

# "Will Robinson, my scanners are picking up several full-scale replicas... Danger... DANGER..."

Dewey Howard of the *B-9 Robot Builders Club* in conversation with Mike Reccia



**D**ewey Howard is living proof that, with a little ambition, seemingly far-fetched ideas can be translated into solid reality. With only modest modelling knowledge Dewey decided he would set about constructing a full-size replica of his favourite character from the sixties TV series *Lost In Space* – the robot. His nine-month scratchbuilding marathon led him to set up a website specifically catering for *Lost In Space* robot modelers. Less than a year since its inception, that site now boasts over one hundred and eighty members worldwide. We asked Dewey to explain why the robot holds such a fascination for him, and to recount just how he went about building six foot, four inches of 1:1 scale replica. In this article other members of Dewey's B-9 Robot Builders Club also detail their work and their reasons for scratchbuilding what have to be some of the largest replica props ever created...

**SF&F:** Dewey, what can you tell us about the original television series robot? Who designed it... what was it made from... does the suit still exist?

**Dewey:** The character of the robot was actually added to the series after the original pilot had been shot. CBS felt that the show needed two additional characters to add some depth to the storyline, so the villainous *Dr. Zachary Smith* and the robot were added. The original plan was to suspend the robot from overhead cables and only shoot it from the waist up. Later that idea was scrapped and it was decided that an actual working costume would be more suitable. Robert Kinoshita was hired for the task of designing the robot. Kinoshita has already been well known for his infamous *Robby The Robot* which was featured in the movie *Forbidden Planet* in 1956. The LIS robot was constructed mainly of fiberglass, plastics, rubber, and wood. He stood about six feet, four inches tall and weighed in at about two hundred pounds.

Bob May was hired to be the actor inside the robot costume, provided that he could fit into the nearly completed costume. He was, of course, able to squeeze into the confined interior, and the rest is history. Bob was the only actor to ever portray the robot character for the show's entire three year run. Because of his talented method for "working

the suit" he brought our favorite character to life and gave him a personality.

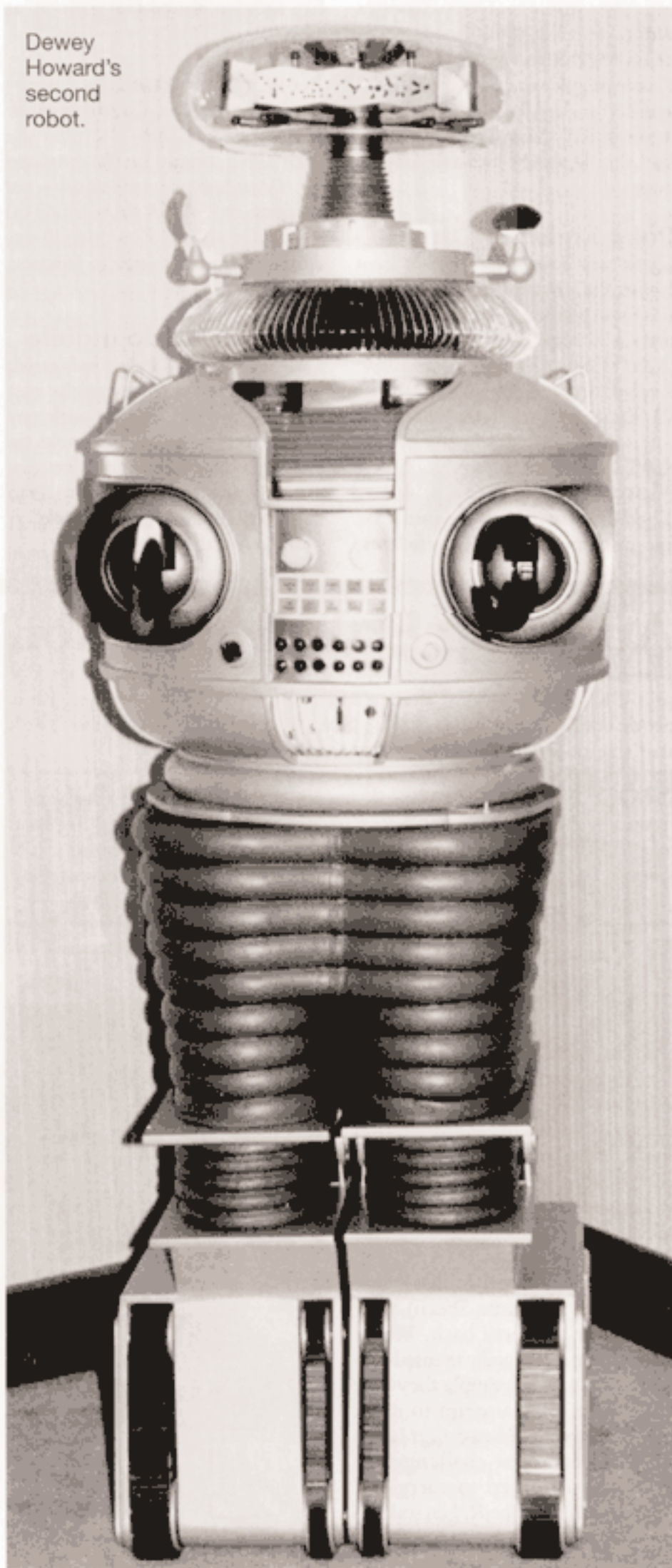
After the series ended the robot costume ended up in storage at Fox until 1979, when it was leased out to a short-lived Saturday morning kids' show called *Mystery Island*. The costume was altered considerably for the show to the point where it barely resembled our beloved robot. After that show was canceled, the robot ended up in storage again for years. It was even rumored that Michael Jackson was once interested in buying him, but when he saw the condition it was in (from the *Mystery Island* revisions) he decided against it.

The robot was eventually rescued by Fox executive and long time fan Kevin Burns. Kevin was able to get the robot restored to its original condition and to replace many of the missing parts. The totally restored robot made its debut in public for the first time in 1990 for the 25th anniversary for the series in Boston.

**SF&F:** What, then, made you decide to make a full-size version of your own and how did you go about it? What had you built – model-wise – before taking on this massive project?

**Dewey:** *Lost In Space* always had been one of my favorite sci-fi shows and the robot, in my eyes, was the hero of the show. One day, while browsing

Dewey Howard's second robot.





## Why I wanted to make the *Lost in Space* Robot...

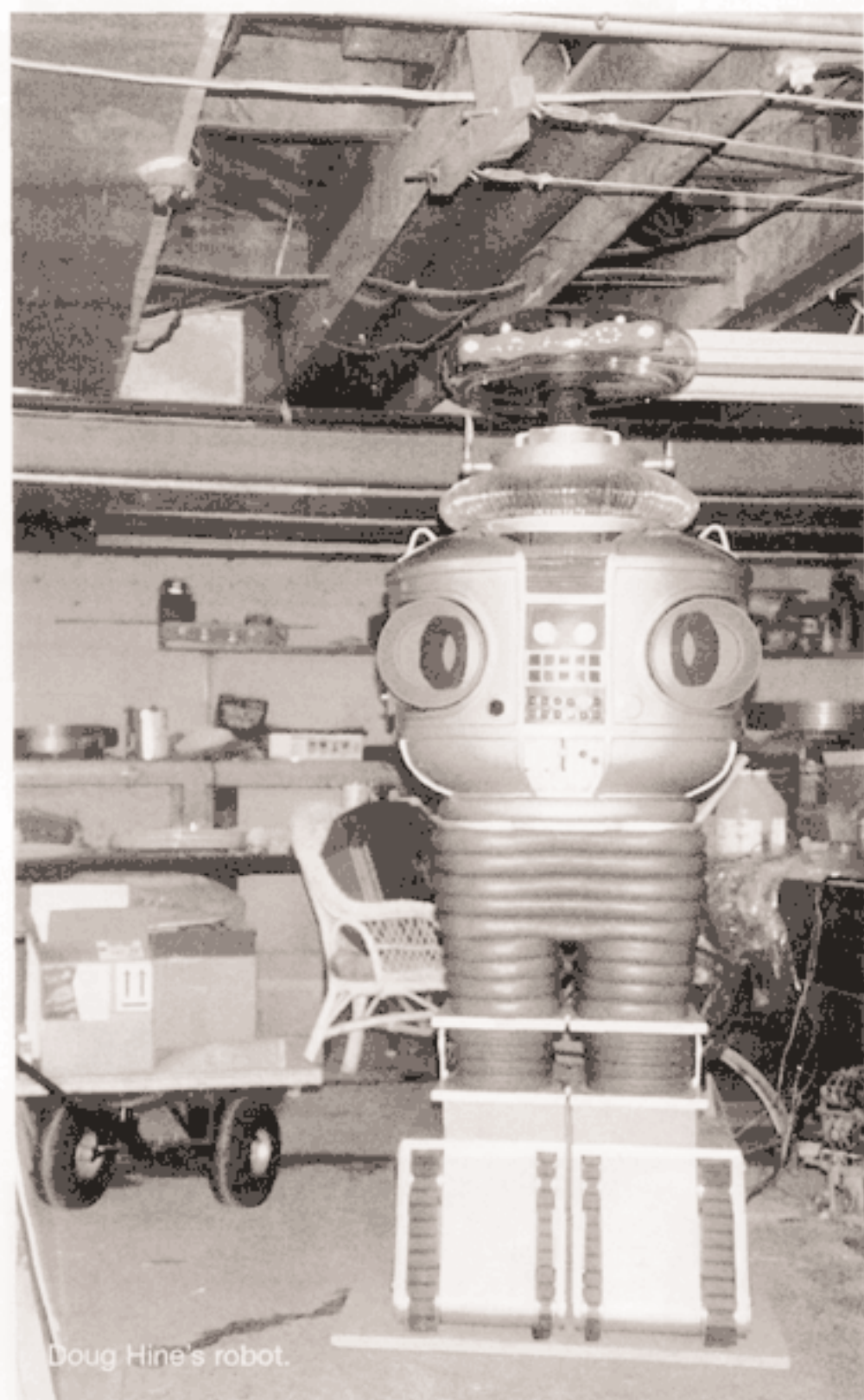
**W**ell, we have to go back a few years to about 1974 or '75. I was young – very young – and for Christmas received from my mother and grandfather a *Lost in Space* robot (Boy, if I still had that thing!!). It was, of course, the best gift ever for a fan of the show – even if I *was* watching reruns, the series was new to me. The toy was great at the time because I was just a kid, but as time passed I became more and more interested in the idea of the family (my mother, grandfather, and myself) having our own robot. As the years passed I became an even bigger fan of the show, finding out all I could about the robot, and not knowing that this would lead to a mild future in electronics. I even ran to the store to buy the last *Starlog* mag for its robot issue!

The idea began to take a hold of me, so I went to the one person I knew could help; my grandfather. He had been a father to me; in fact the only father figure I'd known. I came to him with the idea, and at first he didn't think I was serious about it, but, as I was persistent, he finally said, "OK, let's do it." I of course asked where we would get the parts from. It wasn't like we had a *Lost In Space* do it yourself store down the street. We had to be creative. Old TV sets, junk yards – these were our kits. He brought home an old fan and some balsa wood and I asked what they could be used for – they didn't even look metallic. He took the blade protector off the fan and, with time, patience and some melted plastic, we made the robot's collar! It looked great considering what it was. Some old plastic laundry basket plus balsa wood made a nice torso, with dryer hoses for arms. The bubble was, as I recall, a plastic fish

bowl we had around the house. The feet we made from plywood and the wheels from some motorized thing we found in the junkyard. We only had two things standing in our way. One – the proper support for the legs (since they were nothing more than heat duct insulation) and, two, a strong enough power supply that would last! The project took more time than I expected. By now it was 1978 –almost '79. Finally we got a good support for the legs and took it for a test run. *Wonderful. Fantastic.* We were almost done. Still, we needed a power supply other than the wall socket. I asked about a car or motor cycle battery. My Grandpa thought it was a good idea, and that maybe we'd finish it for Christmas! I couldn't wait. Soon, however, my grandfather fell ill and work had to stop. On December 27, 1978, my grandfather, James F. Walker, died. I did not finish the robot. I couldn't. At the time it didn't seem fair to finish it without him. We had started the project together and that's how I wanted to finish it. My mother and I packed away the parts in the attic or basement. Unfortunately most of the parts were damaged or lost during the move to a new home. Only the arms remain.

Now I'm much older, but still a fan of the show. With all the publicity for the new movie fans are coming out of the walls! I have come to a final and much needed healing – to pick up where my grandfather and I left off. I am going to build the robot. I have to. So, if any of you are thinking of it, *do it*. I would be glad to help, or to get all the help I can on my own project. All I know is I am more determined than ever.

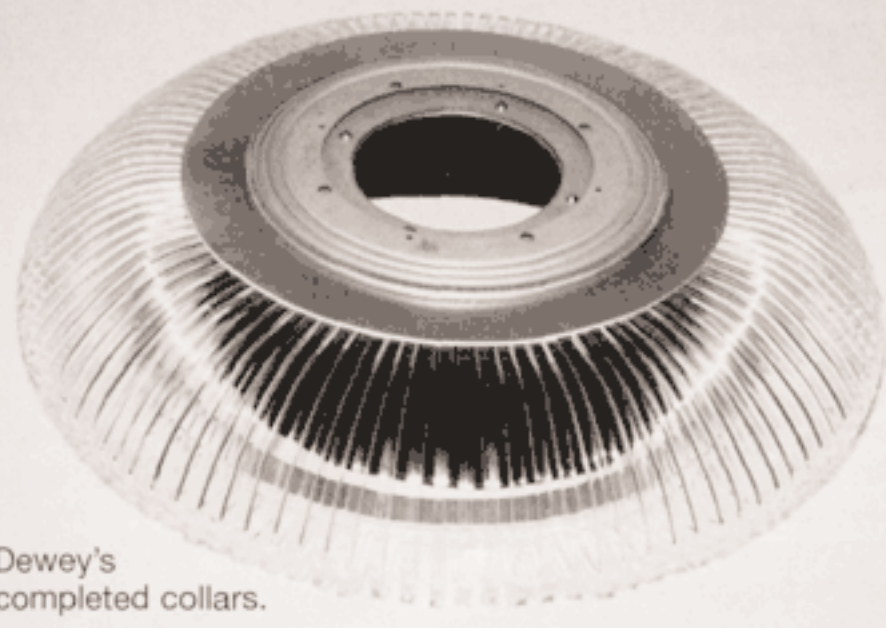
**Christopher Winters**, robot maker.  
*B-9 Robot Builders Club.*



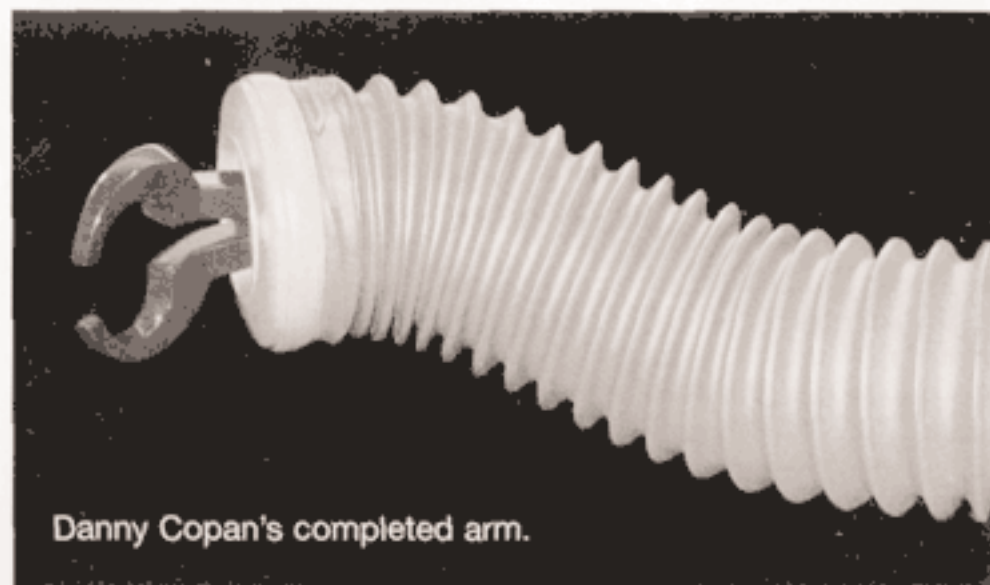
Doug Hine's robot.

through the classified ads in *Toy Shop Magazine*, I came across an ad for a 'full scale *Lost In Space* robot head.' Now there was no way I was about to pass that one up without at least a 'phone call. I excitedly called and a gentleman by the name of Merle Goodall answered and explained that he was having manufactured the plastic bubble head for a full scale *Lost In Space* robot. I found out that this was just the bubble and not the interior, which somewhat

disappointed me. After a lengthy conversation, Merle explained that this was the most difficult part to duplicate for a full scale robot project and the other required parts I could make myself. My modeling skills up to this point consisted of a few model car kits I made back in grade school. This was way over my head! I'm a fairly determined person, so after a lot of thought I figured *why not, I'll give it a try*. So, in nine long months, I had to teach myself everything there

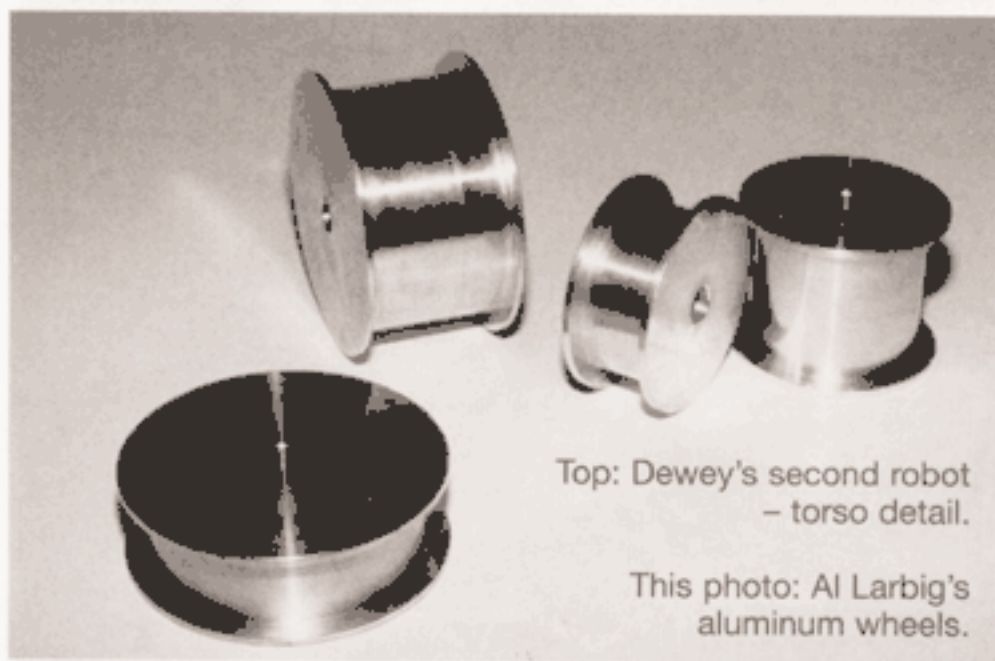


Dewey's completed collars.



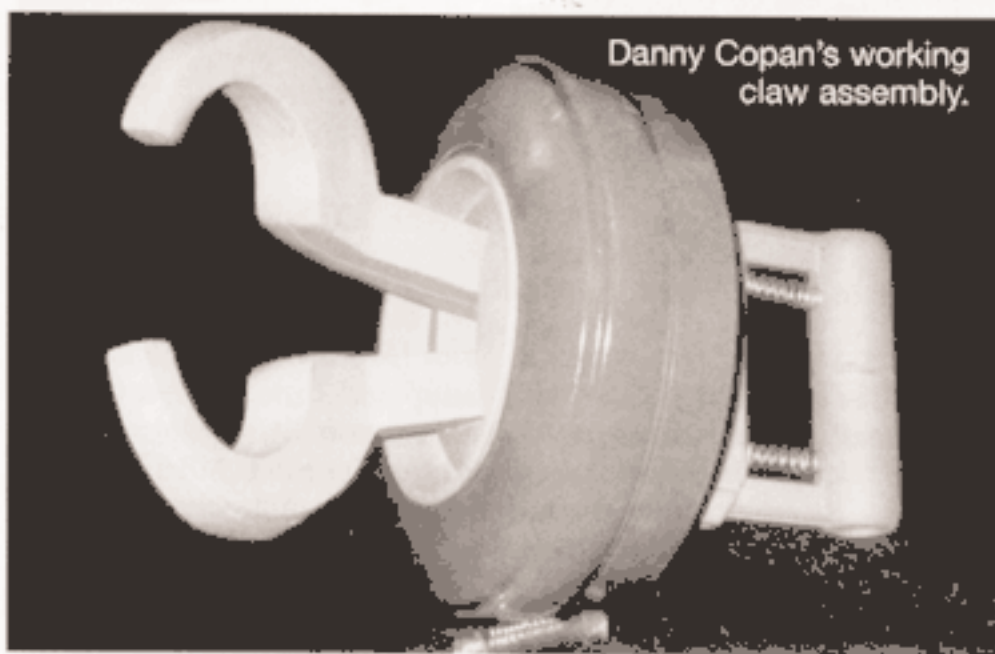
Danny Copan's completed arm.





Top: Dewey's second robot - torso detail.

This photo: Al Larbig's aluminum wheels.



Danny Copan's working claw assembly.

is to know about fiberglass, rubber, plastics, electronics, and mold making. Back in 1993 there were very few resources available to research such a huge project. My basic plans came from a few videos of the show, several photos of the robot, and my sixteen inch tall *Masudaya B-9 robot*.

I started with a wooden frame for the torso, to which I attached sheets of styrene plastic and then on top of the styrene went the fiberglass. I had never worked with fiberglass before, so the thickness ended up being about half an inch, which I later found to be much thicker than was needed. The "brain" and the radar section were also made out of styrene plastic. For the collar section I heat formed acrylic rods and then shaped them in a wooden form I had made.

The tread sections were made from plywood without any blueprints (and, of course, I was wrong on the dimensions). The treads themselves were created from strips of neoprene rubber that were glued together. The wheels were simply cut wooden circles. For the legs I used foam pipe insulation that was coated with latex rubber. The wiring also proved to be quite a challenge. With no experience in electronics - I didn't know the difference between an amp and a volt - I had to learn quickly. The entire project took nine months to complete.

**SF&F:** How did you discover you were not alone in your love of the *robot*, and how did you link up with the other guys on your web site who have made their own 1:1 scale replicas?

## Frank T's Robot. Last time, as you recall...

**W**ho knew that those words would change my life? Like most *B9 builders*, I grew up in the '60s watching *Lost in Space*. While the show was always enjoyable to watch, it was the hardware that really intrigued me. The *Jupiter 2*, *Chariot*, *Laser Guns*, *Space Pod* and all those winky, blinky lights on the ship always got my creative juices flowing. My *Jupiter 2s* were created with shoe boxes and masking tape, as were my *Laser Guns* and *Space Pod*. But there was really one piece of equipment that always fascinated me the most. The *robot*. Being just seven at the time, I always wondered if he was real or imaginary. I even wrote a letter to CBS, and then WNEW channel 5 in New York when the series moved to syndication, to ask for photos or any kind of information on the *B9*. That's when this quest began. For thirty years I had wondered about that *robot*. I built my share of wood and cardboard *robots* during my youth, but none could ever compare to good old *B9*.

Flash forward thirty years. Ironically it was October 16th, 1997, when all of this madness really began to kick in. *Lost in Space* was soon to be a motion picture, the *Sci-Fi channel* was holding *Lost In Space* marathons to commemorate its anniversary. *Lost In Space* specials were popping up everywhere and, suddenly, like magic, it was cool to be a *Lost in Space* fan. Thoughts of building a *B9* were starting up again. But where to find information? Enter cyberspace. I immediately started to scour the net for anything on *Lost in Space* and the *robot*. It wasn't until about December when I found "*Dewey's Latest Robot*" page. Cool! I e-mailed Dewey, and hence started the journey. For some reason I started from the top-down instead of the bottom up as most *B9 builders* have. Dewey helped me with the brain, bubble lifter, radar and collar. I got the bubble from *Planet Plastics*. I assembled the entire head section in about a month. You have to improvise and make a connecting plate to connect the lower portion of the bubble plate to the bubble lifter. If you look at pictures real close, you'll see it dead center on the lower bubble plate. It's black and appears to have four screws in it. Your best source for these kinds of dilemmas: *Home Depot*. You'll have a field day

in that store. *Trust me*. Every time you see something cool, you'll begin thinking "I wonder if I could use this for..." It was around this time that Dewey told me there was a source for torsos. Once he told me about how authentic it was, I had to have it. When it arrived, it was a happy day in New Jersey. Of course, as I looked at it I thought, "How the hell am I going to cut out the voice box and light holes?" The ultimate model kit continued to give lessons in creativity. Anyway, with the help of my dad (he's been in this for as long as I have, helping me build things when I was young) the cutting and drilling went fairly well. I also ordered all the light fixtures, lens caps, bulbs, neon FX generator and sound system. I'm using a *Sony Mini Disk* player for my playback. I've sampled lots of *robot* lines from the TV show (remember, you can't have music in the background when he's speaking!) using my PC, so it was easy to make a disk. You should have been here the night I hooked up the neon to the sound system and put it all in the torso! It was another happy night in NJ.

This project turned out to be more work than I anticipated, but the thought of fulfilling a thirty year old dream became too overwhelming. It's partly my fault. I was so blinded by the vision of a completed *B9 robot* but, fortunately, several trips to *Home Depot* usually solved the daily dilemma, and made all the parts fit in harmony. I had to do research into every facet of this project. I had to study molds and fiberglass to be able to work on the torso and leg sections. Electronics books were needed to complete the inside part of my mechanical friend, and a refresher course in painting was a sure bet. I'm single and live alone, which probably has made this adventure easier. I've heard some of the "disgruntled wife" stories, so I'm kind of lucky in that respect. Let me tell you something, folks, this is one hell of a project, don't let anyone kid you. Be prepared to spend some dough, to have a few sleepless nights and, without a doubt, to do some of the most creative thinking of your lives. But you know something... It's worth it! I still can't believe he's here in my house.

Frank T.



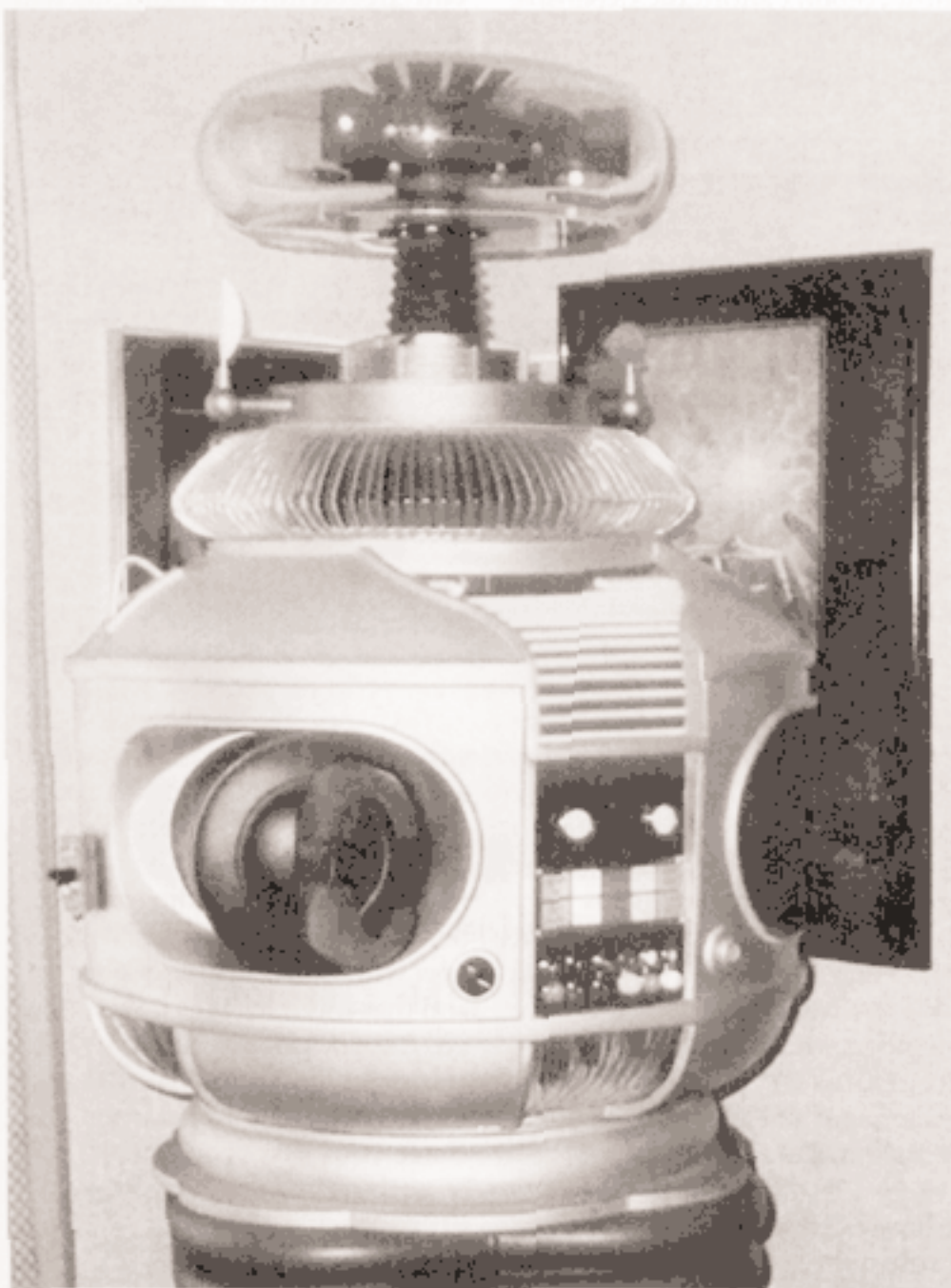
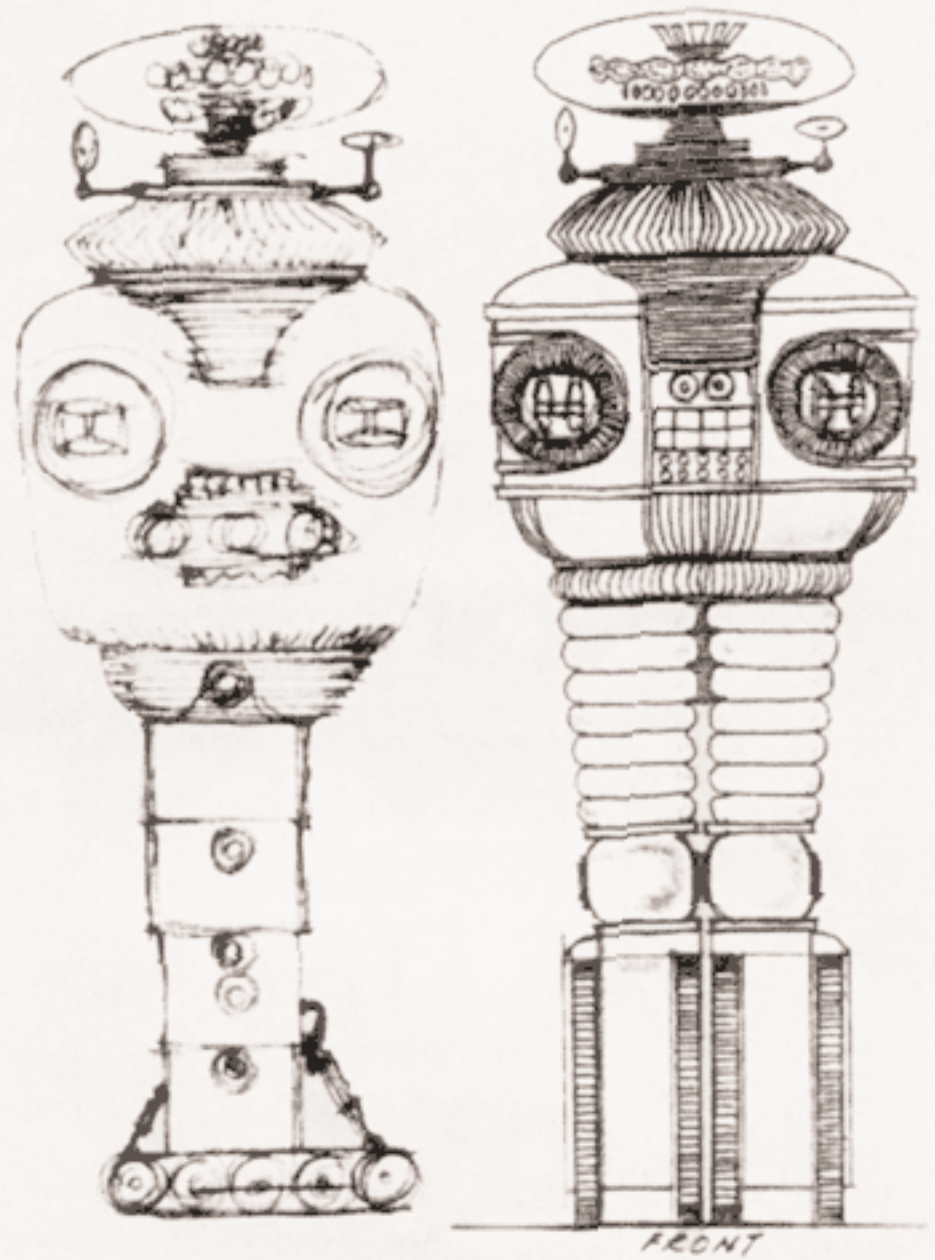
## Budget Robot

The two television shows I remember the most from my youth are **Batman** and **Lost In Space**. My short attention span lengthened considerably every time their ingenious props appeared on the screen. Even though the shows were very "campy", the many crime fighting and space exploring gadgets always fascinated me. *Will Robinson's* companion, the *B-9 robot*, is a special part of my remembrance. It wasn't until many years later that I allowed myself to face the reality that the **Lost In Space robot** was actually a costume. Here I am now, much later, realizing one of the many projects that has constantly been in and out of the planning stages; building the **Lost In Space robot**. The project has proved to be especially challenging in that the resources are limited. There are only a few very helpful folks out there that have completed the same project. I have restored classic cars, jukeboxes, soda machines and gas pumps, but there was

a lot of literature and businesses that made those projects relatively simple. The *robot* is a constant challenge since everything is being engineered on the spot.

My version of the "bubble headed booby" will be remote controlled. I plan for the finished *robot* to be able to move his arms, bubble, waist, radar and sensors, and to talk and roll around. So far I have been able to make everything work to my satisfaction without spending a small fortune. My goal is to build the replica with cost in mind but without sacrificing a lot of quality. Most items are made of wood and plastic with a few pieces of metal here and there. The motors were purchased as surplus units and appear to be working fine. I am really looking forward to seeing the finished product.

Always Lost (In Space),  
Patrick Stanley,  
*B-9 Robot Builders Club.*



Top: Bob Kinoshita's original designs for the robot.  
Above: Frank Terribile's robot (Frank T.).  
Right: Patrick Stanley.





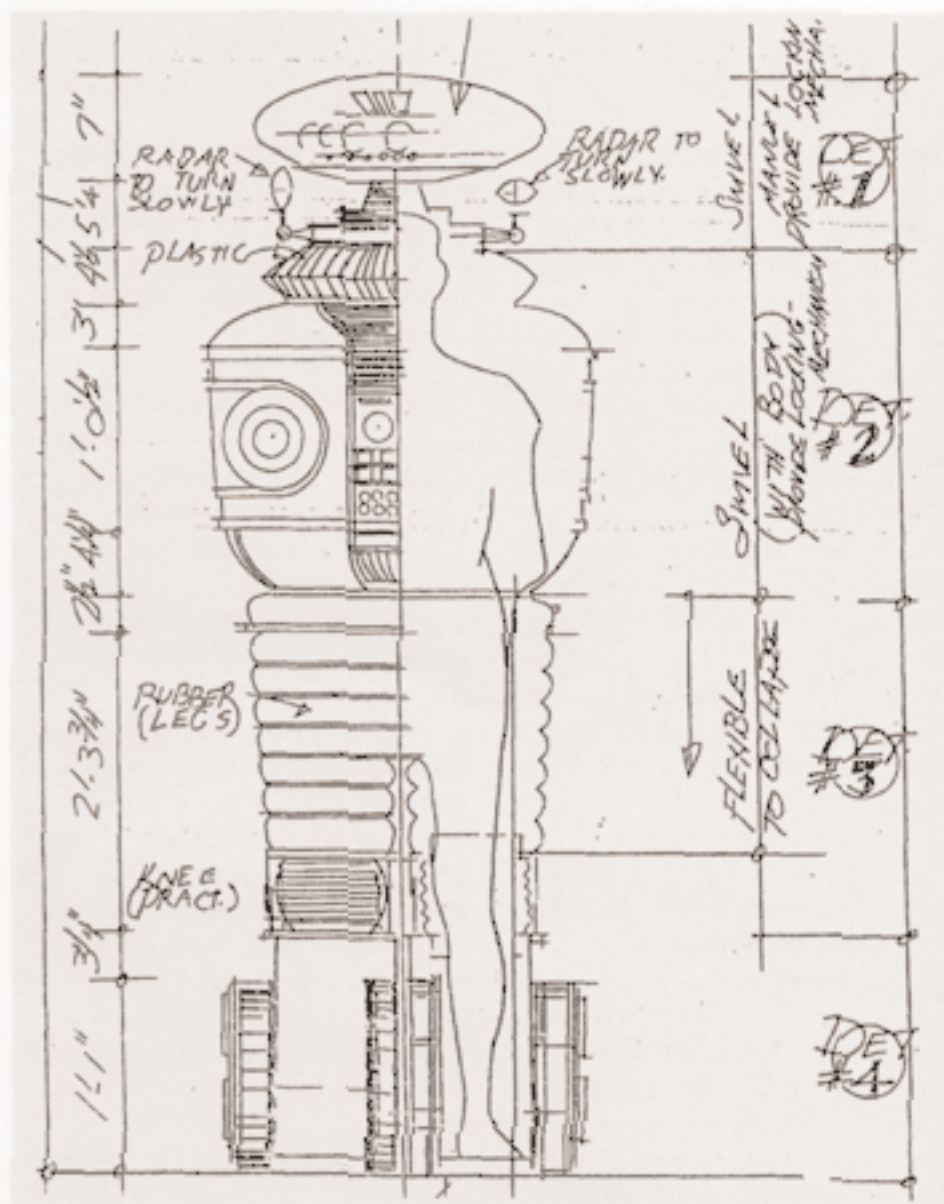
Dewey Howard's second robot.



**Dewey:** A short time after the completion of my *robot* I decided to buy a computer and get connected to the internet. I eventually found my way to the **Lost In Space** news group. I could hardly believe that there was such a thing! ... Other fans who loved the show as much as I did. I posted a picture of my *robot* to the news group and was immediately overwhelmed with email from other excited fans. Most said that the *robot* was their favorite character too. I couldn't believe there were so many others like me. One email informed me that me that my *robot* looked good but could be done much better and accurately. *Oh! Oh! Here we go again.* I talked to this person on the 'phone for quite a while and he told me that there were much more accurate parts available, including torsos cast from the actual studio *robot*. With further investigation I decided it was time to upgrade and revise my *robot*. Once I obtained the actual blueprints for the tread sections and started working on them I found my current *robot's* dimensions were just too far off from the original's to justify a revision. Time to start on *robot #two!* After saving quite a bit of money I started purchasing some of the available parts such as a "real"

torso, another bubble head, torso donut, arms, claws, wheels, neon, and even a power pack. Even with these parts there still was a lot more to do myself to complete the project. This time using the internet as a resource, I could get the parts I still needed to make a much more accurate replica. Some of the improved construction methods included a more accurate collar using tracings off the real *robot*, an aluminum brain, custom-cast rubber treads and bubble lifter and polyurethane rubber-coated legs. This one looked right and was completed in about six months.

I was invited to put some pictures of my *robots* up on one of the busiest **Lost In Space** websites around at the time. As soon as my pages were complete, the email started pouring in and it has not stopped since. I have received hundreds of emails from around the world. The typical fan mail usually would start out with "I don't believe it! I never thought it was possible to build a full size *robot!*" A good number of these fans wanted to know how they could build one for themselves. Through numerous emails back and forth I was able to assist many with the individual parts they were trying to make since



...from the original studio blueprints.

most couldn't afford the expensive parts that were available. The numbers of fans attempting to build their own *robot* kept growing and my email correspondences were getting so numerous I almost couldn't answer them all.

With so many builders now out there I thought it might be a good idea to pool our resources and knowledge into an organized group. I went back through my previous correspondences from others building their own *robot* and asked if they would like to join my newly formed **B-9 Robot Builders Club**. We started with about 30 members when the club was formed back in March (of 1998) and now we have grown to 180 members in five countries around the world. With so many members comes a lot of talent and ingenuity that we all can benefit from. Each member brings something to the group. The membership is very diverse. Our youngest member, who is only 10 years old, wants to build a *robot* with his father. We have members who are engineers, artists, doctors, military personnel, a candy maker, and yes, we do have a few women in the club.

If we need something done there is sure to be someone in the group who will be able to accomplish it. One member is working on a computer-based voice recognition program where the *robot* will understand what

you are saying to it and he will answer you appropriately in the *robot's* voice. Another 13-year-old member is working on a circuit board that will flash the lights in the *robot* so we won't have to use the more expensive self-flashing bulbs. Another makes laser cut steel tread sections that are actually better than those that were on the real *robot*. The possibilities are endless with the great minds we have to work with. Everybody learns from each other. By the time a member gets his or her *robot* completed they have learned such a vast amount of information of all kinds that will assist them in other areas of their lives that have nothing to do with *robots*.

Taking on the challenge to build your own *robot* is fun, educational and rewarding, but most of all it is a good confidence builder. Some of our members joined with practically no experience of building anything before in their life. I made my first *robot* with only a drill and saber saw and that was it as far as power tools go. Anyone can do this if they have the right determination that is required to get the project completed. Once your *robot* is complete there is nothing more rewarding than sitting back and saying "I made that."

The **B-9 robot builders** web site is at: <http://members.xoom.com/b9club/main.htm>