the vulcanization of rubber.

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