

Inventors' group had long history of helping others

by [Access Press Staff](#) // October 9th, 2015

After 58 years of stimulating the economy, celebrating creativity and innovation, and helping launch multiple businesses, the Minnesota Inventors Congress has shut down. The shutdown, announced October 1, is due to reductions in state funding. It means an end to an inventors' center started in 1985, competitions and student programs. It also means the end of an annual inventors' expo that was the oldest in the United States.

“This organization has served inventors and fostered economic development through job growth in many local communities across Minnesota by bringing new products to market that manufacturers have either added into their product line or new start up manufacturing facilities have started ... As board members we are proud to have served in this capacity for the future of economic growth in our state,” said Julie Rath, Minnesota Inventors Congress board member.

The late Bob Starr, along with other Redwood Falls area farmers and business-people, created the Minnesota Inventors Congress in 1958 as a way to connect local inventors and manufacturers. The organization has helped countless inventors make their dreams a reality, from board games to heavy equipment. The list of inventions is varied and ranges from the simple to the very complex. One claim to fame is the invention of the first pop-up camper. The Rolite Trailer was unveiled in 1958.

For people with disabilities, the Minnesota Inventors Congress launched items meant to make everyday life easier. Many inventors were inspired by the situation of a friend or family member, and worked on an invention to improve someone else's life. One popular type of invention was an all-terrain wheelchair, to help people who use wheelchairs work on farms or enjoy the outdoors.

One of the first and best-known inventions was the quad cane. St. Paul resident Carl Oja exhibited his invention, a four-pronged cane, at the 1964 Minnesota Inventors Congress invention expo. The cane is believed to be the first of its kind that could stand up on its own. Little did Oja know how much his invention would change his life. Energized after exhibiting at the expo, Oja returned to his medical equipment business in St Paul, O-J Rental and Sales Company, with dreams of the future.

Oja eventually moved his business and family to Redwood Falls, where he made the shift from retail sales to inventing and manufacturing. The company, ActiveAid, is still going strong and makes and sells many types of medical and home care supplies.

Inventing and inventions will of course continue. In the disability community, people will always be thinking about the next piece of assistive technology or adapted device to improve quality of life. But the end of the Minnesota Inventors Congress means the end of an era in our state.

Access Press is interested in reader submissions for the monthly History Note column, to complement the articles written by Luther Granquist and other contributors. Submissions must center on events, people and places in the history of Minnesota's disability community. We are interested in history that focuses on all types of disability topics, so long as the history has a tie to Minnesota. We are especially interested in stories from Greater Minnesota. Please submit ideas prior to submitting full stories, as we may have covered the topic before. Contact us at access@accesspress.org or 651-644-2133 if you have questions. The History Note is a monthly column sponsored by the Minnesota Governor's Council on Developmental Disabilities.