

# Ridiculous 2 Sublime

STORIES, PUNDITRY, MUSINGS, AND OBSERVATIONS OF  
CHUCK GOLDSTONE  
SPOKESPERSON FOR OUR SPECIES

## The Grow Fast Fertilizer Company of McKeesport, Pennsylvania

When I was in the ninth grade, my neighbors Joe and Donny, both in the tenth grade, joined a local future-entrepreneur program, an after-school activity for those who were too uncoordinated to play high school sports, but not quite smart enough to be on the debate team. The program, fashioned after Junior Achievement, encouraged young adults to be business magnates, offering an early-life laboratory that would teach eager, impressionable high schoolers how to have a dream and then watch it fail, and the many ways an otherwise carefully planned business could rise and then plummet in abject ruin and scandal, all in a single semester, a much compressed business cycle then, but foretelling what the real world would be like in the 2000's.

In our school district, this extracurricular was open to sophomores through seniors, but excluded ninth graders like me who were thought to lack the acumen and maturity to navigate the complexities of commerce and deftly resolve professional disputes, which on the high-school-level were most often settled by beating up an adversary, or for minor disputes, administering a wedgy.

The junior business league, like the AV Club, Chess Society, and the Cello Team, was a B-List activity where no respectable high-school student wanted to be seen, so just to have enough people to keep the program going, the Superintendent opened it up to a select corps of older junior high kids. Even the dorkiest programs in high school seemed very cool for a ninth grader. I was invited to join, since I had the qualities the program required, in that I was free on Mondays after school. Had it not been for me and about a dozen of my fourteen-year old classmates, Joe and Donny would be joining a high school activity that would eventually have to include fifth grade girls.

We met once a week at the old Market Street school, which had been closed for classes for many decades and was now used for storage of supplies too dangerous to keep at the high school. This softly crumbling elementary school was built in 1902, and it was creepy to think that that most of the children who attended here had been dead for many years.

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Compressing the life cycle of a corporation into twelve weeks, we would start by identifying a product we thought someone might buy, then sell stock, create a manufacturing and marketing plan, peddle our wares to anyone gullible enough or

obligated to buy them, and at the end of the year, calculate our profits, sharing the bounty with investors who had confidence—and a dollar to invest— in our vision.

We were one of six groups, each consisting of about eight people. Even as a naïve junior high student, I knew that I was being paired with people who, once I was a sophomore the following year, I would deny ever knowing.

Each team was supervised by an adult from the community, usually a businessman who had not-so-much clout within his own company but volunteered because he was assured respect from fourteen to seventeen year olds. A few of the advisors were retired, and this was a way to get out of the house.

At our first meeting, we were reminded that we were the leaders of tomorrow, given a booklet of rules, and then told we had to come up with an idea for a product in the next half-hour. The guidelines were simple: it had to have a viable market, could be produced for less than we could sell it for, and would not kill anyone, either while being made or used, preferably both.

Each of us knew for weeks we were to be part of this program, yet no one had apparently given any thought to it before now.

"What product would you buy if it were on the shelves?" the advisor asked.

When it was clear we were not equipped to manufacture an inexpensive automobile for teenagers or a hi-fi system, we discussed less ambitious ideas, including baby toys made with wood blocks and painted with high gloss enamel, which at that time contained well over the acceptable level for lead and cadmium. We considered a barbecue-grill cleaning brush which was, quite simply a brush, and someone drew a disturbing looking back massager, shaped just a little too much like a penis. The group also dismissed food, though the idea of a Premium Tuna Sandwich seemed an attractive alternative to cafeteria lunch, until someone pointed out the untoward consequence of dispensing a product made with mayonnaise, storing it in a musty basement locker at the Market Street School, and selling it over the next twelve weeks. We were about ready to agree on a bottled window cleaner made by pouring Windex into smaller bottles and labeling it WindowEx, when our advisor, who had mentioned working at the steel mill, suggested producing an inorganic commercial grade fertilizer, which could be made with the gritty chemical waste from the ingot-making process, and he could get all the raw materials we needed for free. We had only to mix the dry ingredients together, bag and label it, and sell it to an eager suburban community yearning for greener lawns.

We agreed unanimously, if not just because it was getting late. At school the following day, we learned that one of the other groups would be producing an artistically stunning but perhaps not-so-useful egg holder made with a dozen upright golf tees. Another group planned on a novel concept they called "Soup Gloves." A third voted for Sock Puppets and the group across the hall from us decided on Pot Holders, until its advisor discovered they were not talking about insulated kitchen mittens, but small boxes for fellow students to store their pot.

Organic fertilizer has been around for as long as animals have been defecating on plants and includes compost, worm castings, seaweed, bone meal, and manure, ever-slightly decaying and somewhat freshened animal waste. Chemical fertilizer, the kind we would be producing and the most commonly used in this century, offers the soil three elemental nutrients---nitrogen (N), phosphorous (P), and potassium (K),----in various proportions, each promoting a specific attribute of strength, growth, or resilience.

Chemical composition is designated on each bag by the NPK number, the percentage of each of this trio of elements. The most common ratio for lawns and gardens is 5-10-5, meaning 5% nitrogen, 10% phosphate, and 5% potassium. The remainder is filler, often sand or limestone, used to top off the bag and make it look like you got your money's worth.

Use these nutrients in the right proportion and a plant will thrive, but if the ratio is off, you can wipe out an entire field in a day.

Thankfully, we had all the nitrogen, phosphate and potash we could ever want because the mill dumped several thousand tons of it daily onto slag heaps, as the plentiful waste by-product of blast furnaces.

I whispered to Joe and Donny that since our product would contain no organic compounds or manure, we should call it *No Shit!*, which we, as fourteen and fifteen-year olds, thought pretty funny. Our muffled snickering in the back of the room interrupted the advisor who warned us in the first of a series of business life-lessons that "laughter has no place in business."

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Every product needs a catchy name. and often the success of a venture hinges on its branding. During the following hour, we suggested names and voted on the one we would call ourselves from that day forward. There is a reason why companies spend millions on corporate identity strategists, name searches, and focus groups, and do not leave product branding to fourteen to seventeen year olds. If you drew a straight line and labeled one end "Cutesy" and the other "Insidid," all the names we generated would fall at one extreme or the other.

Suggestions included *Happy Lawn*, *Skippy Lawn*, *Garden B Grow*, *ChemGreen*, *Lawn Order*, and the more technical name *PhossyNitroPot* based on the chemical makeup. Someone offered up the Spanish sounding "*Grassy-Yes!*" with the tag line, "*Your Lawn Will Thank You.*"

I personally lobbied for *The Great United States Fertilizer Company*, with thoughts of being the first high school business club to have a company listed on the New York Stock Exchange. But a burly twelfth grader, who had already threatened some in the group if he didn't always get his way, came up with *Grow Fast*, an incredibly stupid name and not even as good as the one suggested by the Laotian foreign exchange student who didn't speak much English. Fearing reprisal, but frankly not really caring much what our product was called, Joe, Donny and I voted with the bully, clinching the name *Grow Fast* as our corporate moniker, and guaranteeing that if he wanted to pummel someone, we

would not be his first choice.

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Running a business requires capital, and our pretend-company would need to generate start-up funds as well. Though we were getting all the steel mill detritus we could ever use, we did have the expense of bags, labels, sealing tape, mimeographed brochures, and a shovel.

Money for these would be raised by selling stock, by sharing with others our vision at a dollar-a-share and offering investors our immediate gushing gratitude and the promise of an eventual return of untold wealth.

Without a formal prospectus or oversight by the SEC, buying shares in the *Grow Fast Fertilizer Company of McKeesport, Pennsylvania* was *entirely* about insider trading, and in the next week, we would collect a dollar here-and-there from family members and friends. Our company might succeed or fail, but either way, it was not our money.

On the Monday of Week Two, a small dump truck from the mill dropped off two thousand pounds of sand and gray grit in two mounds. That night we would learn how to manufacture commercial grade fertilizer, mixing the right proportion of ingredients and scooping the mélange into heavy see-through plastic bags, sealing them with super-sticky tape, and pasting on a label with our corporate logo on the face.

*"Grow Fast Fertilizer.*

*NPK 5-10-5*

*Making Your Lawn Green and Your Neighbors Green with Envy"*

The slogan, I am proud to say, was mine.

Toward the bottom, the label read, "*A McKeesport Senior High School Student Company*" and under that, a disclaimer warning that buying this product is at the user's sole risk, since this was of course, a product made by teenagers.

Each bag sold for two dollars.

Unlike the group that made tea cozies, ours had chosen a product whose production required a lot of heavy lifting. To fulfill each week's orders, one of us would have to scoop shovels of this soot into twenty-five pound bags, meticulously measuring and mixing it thoroughly beforehand to insure the proper ratio of 5 to 10 to 5.

The eight of us were divided into two work units: the Manufacturing Team, comprised of those who were brawny and shovel-conversant and the Sales and Finance Team, consisting of the less muscular and any of us who were Jewish.

Donny was measurably overweight and wheezed more than necessary for a fifteen-year old and Joe was simply lazy, so they asked to be part of the Executive group. Though neither had skills in marketing or basic math, they felt that if they were not going to contribute, they would not contribute much more effectively to our group.

Manufacturing, given the name Synthesis and Packaging, was a dirty process and produced a cloud of white chaff that hung in the air and lightly dusted all the desks and bookcases. By the end of each session, we could barely make out people across the room, as if we were looking through sheer curtains, and before the evening ended, most of us were coughing up a unsettling chalky phlegm.

While the school continually lectured us about not using chewing tobacco or contaminating our lungs with cigarettes, here we were in a school basement surrounded by flaking asbestos-covered pipes, inhaling the dusty pollutants swept from the floor of a blast furnace.

Once the Manufacturer Team knew how many bags to fill, the foreman would measure raw materials from the two big piles, using a quantitative system of apportionment referred to as "more-or-less." Because of a not-so-stringent commitment to thoroughly mixing the chemicals, we could not necessarily vouch for a perfect 5-10-5 ratio, so some consumers may have enjoyed a little more phosphorus than others, and while we are not sure, we think that a few customer may have received bags filled entirely with caustic potash.

Our Sales and Finance group determined that everyone in our community had a lawn, so we multiplied two dollars by the population and projected a windfall. Although I was the youngest in our group, I headed up the Marketing Team, developing a flyer we left on car windshields and in mailboxes. While I do not remember the content, I do remember it shamelessly extolled the virtues of *Grow Fast* and the agricultural efficacy of 5-10-5 fertilizer. Many of the declarations were overly ambitious, but we did not feel burdened by any slavish commitment to what might be considered truth.

We saw our competitive advantage in underselling the neighborhood hardware store and offering free delivery. Since our parents had a lot of friends, we further harnessed the awesome marketing power of "hitting up people willing to do our parents a favor."

On the weekend, Joe, Donny, and I peddled door-to-door, and we would learn that it was easier for strangers to give us a couple of dollars than to endure our sales pitch.

Surprisingly, our company sold over two hundred bags of *mill-schmootz-labeled-as-fertilizer*, and with our total costs for bags, tape, and flyers at a little under nine dollars and the actual fertilizer for free, we made what is considered in Keynesian Economics as "a freakin' killing."

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As ordained, at Week Twelve, all of our companies would disband. Fiscal officers in each organization would calculate profit or loss, all outstanding bills would be paid, and profits would be celebrated.

The most successful company would be recognized on a plaque. Our group always assumed it would be us, but to our surprise we came in second behind the Sock Puppet Corporation, which surged at the last moment when the wealthy uncle of one of the kids bought up the entire inventory of three hundred Fluffy the Lamb puppets the previous Friday.

With orders filled on demand, a concept that we believe started in our classroom and would eventually become the foundation for the Japanese Manufacturing Model, we had very few unsold bags to discard and little to do before we went back home.

After dissolution of the *Grow Fast Fertilizer Company*, our unused stash of raw materials, essentially a huge pile of grit, would be shoveled back into a pickup truck and dumped at the mill's slag heap where it was intended to go in the first place.

Our final duty as officers of the corporation was to calculate the profit and distribute it as stockholder dividends. One dollar invested in us would return a hefty \$1.20, which quite seriously, well outperformed the Dow and the majority of real companies run by grownups.

I later heard that Joe and Donny never bothered to inform their stockholders that the company disbanded, and they each pocketed about seven dollars, just enough for them to buy Pot Holders.

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School ended in June. Some of us had summer jobs, and a few of my classmates made spending money by cutting grass, weeding, and coincidentally spreading the fertilizer our company made over the winter. Though inconsistent in chemical composition, our product turned out to be consistent in its efficiency in killing anything organic it touched. Reports circulated that throughout McKeesport, dozens of once-thriving lawns were mysteriously turning brown and garden tomatoes, oddly shaped and never growing bigger than grapes, were withering on brittle vines. As we were to later discover, the heap of gravel we bagged each week also contained unknown impurities capable of rendering soil sterile for a decade. It was also not-so-comforting to know that for twelve weeks, we breathed toxic dust that steel workers wore respirators working around. Neighbors were warned not to eat anything that came from their gardens and advised that it might be a good idea to have their house pets looked at. As impressionable teenagers, we had trusted our advisor for our product's important chemical recipe since he worked at the steel mill, forgetting for a moment that he worked in the *accounting office* of the steel mill. Some adults, we later found, had been their high school's uncool losers twenty years earlier.

The goal of our business club was to teach us a few lessons that we could carry into our professional lives. We discovered that any excruciatingly bad product or service, properly capitalized and promoted, can be sold to someone, and you do not necessarily have to be good at something to be successful.

Joe and Donny would return as juniors and I would attend the high school as an entering sophomore, not yet deemed either cool or doofus, incoming with clean slate, hoping to be accepted by the A-List kids, concealing my youthful entrepreneurial indiscretion, and pretending I did not know any of the dorky upperclassmen whom I met on Market Street.

We are not sure of the half-life of the chemicals that seeped into soil throughout McKeesport and neighboring communities that summer, so just to be on the safe side, you may not want to buy property there.