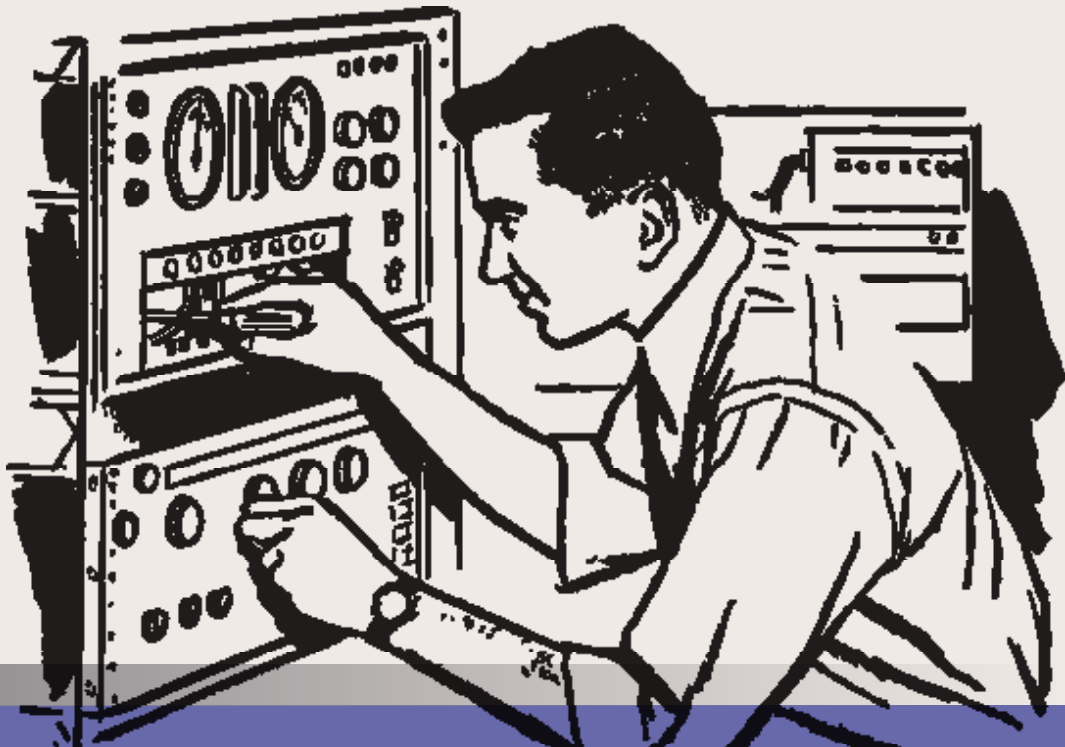


OMEGA APPLIANCE REPAIR

Written by Wayne A. Seltzer

I STARTED MY OWN REPAIR BUSINESS IN EIGHTH GRADE. NOW, IN MY RETIREMENT, I'M PART OF THE GLOBAL FIX-IT MOVEMENT



Adobe Stock-RetroClipArt

Fixing broken things was just a normal part of my family life.

I was born in New York City and was raised in New Jersey in a home with lots of tools, a garage, a basement workshop, and a backyard. My father was a Depression-era baby who grew up with a sense of frugality. He had lived through some pretty tough times as his parents were refugees from Eastern Europe. He was an electronics engineer trained in the US Army Signal Corps in World War II. With his work, my parents were able to move from a small apartment in the Bronx to a house in Queens and later to a new home in the NJ suburbs.

In this burst of postwar suburban growth, people acquired lots of things that would eventually break. My father wouldn't throw broken stuff away — we fixed everything, sometimes with the help of my Uncle Arnold, a mechanical engineer who designed hydraulic control systems for the U.S. Navy (he had a machine shop in his basement!). We enjoyed solving these repair puzzles and were all known in the neighborhood and family as the people who have the tools and knowledge to fix anything.

My dad was a pioneer in consumer electronics. He worked for Emerson Radio & Television, where he designed and tested "Hi-Fi" radios, "stereos," and later, color televisions (we were the first on the block to have one). In the 1960s my dad gave me an Emerson portable AM radio with six transistors! Our home workshop was filled with his audio experiments in his quest for perfect sound.

Dad taught me to solder at a young age so I could help him build his audio projects. He often needed another pair of hands and liked my small fingers and sharp eyes for detailed work. We built all kinds of crazy stuff. Some things caught fire. Some things didn't work. We had a lot of fun.

FINDING A CALLING

Maybe based on my inherited sense of frugality, I noticed that people would throw useful things out on trash night. I'd see a vacuum cleaner,

lamp, kitchen appliance, or maybe an entire dishwasher. And I said to myself, "... there must be useful parts in there."

I SAID TO MYSELF, "... THERE MUST BE USEFUL PARTS IN THERE."

When I was in middle school, when people had their trash cans out, I would often ride around on my bike and harvest parts from their discards. With tools in my bike basket, I would quietly collect useful parts like power cords, switches, valves, and motors. The summer between seventh and eighth grade the local newspaper in central New Jersey advertised: "Hey, kids. Free summer work ads. Send us a classified. We'll print it for free." So I put in "Omega Appliance Repair. No job too big or small," along with my phone number. (I suppose I was thinking about the movie *Omega Man* which was playing in theatres at the time.)

My friend, Gary, who was into graphic arts, printed up some business cards in the school's shop for me. I realized years later that we spelled appliance wrong; just one "P," but maybe that was my trademark. Much to my surprise, I got a lot of phone calls with people asking, "Hey, can you fix this toaster, blender, dishwasher ...?"

I would ride over on my bike to pick up small repair items, or customers would bring things to our house. If I had the part that I harvested from the garbage, I wouldn't charge people for it, only for my time. I'd tell them: "People threw it away; it had no value to them, so it's yours now."

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Me at one of the first Boulder U-Fix-It Clinic events, demonstrating how to use a multimeter to troubleshoot a broken floor lamp.

In high school, I had a well-paying job at a small electronics shop, fixing TVs, stereos, car radios, etc. I was one of a few kids who took shop classes as well as the advanced math and science track. I was fortunate to get admitted to MIT on a scholarship, majoring in electrical engineering and computer science. I quickly found a cool job working for MIT's "Dormitory Telephone System," repairing telephones and switching equipment. During my time there, I was thrilled to be accepted into the MIT co-op program with Bell Labs where I worked summers through graduate school, designing digital telephone systems and other networking and communication projects. After college, I moved to Boulder, Colorado and

was part of the growth of technology companies At Sun Microsystems, I led the "Auto Service Request" project which automated the diagnosis and repair of high-availability servers, no doubt driven by my obsession for fixing stuff efficiently. Several years ago, my friends Peter Mui and Steve Berl challenged me to create a volunteer repair clinic in Boulder, following the model of the successful Fixit Clinic in Berkeley (see "The Fix Is In" on page TK). Partnering with Boulder's community recycling non-profit, I started the Boulder U-Fix-It Clinic. My engineering friends and co-workers at Sun became enthusiastic volunteer repair coaches at our series of free clinics. We received a grant to purchase tools and

Marty Crigler, Eco-Cycle, Wayne Seltzer

supplies, and were thankful to be the recipients of some great toolkits from iFixit. We're now part of a growing global community of fixers; it's been a lot of fun to meet people who share their passion for diagnosis and repair to save the planet by fixing our broken stuff. During COVID, we've had an ongoing series of Zoom repair clinics with volunteers around the world. And, of course, we're looking forward to resuming our in-person events.

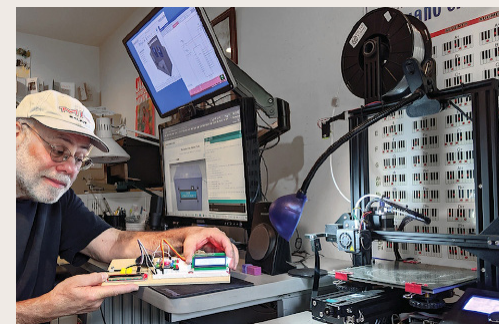
Now I have more time to share my passion for making and repairing. I retired a few years ago to become the interim director of the "Blow Things Up" makerspace at the University of Colorado's ATLAS Institute, where I am now "technologist-in-residence." I'm also a part-time electronics/computer science/robotics instructor at the CU Science Discovery summer camp and after school program. A few years ago, at a Denver Maker Faire, I met Qing Hua who encouraged me to teach Arduino classes through her Build-A-Robot program. It's been great teaching middle-school kids who are the same age as I was during my "Omega Appliance Repair" days.

STILL BROKEN...

I suppose what I was doing in the 1970's was not a whole lot different than the repair movement that's going on now. Can we keep things out of the landfill? Can we make use of the stuff that's worn out or just broken? Unfortunately, we haven't really solved the problem. Products are increasingly complex and harder to repair. And, even worse, manufacturers design products to be not repairable. I'm glad to be part of the international #rightorepair movement that seeks to require manufacturers to make replacement parts, tools, software and documentation available to enable consumers to fix the products they own. 🛠️



During the first part of COVID, I joined Make4Covid [make4covid.co/blog]; volunteers across Colorado used their 3D printers to make parts for thousands of face shield masks.



I was featured in an MIT Technology Review article "Hands on: How four alumni have built making into their lives."



My father Alex Seltzer, an electronics technician and a pioneer in the early days of consumer electronics design and production.

WAYNE SELTZER is the founder of the Boulder U-Fix-It Clinic in Colorado: boulderfixitclinic.org