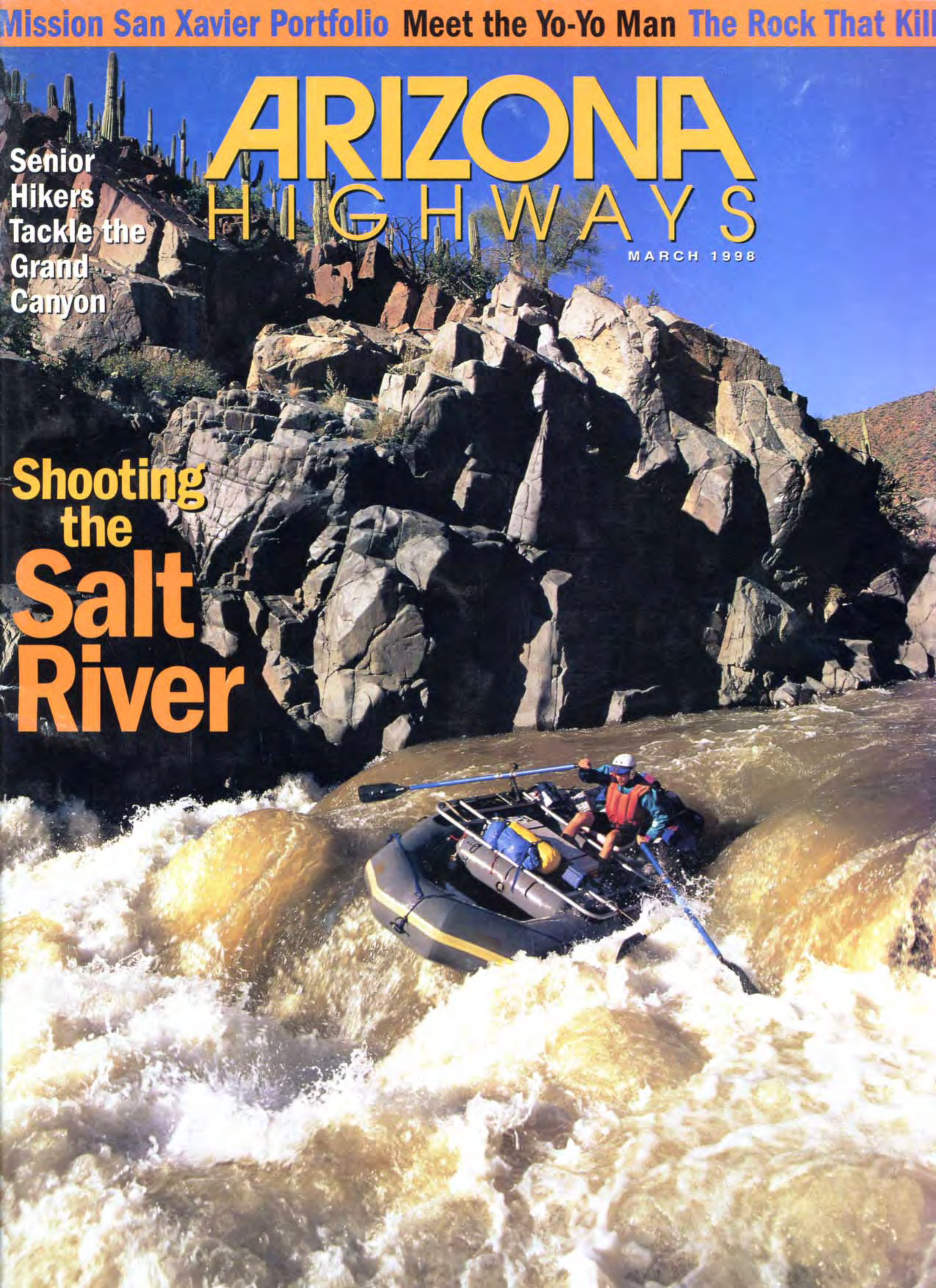


# ARIZONA HIGHWAYS

MARCH 1998

Senior  
Hikers  
Tackle the  
Grand  
Canyon

Shooting  
the  
Salt  
River







# Remember

# yo yo yos?



Well,  
They're  
Still  
Around  
and  
Here's  
Proof

It started so innocently. A trip to Tucson with a couple of kids. We'll down a dog at a Rockies game. Check out the critters at the Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum. See if there's any snow on Mount Lemmon. And learn to yo.

The old obsession is back. Today I will learn to Walk the Dog. I just know it.

Many years ago, I had read an obscure reference in some tourist thing about a company run by a member of the — make that THE — Duncan family. As in Duncan YoYo Company. I hadn't forgotten it.

(LEFT) U.S. National Yo-Yo Champion Yo-Hans (Hans Van Dan Elzen) demonstrates the Two-Handed Loop the Loop for: from left, Ray Trestik, Erick Morley, Matthew Elias, Ryan Quillen, and Ben Slote.

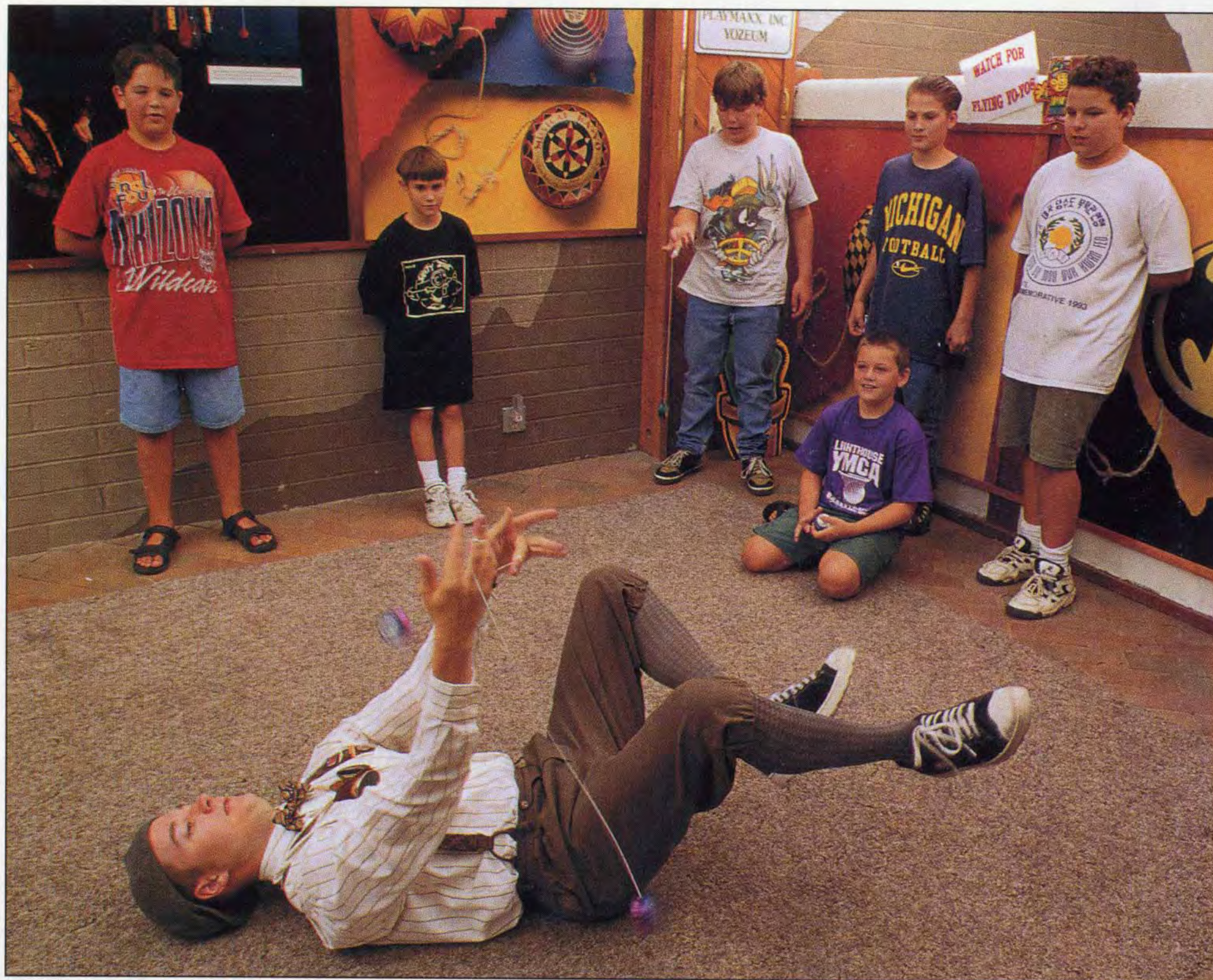
(ABOVE) The Lumar Whistling Yo-Yo was popular in the 1930s.

(ABOVE, RIGHT) Shawn Laetsch starts up *The Motorcycle*.



Text by  
Trudy Thompson Rice

Photographs by  
Jill Reger



(LEFT) Yo-Hans performs for an attentive audience of future yo-yo champions.  
 (BELOW, LEFT) Baby-boomers will remember this Roy Rogers and Trigger yo-yo from the 50s.  
 (BELOW) The Flying Saucer is worked to perfection by Erick Morley.  
 (RIGHT) Angie Miller demonstrates her skill with a yo-yo.  
 (OPPOSITE PAGE, BELOW) Don Duncan shows off the Playmaxx yo-yo collection.

Like many American kids, I had tried to learn the art of yo-yoing on many occasions. Starting in about the third grade, yo-yos would make a splashy appearance every spring, just long enough to suck up some allowance money and create havoc in our personal lives. A professional yo-yo player would come through town, hang out in toy store parking lots, and make it look easy. He'd Walk the Dog. He'd Rock the Baby. He was as much showman as salesman, and in no time flat, kids would be lined up around the block to buy the wondrous toys.

For the next couple of weeks, yo-yos would be everywhere. They'd go to school in our pockets, only to be snuck out for a quick practice and show in the bathroom or cafeteria line, or on the playground. Then they'd slowly but surely disappear, many of them confined to the desk drawers of teachers who confiscated them as contraband (oh, for the days when school contraband was a yo-yo!). The others landed at the bottoms of toy boxes like mine, their strings hopelessly tangled around Barbie or Mr. Potato Head.

Actually, more than once I reclaimed my Duncan Yo-Yo from the depths of the toy box because Mr. Potato Head drew some rather unseemly attention to himself by rotting and sending a spectacularly bad odor throughout the house. Before some toy-making genius replaced real potatoes with plastic ones, playing with Mr. Potato Head had an odiferous downside that affected households across the nation.

About once a week, I'd dig to the bottom of the toy box on Mom's orders (she came to recognize Mr. Potato Head's distinctive stench after the first time he lay, neglected

and rotting, under the couch), find the discarded yo-yo, and bring it back to life by untangling it and rewinding the string. Sure that I could eventually learn to Walk the Dog, I'd work the yo-yo patiently for about three minutes then decide that Barbie needed a new hair-do.

But I digress. I'm in Tucson some 35 years later with two kids in tow, and they are not into yo-yoing. They want video games. They want pizza. They want anything but an afternoon learning about yo-yo history. Until they meet Don Duncan.

Mr. Duncan is quiet, unassuming, and

- There are yo-yos that look like Sputniks.**
- Yo-yos that light up.**
- Yo-yos that make noises.**
- Wooden yo-yos.**
- Plastic yo-yos.**
- Sterling silver yo-yos.**



always has a ProYo or two in his pocket. And on his desk. And in his desk. And under his desk. And in his car.

"I won't buy a car unless it has a place to stow a ProYo," he says to a visitor he transports to lunch. Demonstrating his point at a red light, he reaches into a cranny in the door and pulls out one of his expertly engineered creations, which he plays until the stoplight changes. He is that kind of individual.

Mr. Duncan is wearing a sweater and looks like Father Knows Best in a bola tie. He's quiet (did I say that?) and claims he



can't really play the yo-yo, but he'll show me what he knows. First there's the Circle of Danger that extends the length of the yo-yo string, plus the length of the yo-yoer's arm. Let's just say that his office isn't large enough to accommodate my Circle of Danger. After my yo-yo narrowly misses the screen of his computer as I try to Walk the Dog, we move to the parking lot for more lessons.

The kids forget the pizza and the video games. The old yo-yoing magic has touched yet another generation. The little guy's string needs to be shortened, and Mr. Duncan shows us how to do that. The nine-year-old niece is assured that yo-yoing is something girls are really good at, something this 43 year old appreciates because when I was nine, girls weren't told we were good at much of anything. In no time, the kids are Walking the Dog.

Watching Mr. Duncan (it's unsettling to



call this man Don — it would be like calling Mr. Rogers “Fred”) greet visitors is a cultural experience. He’s playing a yo-yo absentmindedly. He answers questions patiently and listens like he really cares to everybody’s yo-yo stories. He fields phone calls and good-naturedly hassles his staff. They tell a visitor that working for Mr. Duncan (they do it, too) is like working for your best friend and your dad at the same

time. They’ve been with him for years, and they know and love this collection of yo-yo memorabilia.

Walking through the displays, which moved last November to Chico, California, for a two-year stint, is like strolling through the ’50s, ’60s, and early ’70s. There are yo-yos that look like Sputniks. Yo-yos that light up. Yo-yos that make noises. Wooden yo-yos. Plastic yo-yos. Sterling silver yo-yos made by Tiffany’s. Yo-yos promoting all kinds of stuff.

Photos show the yo-yo factories cranking out the toys that found their way to every school yard and toy box in America. Yellowed newspaper clippings, letters, and memos lead visitors through the history of the yo-yo in America, where marketing genius Don Duncan (our host’s father) turned an odd toy from the Philippines into an American icon.

“Dad knew what he was doing,” says Mr. Duncan, a master of understatement. “He knew the key to selling yo-yos was creating a market for them, and the way he did that was to send expert players all over the country. He set the stage for them by running ads in local papers and getting the kids excited about upcoming contests. By the time the yo-yo guys hit town, the kids

had that allowance money saved up and were ready to make the big purchase.”

Many of the early Duncan Yo-Yo demonstrators were Filipino, bringing their skills from the Philippines. The senior Don Duncan discovered the simple wooden toys in the late ’20s, when he saw Filipinos playing the yo-yo in the lobby of a San Francisco hotel. “He recognized the marketing and sales potential and put his imagination and a lot of hard work into making yo-yos popular in the United States,” says his son and keeper of the Duncan family yo-yo memorabilia.

Mr. Duncan takes one of his ProYos apart, showing visitors how they work.

His new yo-yos are made by Playmaxx, a Tucson manufacturer Don Duncan founded and co-owns. Why not Duncan? The Duncan family sold the first company in 1965 and then Don Duncan re-entered the business in 1980, forming the company called Playmaxx and marketing a yo-yo under the brand name ProYo.

ProYos are designed by Don Duncan right down to their little wooden axles.

“The wooden axle and the cotton string are key to a yo-yo that plays well,” says Mr. Duncan, pulling out a box of each kind to show the kids. “Plastic axles and nylon string don’t have the right feel, and the result is that you get frustrated and don’t have as much fun.”

Playmaxx makes ProYos for a variety of purposes. Today they make some for a food company to use as giveaway premiums — Ad-Yos, they call them. Tomorrow they may assemble a few for “YoYo Man” Tom Smothers, the comedian, who won’t take anything but a Playmaxx ProYo onto the nightclub or TV stage. Smothers came to Tucson at Duncan’s invitation in 1996 to headline the Desert Yo-Yo Classic Tournament, an occasional event hosted by Playmaxx.

The kids are nosing around in the exhibits again, and the friendly tour director is telling them about the yo-yo shaped like a cheeseburger. They’re wondering if she could turn out the lights and they could see if any of them glow in the dark. She’s considering it.

As for me? I’m trying to Walk the Dog. Again. 🐕



*Trudy Thompson Rice lives in Phoenix with her husband and son, both of whom can now Walk the Dog. She’s still trying. Phoenix-based Jill Reger, who says she is a klutz by nature, emerged from the photo shoot unscathed by flying yo-yos, though one of her camera lenses is still trembling from a close call.*