

A Cabinet of Curiosities, Along with Divers Speculations*

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CARRY A. NATION (the spelling she is said to have preferred) married her husband Andrew, I suspect, for the name's sake. She took the mission it seemed to spell out to her seriously, and stravaiged through the country with her hatchet, smashing up glassware and bottles and mahogany bars that would today make an antique collector green with avarice. She also advocated "signing the pledge," a promise of total abstinence forever. Many pledges are unrealistic, going as they do against the basic weaknesses of mankind. Some years ago, I suggested there be an end for good and all to two categories of onomastic articles: (1) "What's in a Name?" and (2) "Fun and Games with the Phone Book." What follows may seem to come perilously close to the latter, but—word of honor—no phone book has been cracked for the sake of this collection.

The odd names, the incongruous ones, the bizarre ones, always come in for their share of attention. Nearly everyone who notices them has a private collection of the likes of Fernando Alphonse Schultz, Bonita Schmelzkopf, Bonnie Belle Severson, and Llewellyn Pfannkuchen, to name some of my own; and it may be surprising to realize that one can lead a normal and happy life despite the name. Names given for political, military, sometimes even literary heroes abound. Twin boys born in Montague, Mass. in 1898 were named Dewey and Sampson, and there must now be any number of Woodrow Wilson _____s in middle age. My Uncle George, born February 22, was named inevitably; but an aunt on the other side was born May 10, 1910, when Halley's Comet flashed across the skies over Cottage Grove, Wisconsin, and you would have to have known my grandmother to understand why the baby was named Marian Meteor. (Still, Clarabelle Comet would have been worse.) Consider the sources of names, some of which turn out to be bizarre in combinations, some that grow devastatingly common: Gene Austin, the crooner before Bing Crosby, made a hit record in the

* Fran Utley was a genial man who enjoyed life. Dr. Sam'l Johnson would most surely have called him "clubbable." He was happy and successful and productive in his career because he took things just seriously enough; he got his facts right and he expected others to do likewise, but pedantry simply was not in him. And so, in his memory, some unprogrammatically but perhaps diverting remarks on a subject he relished.

twenties called *Ramona*; this, combined with the popular novel by Helen Hunt Jackson contributed *Ramona Krueger* and *Ramona Uphoff* to my chalk-squeak collection. But where is the explanation for the Jennifer explosion of the past ten years? Jennifer WHO?

Styles and the temper of the times are unquestionably factors in naming patterns, and since this is a non-statistical account, the observations should be taken as such and nothing more.

Tombstone evidence: A roamer of New England country graveyards notes some general patterns: distinctively Puritan names such as Thankful(l), Mercy (Marcy), Submit, Freeloove, Experience, and Tamesin are early and tend to appear on stones with the death's head or the cadaverous angel. They are relatively rare among males. Preserved and Prosper (short for Prosper-thy-works) are occasional.

Eighteenth-century names, often with angels, lean heavily on the Old Testament: Acsah, Asenath, Zenobiah, Jemima; Elijah, Elihu, Benoni, Judah, Levi. Then comes the Classical Revival, less accurately called the Greek Revival. Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian columns appear even in rural and small-town architecture; the slate (and now, increasingly, marble) tombstones are incised with weeping willows and pseudo-Grecian urns. As the nineteenth century advances, the names on the stones begin to change to Tryphena, Lavinia, Julia, Phoebe, Drusilla; Lucius, Cassius, Apollos, Pliny, Ulysses. Especially notable are Dr. Polycarpus Cushman (Bernardston, Mass.) and Mr. Socrates Wild (Leyden, Mass.). And then there are compromises like Hannah Sophia Ripley Hemenway, who enjoyed the best of both worlds.

The name and its wearer (or bearer):

In January of 1884, a neighbor of Charles Hemenway of North Leverett, Mass. complimented him on the birth of a daughter and enquired as to her name. "Ruby Marion," was the reply. "You're not naming her Hepsabeth after your mother?" came the reproof. "I loved my mother," said Charles Hemenway, "but I love my daughter too, and I wouldn't wish such a name on her." The new parents were also in the midst of a then popular tradition of naming girls for selected gems and precious stones (Pearl, Beryl, Opal, Garnet) and probably unaware of the etymological appropriateness in the name they gave their red-haired daughter.

Not all name-givers are that considerate. Jokes are plenty about twins named Kate and Dupli-Kate or Pete and Re-Pete, or singletons called Bermuda Schwartz or Etta Hamburger. But a risible name need not be a depressant or a deterrent to success: W. Atlee Burpee did more than well in the seed business, and Mrs. R.O. Backhouse, pronounced [bakhaus], got a handsome daffodil named for her. Liberty Hyde Bailey lived well into his nineties, and we who rejoice in green and growing things continue to call his name blessed. And for all the occasions on which we ask

if it was eponymic fate that made Robin Fox and Lionel Tiger write about animal behavior, we must recall that C.T. Onions was a lexicographer, that Bedrich Smetana was a composer even if his name did mean "sour cream," and that Ford Horn was not an automobile dealer but a grocer in Stoughton, Wisconsin.

There are enough unusual names that are real and enough usual names that can be played with to give the dedicated prankster pretty free rein, though messages to call Mr. Lyons or Mr. Fox that end when the Zoo answers are not necessarily high humor. There is the apocryphal story of the wealthy jokester who invited a group of people, strangers to one another, to a sumptuous dinner party, telling them only that they had something in common that they would discover during the course of the evening, and that they would be left to introduce themselves. Ultimately, they found the common denominator: they had names like Duff(y), Pratt, Bottomley, Hinds, Butts, Botham . . . and it is said that two of the women were named Fanny.

Stereotype-names, especially those that are taken to represent an ethnic group, have edged off into the realm of taboo, and this may or may not be an improvement. It depends upon whether you agree with the editors of the second edition of *Webster's New World Dictionary* and the *Doubleday Dictionary* that ignoring an ugly word or name will make the concept go away as well. But at any rate, the Nostalgia Craze does not seem to have brought back from the "golden days of radio" a once-popular Saturday afternoon program called "Kaltenmeyer's Kindergarten" in which the pupils were a veritable melting pot and spoke accordingly. "Giggling Gertie" had no apparent national origin anymore than she had a mind, but Mickey Donovan, Isidore Finkelstein (who said "oi-yoi-yoi"), Yon Yonson ("Ya, sure teacher, ay bain hare") the Italian Tony (whose last name sounded like [pačək'əlut]), and Percival van Schuyler (who always spoke in polysyllables) were all among those under the seemingly strict but really benign tutelage of Professor Kaltenmeyer. They made fun of each other, teased and were teased about names and speech ways, and nobody got mad. Where did it all go? Into the distant ether with Parkyakarkas, Fibber McGee and Molly, and the Mad Russian. And so, after baptism in sheep dip of some sort, we come up with names as safe as Henry Aldrich, and even Archie Bunker, who, though his surname may have a phonetic omen, is carefully unidentified ethnically, though if he were real, one could readily apply the process of elimination and figure it out. It would be interesting to know, if indeed one could know, whether this compulsory liberalization has really done anything to remove the stereotypes from anything but public performances.

Some people—for whatever reason—really dislike all or parts of their names. The courts are usually sympathetic when Clara wants to trade in

her old fashioned model for *Claire* and her sister Sadie wants to be *Saadi*. The papers and wire services were recently full of the news of a lawyer named John Dean who changed his name to Natty Bumppo; and a recent item in the *New Yorker* dealt with a man named Wayne who could not stand his last name (not revealed). His friends held a competition to provide him a new one. The winner was DWOP.

Names have been part of the stock-in-trade of the trickster and prankster ever since Odysseus fooled the Cyclops into believing his name was *Nobody*. Pranks are most fun when they momentarily deflate the pompous and do no lasting harm, when they measure the awareness of one's fellows. This is probably what H.L. Mencken was up to when he stated in the fourth edition of *The American Language* (p. 477) that *Levy* was the second most common surname in New Orleans. This may have been accepted by many, but it did not escape the watchful eye of Raven I. McDavid, Jr. when he came to edit the abridged edition which appeared in 1963, and speculated in a note (p. 576) that it is probably a pun on *levee*. Bilingual tricks are tempting: Mr. and Mrs. Herman Vielkinder were the alleged parents of sextuplets in an April 1 story in the Madison, Wis. *Capital Times* the year after the birth of the Dionnes. And even the venerable Modern Language Association has been hoaxed by some Eulenspiegel—or Puck—: The 1961 Directory issue (Sept.) has a listing for a non-existent “Mt. St. Swithin’s College” in “Wiwiantic, Conn.” whose chairmen included English: A Federal Case, Romance Lgs: Ettore Prosciutto, German: Manfred Reipeisen. . . . It did not happen the next year, but it probably happened in the first place because it was all credible, if a bit odd. (Incidentally, there really is a Weweantic River in Plymouth County, Mass.)

All of which brings us to the final shelf in the Cabinet: the real names no one will believe: Tom Paine, Dick Tracy, Barbara Allen, Peggy O’Neill, Robert Burns. . . . Vermont Connecticut Royster, sometime editor of the *Wall Street Journal*, may have encountered some amusement at his name, but it is unlikely that his identity or his title to it were ever challenged. Consider, then, my friend John Smith, who said one of the most tiresome aspects was the fishy looks he got from hotel clerks when he signed the register for himself and his wife Emma. On the other hand, during his bachelor days, he actually had a feminine fan club. They called themselves—what else?—the Pocohantas Club.

The pendulum swings, and the unusual is accepted with amusement or affection, while the too-usual or the too well-known is viewed with some suspicion. The pendulum will swing back, as it already has in other areas—white sidewall tires, for instance. Not too long ago, one gusher was heard saying to another, “But, Darling! A *black* telephone! How chic!”