

The Strange Tales of Maxwell Zoelegger

Stories from the Cactus Shade Mobile Home Community

By: Joseph Rollins

Dr. Maxwell Zoelegger arrived at the Cactus Shade Mobile Home Community in an unusual way. People don't often move to this barren, dusty dot on a map by choice. Some grow up here, later returning for financial support or when they run out of places to go. That's not saying much, though, considering the standard of living for the community hovers three notches below the poverty line.

The manner of his arrival alone caused a small gossip storm. He paid cash for his mobile home and purchased ownership of his space outright. That kind of money was not something other residents of Cactus Shade could produce.

The day Dr. Zoelegger moved in, a moving truck arrived filled with tables and work benches of all shapes and sizes. Dozens of boxes were unloaded and carried into the house. Every box was labeled 'Fragile' in large print. The neighborhood kids kept an intense watch over the proceedings, verbally documenting everything.

The day after the doctor moved in, he became acquainted with the main group of neighborhood boys. They wasted no time shifting their daily football game half a block from its usual location, so the playing field crossed through Dr. Zoelegger's front yard. Starting at 7am to

avoid the summertime desert sun, the boys picked sides and got started. Typically, their games were pretty aggressive - officially two-hand-touch, but full contact occurred on most plays. Thirty minutes into the game, a major collision occurred between two of the larger boys and the front of Dr. Zoelegger's trailer. A window screen hit the ground as the dwelling shook with force.

Silence radiated from the doctor's house for a full minute before the front door was thrown open, the doctor scanning the terrain, wild-eyed and frantic. He wore a thick leather apron that reached down to his feet, with leather gloves climbing from his fingers up to his elbows. Strapped across his forehead was the oddest pair of brass, circular goggles the boys had ever seen.

The boys had congregated across the dusty road, 50 feet away so they could observe the results while deflecting any possible assaults on their game. They were used to inconsistent, even outright unpredictable behavior from grownups and understood how to take a defensive posture.

The doctor assessed the situation in a few moments. The boys, being astute observers of adults, saw his look of panic give way to relief, followed quickly by worry. After another moment of contemplation, Dr. Zoelegger slowly removed his goggles, apron, and gloves, placing them just inside the doorway. He strode over to the boys.

"Hi boys" he said, addressing the group. Fifteen blank expressions stared back.

"I understand that accidents happen when playing ball. I just need to make sure no more happen that involve my home."

The eldest boy in the group, being the default leader against a full-frontal adult assault, spoke, "We didn't do anything."

“Ah,” said the doctor. “Well, I’m not looking to get anyone in trouble just for playing ball. You see, I have a lot of very sensitive scientific equipment in my house; glass tubes, chemical compounds, stuff like that. I’m working in there, experimenting. Inventing is my job, see, and I only need to ensure that my place doesn’t get disturbed again.”

Again the biggest boy spoke for the group, “We were just standing here when you came out.”

Dr. Zoelegger is a man of unparalleled intelligence. Therefore he is lacking in most basic social skills, as well as possessing a stark deficiency in common sense. But while adult social protocol perplexed him, the logic of children was easy to grasp.

“I’ll make you a deal. I saw an ice cream truck drive through here yesterday afternoon. Every day you boys protect my house, and no one bangs into it, I’ll buy each of you an ice cream. Just knock on my front door when the truck comes.”

At this the demeanor of a few of the boys shifted. The potential threat may actually be a friend. The other boys, including the group spokesman, maintained their poker face.

The response was as expected, “OK, we’ll watch your house and knock on your door this afternoon.”

Dr. Zoelegger saw no reason to attempt any further polite, needless chit-chat. He knew it was unnecessary and unwanted by the boys. He nodded, spun on his heels, and walked back to his trailer.

Dr. Zoelegger spent the day studying a table covered in strange contraptions. They were predominately comprised of copper or stainless. A few were brass. Dials and diodes and tiny, flickering lights, and small screens were mounted on some. There were glass tubes and beakers with multi-colored liquids coursing through them. Four tools with mechanical limbs and multiple joints were perched on each corner; brass octopuses bolted to the thick wooden table.

The doctor mumbled to himself while working over his equipment. He replayed his time spent under the thumb of the federal government. They facilitated his education - the best money can buy. But in the end, the price was too high. The agency had been obsessed with weapons development; using science to dominate the globe, under the banner of making it safer.

Shortly after four o'clock, a gentle yet assertive rapping on the front door roused the doctor before his lonely diatribe shifted into high gear. He looked up at the over-sized analog wall clock and noted the time in his journal.

Dr. Zoelegger removed his protective clothing and goggles, answering the door in his jeans and long-sleeve shirt. Sweat drenched his brow despite the blasting air conditioner. In front of him was the young man who spoke for the group that morning. Flanking him on both sides were two boys nearly the same size, there for support in case the doctor rescinded on their deal. Standing about 20 feet behind was a pack of children twice the size as the group from the morning, including six young girls, all with disheveled braids and dusty clothing.

"The ice cream truck is here," said the spokesman, sounding more hesitant than earlier as he shifted from a defensive conversation to one where he hoped to gain something.

"I see," replied the doctor. "How many of you are there?"

"Twenty-two."

"And how much does each ice cream cost?"

“One dollar exactly.”

Dr. Zoelegger reached into his front pocket and removed a wad of small bills. He counted out twenty-two dollars and handed it to him. The boy muttered a thank you and turned with a triumphant grin to face the other kids.

As the doctor closed the door to return to his work, one of the boys on the porch got a long look at the contraptions and gadgets strewn across the heavy wooden table nearest the door. Dr. Zoelegger smiled to himself as the boy’s jaw dropped.

“Maybe sometime I can show you boys what I do in here,” he offered.

After closing the door, the doctor returned to his thoughts. He had expected to spend about twenty dollars a day on the deal he struck, but the doctor anticipated the boys exaggerating the price for each ice cream. The extra money may be hoarded by the biggest kids or spent on more than one ice cream per child. He had not expected the kids to show such a strong sense of community by getting ice cream purchased directly for more kids. This act of benevolent deceit caused Dr. Zoelegger’s heart to swell. A long time had passed since the brilliant scientist trusted in the goodness of the human race.

Over their ice cream, the kids talked like kids do. The young man who saw Dr. Zoelegger’s laboratory relayed what he saw to the others. The children were mesmerized and asked a lot of questions. It was agreed that the next day, when the ice cream truck came, the same three boys would knock on Dr. Zoelegger’s door and request payment. Then the three of them would ask for a tour of the doctor’s house.

The boys played football the next morning at the opposite end of the park from Dr. Zoelegger. Four girls who benefited from the ice cream deal kept an eye on the newcomer, skipping rope in front of the doctor's house. The whole coordinated affair seemed innocent; however, a shout from one of the girls would bring fifteen kids running, ready to defend their ice cream benefactor.

After four that afternoon, the expected knock came on Dr. Zoelegger's door; twenty-four dollars this time. The doctor smirked why doling out the funds. After the group spokesman handed the cash to the crowd behind him, he turned back to address the doctor.

"We were hoping, sir, if it's not too much trouble, if we could see your place. The things on the big table inside your door - what are they?" The boys on either side of the spokesman caught their breath, awaiting an answer before the question was complete.

Dr. Zoelegger gave the boys a crooked smile, "OK, come on in. I would be happy to show off what I do. By any chance, are any of you interested in science?"

The three boys visibly relaxed together. "The three of us did really good in science class last year. We all got C's. But not everyone did so good. Of course, there's the Johnson twins. They get A's in everything without even trying."

"Oh," replied the doctor. Not the response he expected. Regardless, the doctor ushered the boys in and began showing off the contraptions on the wooden table. As a reflex reaction, Dr. Zoelegger dove into a graduate-level physics and chemistry lecture. The boys faded out of the conversation but tried to fake interest so the adult remained unaware of their status. Their eyes began to roam around the inside of the mobile home. All three jaws dropped and they could no longer feign interest in the doctor's speech.

The living room walls had five large chalk boards mounted on them; their surfaces covered in letters and numbers and scribbles that were incomprehensible to the boys. The living and dining rooms themselves were littered with tables similar to the one by the front door. Thick, scarred wood covered in gadgets. Brass and copper contraptions made whirling and spinning sounds. The polished gold metal was a stark contrast to the smaller, distorted stainless steel and wrought iron gizmos. Hoses ran from the kitchen to a pair of tables in the dining room. Rather than the normal collection of abnormal objects on the other tables, these tables had upright glass tubes and beakers, some connected with pieces of rubber hose or horizontal glass plumbing. Each was filled with bubbling liquids of every color. Some contained thick, swirling gases resembling white steam, a couple had a blackish-red smoke rising from the beakers, then dropping down and clinging to the table. Underneath these two tables the boys recognized blocks of dry ice from their adventures sliding down a nearby hillside.

The doctor noticed the boys staring slack jawed at his make-shift laboratory. Due to his unique ignorance of social queues and protocols, he started lecturing louder to regain their attention. After the doctor's second mid-sentence sarcastic quip was ignored, the eldest boy interrupted.

“What is it you do in here exactly?”

“I am a scientist and an inventor. Thanks to the government, I hold three doctorates in science and applied engineering principles.”

The three boys let out a choreographed grunt of approval. “This stuff is really weird. What are you inventing, anyway?”

The doctor was caught off guard by the question, secretly cherishing their direct nature and wishing adults functioned in a manner remotely comparable.

“Well, see, after college I worked for the government,” mumbled Dr. Zoelegger. “They were only interested in me using my talents to produce weapons. I was actually very good at designing new and better ways to destroy things.

“But I hated every minute of it.” The doctor visibly livened up, standing up tall and speaking clearer. “Eventually I began working on the project you see before you. They wanted me to weaponize it and I refused. They used persuasive methods of coercion, but I held my ground. Eventually I fled the facility and my home, ending up here, trying to finish my project.”

“But what are you making?” asked the smallest boy.

Losing control of the conversation, the doctor said, “Right, well, I actually am trying to solve a problem that plagues mankind. See, I’m attempting to build a Replicator device to create food out of thin air. I know the name is a bit of a rip-off, but I assure you the actual devise will be the most treasured invention humanity has ever known. It will take an object, maybe a rock, a piece of trash, or even the air itself, and rearrange the molecules into food. Or water, if that is what is needed.”

Despite Dr. Zoelegger’s long-winded speech, the boys perked up at this.

“So if I had one of these machines, then I wouldn’t have to get ice cream money from you. I could make my own ice cream any time I wanted it?” asked the smallest boy.

“No,” replied the eldest boy. “This is for the starving kids in China my grandma always talks about. So they can have enough to eat.”

Speaking for the first time, the middle child said: “My mom says the starving kids are in Africa. Dr. Z, who is this machine for? Is it for kids like us to have ice cream, is it for starving kids in Africa, or starving kids in China?”

The doctor was amused by the exchange, particularly at being referred to as ‘Dr. Z.’ He cleared his throat, “There are kids here in Cactus Shade that don’t get enough to eat every day.”

“But that’s my point,” said the middle boy. “Here, we have you to buy us ice cream. Mom says in Africa there is no one with enough money to buy ice cream.”

Probably not what his mom said, thought the doctor.

The boy continued: “If a bunch of kids are hungry, all they need is a nice adult with enough money to buy them stuff.”

“Does this machine make money out of thin air so people can buy whatever food they want?”

Dr. Zoelegger wisely decided against pointing out their flawed logic, instead suggesting they go find their friends and retrieve their own ice creams before they melted. The boys jumped at the suggestion.

After they left, the doctor returned to work, but could not keep his mind off the bits and pieces of the conversation. For year, he had been frustrated with the approach of those tasked with ensuring the general welfare of the people. Deadly force was their most effective tool, saying it was the fault of other nations. But other nations said the same, leaving the doctor feeling like a pawn in a global Mexican standoff.

Dr. Zoelegger always assumed this was because humanity was in its infancy, destined to evolve past violence, power, hatred, wealth. In his short life he became jaded that evolution was

generations away, but the kid's altruistic ignorance roused inexplicable feelings for the future. The young already possess the morals needed to make the evolutionary leap forward.

For a long time he believed his role in humanity's evolution was to stay out of the way and not contribute by developing weapons for the government. Now he allowed himself to wonder if perhaps he was the catalyst needed; perhaps the time was now, here, with him. Perhaps humanity was on the brink, a moment frozen in time to either change or suffer our own destruction.

Common sense should have shown Dr. Zoelegger what would happen next. The three boys gave the other children a vivid description of the inside of doctor's home. They also discussed the goals of the doctor with other kids. A machine to make ice cream whenever they wanted went over particularly well with the littlest kids.

A few children told their parents about Dr. Zoelegger's laboratory. Later that evening, alarmed adults congregated on front porches. Conversations lasted into the evening and were filled with assumptions and harsh judgments. More than one adult reached the conclusion that Cactus Shade's newest resident must be manufacturing methamphetamine.

The next couple weeks passed relatively uneventful. The boys played football. The neighborhood children continued to get ice cream every afternoon. The adults gossiped in hushed tones about the new meth maker.

Dr. Zoelegger worked away diligently in his home. He was oblivious to the rambling nonsense of his neighbors even after a couple of them tried unsuccessfully to purchase narcotics from the confused doctor. Then at the end of the second week, the doctor made a mistake that dramatically shifted events in Cactus Shade Park.

Dr. Zoelegger poured over his gadgets and equations. He decided to mix two liquid compounds and apply an energy pulse from a humming copper contraption. The liquids instantly began vomiting a bright orange smoke. The doctor realized his mistake and dove towards the nearest fire extinguisher. Being an experience chemist, his laboratory was arranged so he was never more than a few feet from an extinguisher. The doctor grabbed it, pulled the pin and spun on his heels towards the smoking beaker just as it exploded.

The explosion wasn't particularly violent, but it was messy. Bright orange goo blanketed the walls and the air in the trailer was thick with smoke. Dr. Zoelegger opened the nearest windows and stumbled out the back door. A dozen neighbors already crowded around the front of his home, gawking. The explosion produced a popping noise, heard by everyone within a quarter mile radius. After the pop, orange smoke poured from the open windows. The smoke traveled sideways along the ground, stretching a hundred feet from each open window within a couple minutes.

The doctor fell out the back door, covered in orange goo. He quickly shed his long leather apron, gloves, and goggles, then continued to shed his clothing until he stood in front of his neighbors completely naked.

Suddenly aware of everyone around him, Dr. Zoelegger looked up at his neighbors. The crowd was rapidly swelling.

One woman spoke into a cell phone: "Now he's completely nude. Like I said, I heard he's crazy and makes meth like that guy in 'Breaking Bad'. I'm not one to gossip, though, so I didn't concern myself with his affairs since he kept to himself and my kids stopped asking me

for an afternoon snack. The smoke is orange and smells like toilet bowl cleaner. Just hurry up and get here, OK?”

Dr. Zoelegger sat down on a rock in front of his house. “I have clean clothes in a plastic safety bag inside, but it will be an hour before I can enter without vomiting excessively.”

The crowd continued to stand and stare at the naked scientist for several minutes. The only definitive action amongst the individuals was the growth of the crowd. The mob was a particularly spineless mob; no one even yelled to the doctor about what he was doing or if he was hurt. This was the scene when the first police car came rolling up, followed immediately by a fire truck.

The fire department didn't know what to do about the long tentacles of orange smoke stretching out from the mobile home. The man in charge knew this was not an accident caused by cooking methamphetamines and feared the naked man in front of him was creating something even more deadly. He spoke on the phone at length with a federal hazardous materials team, who promised a qualified team would arrive imminently.

One of the more seasoned veterans on the force returned to his patrol car and removed a full length, pink robe and fuzzy slippers from his trunk. He walked back over to the still naked doctor, shoving them into his arms.

“These are typically for domestic abuse victims. Put them on,” he grumbled.

The police cornered Dr. Zoelegger, grilling him about his operations. They were certain he was up to something they could arrest him for, but no one seemed to agree what for. Some of

the younger officers were giddy, anticipating the story they would retell about their first major bust.

Twenty minutes after the first officer arrived, a black sedan with windows tinted darker than the paint job pulled up. To men sporting aviator sunglasses and identical, drab black suits with white shirts and black ties emerged and began speaking with the officer in charge. Still seated on the rock in front of his dwelling, Dr. Zoelegger knew the CIA had found him.

All of a sudden, to his left came a familiar voice, “Dr. Z, do you need help?”

“Yes,” the doctor replied in a hoarse whisper. “Can you get me out of here?”

“Yeah. You need to run directly behind where you’re sitting, cross through the Fletcher’s front yard, over the fence and across the Johnson’s backyard. Hop their back fence and you’re out of the park and in the desert. Start walking; Cactus Needles Trailer Park is about three hours away.”

Dr. Zoelegger was momentarily speechless. The thought of starting over invoked a physical cringe from the doctor as he perched atop the rock. A quick glance at the agents crossing the road and heading towards him quickly made up his mind.

“OK, let’s go,” he said.

Six bigger kids wandered out from the bushes behind the doctor and stood nonchalantly between the CIA agents and the doctor. Another eight smaller kids, working in pairs, walked directly up to different police officers and began talking at them. The distraction in full effect, someone stepped in front of the doctor and shoved him off his rock and into the bushes behind him. Initially startled at the swift, effective action of the kids, Dr. Zoelegger regained his composure, running through the Fletcher’s front yard and over the fence into the Johnson’s backyard, losing his pink robe on an errant nail. Finally he hopped the perimeter fence encircling

Cactus Shade and took off loping across the desert, full of hope and fear, naked as the day he was born except for his fuzzy slippers.
