

TIME

Thanksgiving 2001

Next week American families will set their tables, count their blessings and discover how their lives have changed—and how they haven't. Pull up a chair...

By Nancy Gibbs



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where it's at

A machine code-named Ginger was all the buzz last January. And now?

BY AMANDA BOWER

WHAT IS "IT"? FOR A WEEK OR SO LAST JANUARY, that was the question on everybody's lips. After the Harvard Business School Press advanced \$250,000 for a book about It—a top-secret project under development by one of the most accomplished inventors in the U.S.—reams of newsprint were devoted to speculation about what It might be.

The recipient of the advance, author Steve Kemper, gushed in his book proposal that It—code-named Ginger—would revolutionize personal transportation, urban design and our daily lives. Apple Computer CEO Steve Jobs said It could be bigger than the PC. Everyone had a different theory: Ginger was cold fusion, a flying car, a whole lot of hot air.

So what is It? Ten months later, we still don't know for sure, and no one who does is talking, least of all inventor Dean Kamen, 49. The only public utterance from the denim-clad millionaire was an early statement that "the leaked proposal quoted several prominent technology leaders out of context, without their doubts, risks and maybes included." (He also reportedly cut off all contact with Kemper, although Kemper has denied this.) The project was promising, Kamen said, but the expectations generated by the press were "beyond whimsical."

Kamen, whose invention credits include a portable drug-infusion pump, a compact dialysis machine and a wheelchair that can climb stairs, has refused to say another word on the subject. When pressed recently by a persistent journalist, he took her by the shoulders and asked, "What part of 'I'm not going to talk about this' don't you understand?"

The best clue to Kamen's intentions may be the patent application he filed in late 2000 for a series of self-balancing "personal mobility vehicles." It's known that Kamen and his colleagues have been working for years on a clean, sealed-combustion Stirling engine that could run on any fuel, including hydrogen. The prevailing theory is that Ginger would combine Stirling technology with a stabilizing system pioneered in Kamen's stair-climbing wheelchair. (The wheelchair's code name, by the way, was Fred. Get it? Fred and Ginger.) The newest clues are the names of two websites registered by Kamen-controlled companies: mystirlingscooter.com and flywheels.com. ■



Inventor Kamen filed a U.S. patent with several rough sketches, including this scooter-like design



MARCUS HANSCHEN — FUSEPROJECT (3)

The hydrogen-powered Scoot, below, folds neatly in half and can be slung over the shoulder



» SCOOT OVER

While the world waits for Ginger, which may or may not be a hydrogen-powered scooter (see next page), two San Francisco designers have built one of their own—or at least a prototype. The elegant carbon-fiber-and-aluminum Scoot combines a wide, scooped-out footrest with rugged, over-size wheels. Scoot folds in half so that the tires and grimy underside are neatly tucked away. And with a hydrogen fuel-cell engine, you will leave the slackers in the dust.

- ◆ **INVENTORS** Johan Liden and Yves Behar, Fuse Project
- ◆ **AVAILABILITY** In 2003, for \$500 to \$800
- ◆ **TO LEARN MORE** Visit fuseproject.com

