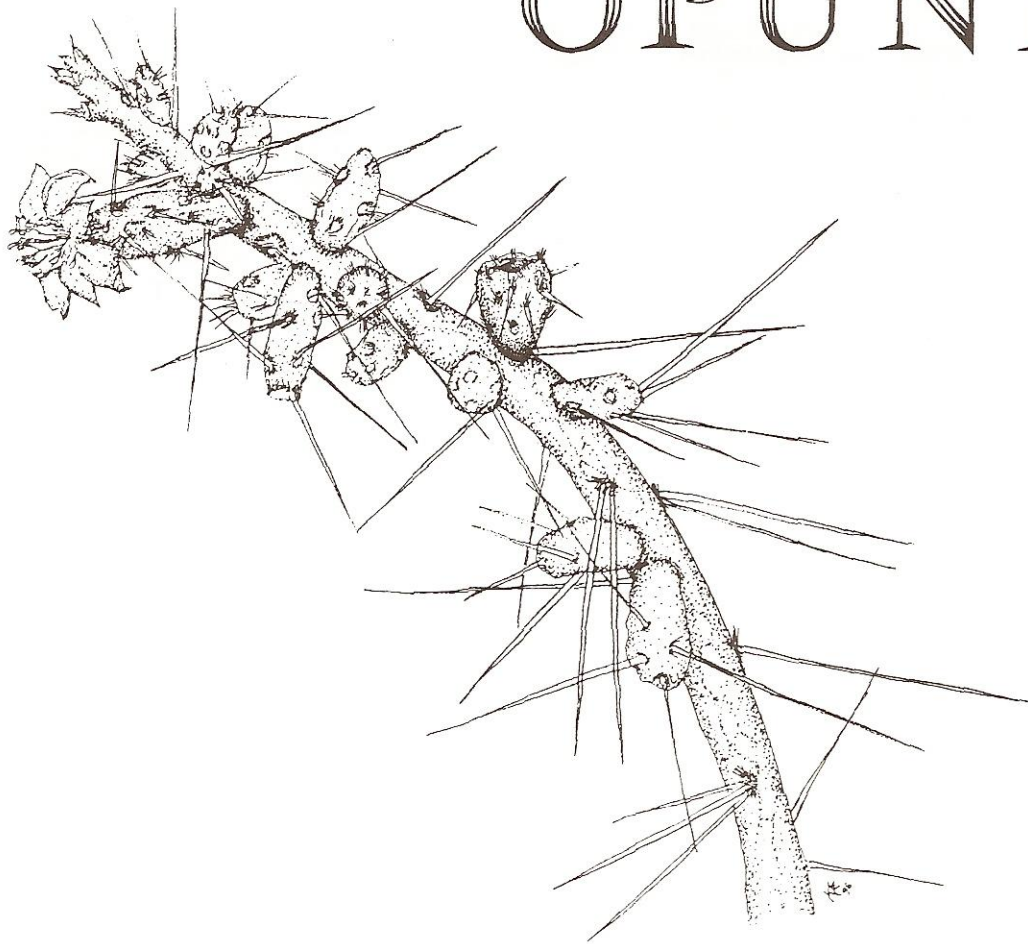
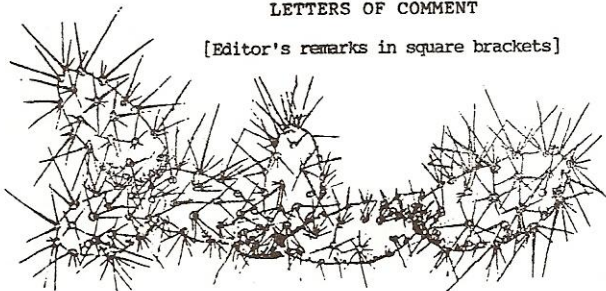


OPUNTIA

40



[Editor's remarks in square brackets]



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ART CREDIT: The cover depicts Opuntia lindsayi, just described as a new species in the March/April 1997 issue of CACTUS AND SUCCULENT JOURNAL (U.S.) by Jon P. Rebman. It is native to Baja California. Drawing by Kathy Allen.

EDITORIAL: In the last issue I mentioned OnoCon 99, a new sercon being proposed for Calgary next February by the Liesemers. I've now been advised that this is cancelled, as they will instead be co-operating with the NonCon in Radium, British Columbia. That was a sercon but is now a relaxacon, headed by Cath Jackel.

The big excitement in Canfandom these days is Robert J. Sawyer, the SF novelist, being sued for \$5 million for libel against reviewer Allan Weiss. The two got into a feud via the pages of a Toronto magazine REALMS over Weiss' panning of a Sawyer novel and Sawyer's reply that brought in past feuds involving the bibliography of Canadian SF prepared for the National Library of Canada years back. I don't intend to have as-it-happens accounts in OPUNTIA about the lawsuit, but once all the shouting is over and the barristers have collected their fees, I may do an historical piece.

FROM: Joseph Major
1409 Christy Avenue
Louisville, Kentucky 40204-2040

1998-07-29

The bit about encouraging chain letters in order to justify expanding and getting enough income to get the economy restarted sounds practically Friedmanite. Expanding the velocity of money as it were. The most interesting chain letter scheme I ever heard of was the Airplane Game of the 1980s. It covered up its methodology with catchy titles. One joined an "airplane" as one of 16 passengers paying \$110, \$100 to the pilot and \$10 to the organizer. When the airplane got its 16th passenger, it split into two airplanes, with everyone going up a step, to one of 8 flight attendants, who became the 4 flight engineers, who became the two copilots, who became the new pilots, while the old pilot, with \$1600 from the passengers, would pilot out. As you can see, the organizer got the quick bucks. The first organizers started in among New Age people on the coasts, peddling this as a "wealth builder" and stressing its "holistic" aspects, fitting the sales to the market.

[See page 8 for further details about Airplane.]

FROM: Harry Andruschak
Box 5309
Torrance, California 90510-5309

1998-07-26

As a postal worker, I did note the comments about them stealing cash from chain letters. Here in the USA, that means instant job loss. Of course, most of the mail is now automated. You see 9 letters per second feeding into the Optical Character Reader. Which one might have a dollar bill in it? Theft in the post office is rare, but obviously it can have huge effects on the public. That is why the post office has a no tolerance policy on this subject. But sometimes postal workers are accused of theft when nothing of the sort has happened. How many times have I heard people complain that some postal worker stole a cassette tape that had been mailed? Although postal regulations say that cassette tapes must be mailed in padded bags, many people still try to mail them in plain letter envelopes. Letters fold and bend but cassette tapes do not. They especially do not bend in the OCR we use to process mail. I spend a lot of time every work day removing crushed cassette tapes from the machines.

FROM: Karen Johnson
35 Mariana Avenue
South Croydon, Victoria 3136, Australia

1998-08-03

I was just reading a book GREAT AUSTRALIAN URBAN MYTHS, and it mentions the history of redemption rumours such as the million stamps. According to American folklorist Gary Alan Fine, a redemption rumour works on a double basis. First, you are redeeming some otherwise useless item for money (stamps, bottle tops, cigarette packets, bread tags). Second, you are redeeming yourself by participating. It's okay to use unhealthy and/or bad for the environment products because you can do something good at the same time.

FROM: Carolyn Clowes
5911 West Pay Drive NW
Depauw, Indiana 47115

1998-08-11

I attended Catholic schools, and the chain letters I remember were the send-this-prayer/send-a-holy-card variety. Holy cards are Catholic trading cards, with grisly depictions of saints dripping blood, crowns of thorns dripping blood, Jesus dripping blood, along with devotional sayings that promise indulgences to shorten one's toasting-time in Purgatory. At my school, these letters had fertile ground. They warned of dire consequences to befall anyone who broke the chain. The other names on the list were always my classmates, and I always broke the chain. The only consequence I recall was getting blamed for it.

FROM: Buck Coulson
2677W-500N
Hartford City, Indiana 47348-9575

1998-08-06

Chain letters aren't all about money. There was a fad in the 1950s or 1960s to send good wishes or some similar phrasing via chain letter. I'm not sure just when it was because I roundfiled all that I received, having no belief that good wishes or good luck could be transferred via the post office. All of them specified that since they weren't about money, they weren't illegal. They could have been come-ons for some other scheme, but I never heard of any arrests being made.

[This type of letter I have dated back to the start of World War One. It variously appears as a send-this-on-in-nine-days-or-you-will-suffer, or else the St. Jude appeal letter, about which I wrote in OPUNTIA #25. As I continue my researches into chain letters, I am becoming convinced that they all originated circa the turn of the century. Can anyone supply a reference in print to any chain letters prior to 1900?]

FROM: Harry Warner
423 Summit Avenue
Hagerstown, Maryland 21740

1998-07-29

I do wish you'd restrained yourself with the footnotes and put the information they contain into the text of the article. I found it too tiresome to keep turning the pages to the footnote section in order to see how trustworthy the source of this or that statement might be. Additionally, you could have saved at least a page by attributing information in the text, because you doublespaced between footnotes, and many of them ended with a line containing only a few words, wasting the rest of the line's space.

[The chain letter articles appearing in OPUNTIA are extracts from a larger work with hundreds of footnotes. I separated them out into the back so they do not interrupt the narrative flow. Doublespacing the footnotes is done to make the list more legible when skimming through the columns. A saving of a page or two is not as significant.

In an aside, Joseph Nicholas was complaining that I cited the London newspaper THE TIMES as THE TIMES OF LONDON. Although I didn't get around to changing the citation for the article in this issue, I will run the main text through a global search-and-replace to make it THE TIMES (LONDON) for future versions.]

FROM: Robert Lichtman
Box 30
Glen Ellen, California 95442

1998-07-30

An interesting reprint from that 1875 NEW YORK TIMES. This was the year before the formation of the National Amateur Press Association, the oldest still extant of the non-fan apas. A few of the names mentioned are semi-familiar to me from my limited knowledge of the history of that group.

The Fantasy Amateur Press Association deadline is fast approaching, and at this writing we have 56 members.

[Which remark gives me an opportunity to throw in a plug for FAPA, of which I am an ordinary member and Robert is Secretary-Treasurer. For those not familiar with apas, they are a type of distro invented in the 1800s when the first zines appeared. Members send in x number of copies of their zines to a Central Mailer, who then collates the zines into bundles and sends a set back to each member. There is usually an annual fee to cover the cost of postage. FAPA has some additional requirements in addition to the annual US\$15 fee, such as previous credentials in zinedom or as a letterhack. Write Robert if you are interested; I'm sure he'd appreciate an SASE. FAPA is the oldest science-fiction apa, now in its 61st year. The August 1998 bundle contained 45 zines with a total of 367 pages. Membership is limited to 65, but there are a few vacancies at the moment, so don't be shy about joining. You will be required to produce 8 pages per year as the minimum activity, in 60 to 65 copies. I always look forward to receiving the quarterly bundles.]

I ALSO HEARD FROM: Murray Moore, Sheryl Birkhead, Teddy Harvia, Maureen Speller, Scott Crow, John Held Jr, Taral Wayne, Guy Miller, Chad Arie, Ken Cheslin, Tom Feller, Chester Cuthbert, Bill Bridget

MODERN CHAIN LETTERS

by Dale Speirs

Chain Letters Considered as Sabotage.

During World War One, it was known that there was at least one plot by German sympathizers to start peace chain letters (ref. 93). The scheme apparently started in Boston, Massachusetts, and was a variation of a previously known prayer letter, except that it urged peace. The peace chain was altered to suit Masons, Catholics, and other groups. The intent of the scheme was to plug up the U.S. mails and waste freight capacity. It does not seem to have been successful, and was denounced by Catholic authorities, who told their congregations in no uncertain terms to discard the letter (ref. 94).

Not so much direct sabotage, but still a bit more than just political, were chain letters circulated in World War Two against occupying Germans. The Danish underground resistance circulated chain letters around significant anniversary dates of the occupation (ref. 115).

Chain Letters In Partisan Politics.

Chain letters were popular in politics, and were used to drum up support for a candidate, not necessarily as a fund-raiser. In 1927, Republican supporters circulated chain letters in the New England states to drum up support for President Coolidge (ref. 118). The man himself was not happy with the chains, and it was speculated that Coolidge considered them undignified (ref. 108). As to why chain letters were used, the politico who started them said he did so in the absence of an

organization to encourage Coolidge. He felt that in such a vacuum the best method to stir up widespread support quickly was to use the chain letter's proven speed and ability to saturate an area (ref. 107). On learning of Coolidge's displeasure, he withdrew the chain letter plan.

During the 1927 campaign, the Democrats also used the idea. A supporter of Senator James Reed for the Democratic Presidential nomination that year mentioned that chain letters had also been used in 1912 (ref. 110).

In 1936, the chain letter idea was revived by the Republicans for the Landon-Knox campaign (ref. 106). The letter was used in New York City and area, and started off: *"If in favor of the sentiments expressed below, please copy the letter and sign your name. Then send a copy to not less than ten Republicans you know in the greater city."*

In 1956, Louis Marx, the toymaker, started a fundraising chain letter for the Eisenhower-Nixon slate called the 150 Club. The head of the chain put up \$150, then got 150 friends to put up \$15, and each to solicit 150 more at \$1.50. He calculated that this would raise \$36,150 and activate 22,501 supporters (ref. 105). This chain letter was unlawful, but that wasn't the one that stirred up trouble for the Republicans. The party sent out postcards urging that the recipient start up a chain letter for their Republican candidates. The postcard was signed by Richard Nixon (ref. 104). Federal American law prohibited government employees from participating in campaigning, and thus a controversy was stirred up. The Democrats condemned Nixon for sending the postcards asking Federal employees *"... to violate Federal law by participating in a chain postcard and telephone call electioneering device on behalf of the Republican party"* (ref. 102,103). The whole thing blew over

a few days later when the Republican campaign director said the fault was his, not Nixon's, and the problem had been caused by a mailing list which had not been screened for Federal employees (ref. 101).

The Democratic National Committee announced a "Democratic Mail Call" in 1956, which was a chain letter plan to get out the vote (ref. 119).

Not as successful was a chain letter circulated by anti-Communists in Czechoslovakia in 1949 calling for free elections under United Nations supervision (ref. 109). The chain letters were to be sent to American embassies, and at least several hundred were reported to have been received. The Communists in turn ordered a counter-campaign.

Chain Letters In Non-partisan Politics.

Non-partisan political chain letters included the Buy American protectionist campaign sponsored by the Made In America Club Inc. (ref. 117). Pledge cards were circulated and each signer endeavoured to get five more signers of the cards in a chain system.

When coffee prices began to increase in 1950, some housewives started a chain letter urging a boycott of coffee until the price came back down (ref. 163). The chain letter read in part: *"Let's get coffee prices down. Gripping won't do it, but this chain letter will, if you don't break the chain and if you will stick with all us women who are fed up with this coffee robbery."* The effect of the letter seemed minimal, as at the time it was circulating, grocers reported no effect on sales. The price of coffee remained a problem for several years, and eventually spurred a retaliatory chain letter in Brazil (ref. 164).

In the February 2, 1954, issue of *THE BRAZIL HERALD*, a chain letter was published which made the point that trade was a two-way street: *"If the United States does not wish to pay a fair price for our coffee, why should we pay absurd prices for the junk they are selling us?"*

One indignant Cincinnati businessman tried to start a chain letter against government waste and corruption, a five-name letter urging a tax boycott (ref. 161): *"I solemnly swear that I shall refuse to pay a single cent towards an income tax on March, 1952, unless the government has taken action on the house-cleaning. Unless this situation is solved to the general satisfaction of the general public, I shall join a sit-down strike on that date and will go to jail in company with millions of others who have joined me in my resolution by that time."* However, the businessman repented a couple of days later (ref. 162) and withdrew his chain letter, commenting: *"I simply started the fire at the wrong end."* This seems to have been one chain letter that did in fact die permanently.

During the American civil rights campaign of the 1960s, a chain letter urged people to send \$1 cheques to former Mississippi Governor Ross Barnett, in aid of the family of slain civil rights worker Medgar Evers (ref. 165). Barnett got about 5,000 cheques and was not happy with the matter, threatening legal action against whomever started the chain letter.

Savings Bonds Chains.

There was a World War Two chain letter involving defense stamps and war bonds (ref. 17). The post office issued a warning about chain letters using Defense Savings Stamps in the summer of 1941 (ref. 72). This was nation-wide in the

USA in February 1942, by which time the New York City Postmaster had to issue another warning (ref. 122).

In January 1955, a savings bond chain letter attracted attention in the USA when the U.S. Treasury noticed an unusual surge in bond sales (ref. 71). In fact, banks were running out of the bonds because of the demand. This was a person-to-person chain letter to avoid the postal authorities, and the Treasury officials could only give the usual cautions. This chain letter was the most accurately named chain in history, circulating under the name of "This Is a Give-Away-Your-Wealth Campaign" (ref. 169). Likewise the Better Business Bureau had to warn against savings bond chains in 1958 (ref. 121). The chain letter claimed that for the cost of an \$18.75 bond, one could get \$38,400 back when one's name reached the top of the list (ref. 79), or a value at maturity of \$51,000.

The savings bond chain letter showed up in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in late 1959 among students of Harvard University (ref. 77). It appeared to have started at Yale University and spread to Princeton and Brown universities. Local banks began restricting sales of bonds in an effort to choke off the chain. By 1961, the bond chain was operating in Puerto Rico amongst the professional class and Postmaster-General J. Edward Day had to release a warning (ref. 78). The Postal Inspection Service estimated that half the professionals there were participating. This time, the U.S. Treasury refused to comment. The bond chain continued into 1963, and the U.S. Treasury was forced to break its silence (ref. 123) and issue the usual unheeded warning.

Charity Letters.

Charities have used chain letters to raise funds. This doesn't make it legal but often induces people to participate because it is a good cause. Some private chain operators have tried to gull potential marks by claiming that the chain proceeds go to charity. A 1978 chain letter operator wrote (ref. 180): *"What makes this a completely legal money-making opportunity is that after the first £1000 profit we are asked to pledge 20% of further profits from this effort to your favourite charity ..."*. This claim of legality is false. Courts have held that chain letters distribute money by chance, which therefore constitutes a lottery and is therefore illegal without government permit (ref. 181).

In 1906, the Freemasons were criticized for doing this in their attempt to raise money for a monument in Canton, Ohio (ref. 84). A later plan, circulating in 1923, was denounced by the *MERCHANTS' ASSOCIATION BULLETIN* (ref. 91). It was a \$1 letter which called for each person to add \$1 to the envelope and send it on. The tenth person was to return the \$10 to the originator. It would be interesting to know how many letters ever made it through such a circuit, since there was no reason why anyone along the way could not just pocket the money and kill the chain.

Many charities saw no point in using chain letters to raise funds. During World War One, the American Red Cross was afflicted by such well-meaning efforts (ref. 89), and had to make announcements that no such letters had its approval, that chain operators could not be guaranteed honest, and that donations should be made directly to the Society. The Red Cross letter in circulation was a variant of the nine-days prayer letter (ref. 97). Nurses who thought that chains would be an

interesting way to raise money for the wounded soon discovered the hard way what happens if a chain takes off (ref. 90). A nurse who started a 25-cent chain letter received well over 64,000 replies. The money was welcome of course, but she and her friends found out how much work it was to open and sort out that many letters.

In England, a 1991 charity chain letter on behalf of a children's hospital proved capable of raising the money, but the hospital itself did not authorize the letters (ref. 179). It pointed out that the chains followed the usual distortions of copying, and what was originally supposed to be money for a neo-natal heart-lung transplant facility became a neo-natal lung transport facility. Because there was no fixed date mentioned in the letters, they kept circulating, with the copying errors growing along the way.

The Romanian Orphanage Trust used a chain letter to raise money in 1995 (ref. 80). This induced Hollywood celebrities to allow their names to be used on the 10-person lists. The \$3 chain also provided a source of entertainment, as people examined the lists and speculated on the friendships between stars and non-stars.

Still No New Thing Under The Sun.

Money chain letters re-appear with each new generation of suckers, and a few examples follow. Many chain letter operators re-appear every few years under different names but traceable because they tend to use similar addresses or the same chain letter (ref. 197). Re-using a chain letter is no problem because there is always a fresh supply of marks.

A major scandal occurred in Italy in 1958 (ref. 131,166), when

the government cabinet had to convene to hear about a bank cashier's chain letter scheme that paid 100% interest and millions of dollars. This chain letter shaded into more of a pyramid scheme, where the operator, Gianbattista Giuffrè, paid off early investors with subsequent investments. When he was stricken with a heart attack, the chain scheme collapsed.

In late 1978, a \$50 or \$100 chain letter called Circle of Gold began in California and quickly spread to New York City (ref. 75). It operated mostly as a person-to-person chain, in the same manner as the 1935 fad, and later spawned a \$1000 variant called the Circle of Platinum. Post office officials traced it from San Francisco to Chicago, then down the east coast to New York City. From there, the Circle of Gold went through the Sunbelt states before returning to its point of origin (ref. 98). Court injunctions were obtained in New York against 15 operators of the scheme (ref. 99).

In 1987, a chain called Airplane led to 37 arrests throughout New York State (ref. 76). This one required an investment of \$1500 to \$2500. Suckers became one of eight passengers on an 'airplane'. The money was paid to the 'pilot', who promptly bailed out with the money. Everyone moved up one step and with time would make it to the pilot's chair. New airplanes were recruited to speed up the process. The authorities crashed Airplane only to see it replaced by a new chain letter called Corporate Ladder. This one cost \$12,000 to play; one entered as a vice-president and worked up the ladder of success.

Car dealers have occasionally tried to sell cars on the chain letter method or by pyramid selling. A 1956 method was to offer a buyer a free car if he not only got six friends to buy but

each of them also got six friends to buy (ref. 120). Even assuming that someone could round up 42 buyers, he would realize, if he stopped to think about it, that he was essentially acting as an unpaid salesman for the dealer. This chain scheme re-appeared in 1959 (ref. 167), this time using word-of-mouth to evade the post office and pushed by an operator who went as an "advertising agency". This plan told people that it would be limited to 300 persons who would get credit to the amount of a car if they brought in sufficient additional customers. As the Better Business Bureau pointed out, this would require 12,600 cars to be sold before the original 300 would get their free automobiles.

Joke Letters and Oddball Descendants.

Chain letters start off in earnest, but as they die out, they often switch to oddball types. The Liquid Assets Club was a 1935 chain letter for a pint of whiskey. A similar chain letter circulated at the University of Alberta (Edmonton, Canada) student residence circa 1976. The student residences had several thousand people in three dormitory towers. Each tower had a coin-operated photocopier in the basement laundry room. The chain, for a bottle of whiskey, started one evening and within an hour had students lined up at the photocopiers making duplicates of the letter. The author remembers it well because he had some non-chain copying to do. Normally there was no trouble finding an available machine but that night I gave up in disgust. Being an abstainer, the booze letter had no fascination for me, and in any event, I was well aware of the odds against winning. I never did find anyone who came out ahead on the deal. The chain collapsed after a few hours, partly because of the usual mathematics and partly because the liquor stores weren't open late.

C.W. Hill quoted a 1953 joke chain letter (ref. 8) as follows: *"This chain has been started with the purpose of bringing happiness to tired business men. Unlike most chains it requires no money. Simply send a copy of this letter to five of your male married friends, then bundle up your wife and send her to the fellow who heads the list. When your name comes to the top you will receive 168 women. Some of them ought to be dandies. Have faith and please do not break the chain. One fellow broke it and got his own wife back!"*

A 1968 chain letter asked for recipes (ref. 170).

A literary chain letter of the early 1990s involved paperbacks rather than money (ref. 157). The six-name letter asked for a used paperback of reasonably good quality, that is, *"not too badly worn"*. It gave recipients a chance to see what other people were reading. Reported results were mixed; one person got "about 15 or 20", while another had yet to receive anything.

The British Frauds of the 1990s.

Although chain letters run continuously, there seemed to be a burst of them in Britain in the early 1990s, judging by how busy newspaper columnists were kept condemning them. What made this waxing of the chain cycle unusual was a new trend to them being operated by pseudonymous companies asking for a service fee with each name, rather than taking a cut of the actual chain letter money. The Dollarjet scheme, and its successor Worldwide Roulette, for example, mailed its chain letters from Tunis, with instructions to pay the money to a Panamanian company via a post office box number in Vienna (ref. 184,190). In addition to the usual failure of chain

letters to deliver the money, the Dollarjet plan did not promote names up the lists as proper procedure would expect.

The Excel Prestige International plan charged a L75 membership fee; the operator, Kevin Quigley, could not be located by angry marks when the chains went awry and was reported as living abroad (ref. 187). One person who bought into the Excel chain letters paid in L1000, recruited 12 people, got a payback of L200, and subsequently received an Excel chain letter from someone with a membership number in the 6000s. In other words, the Excel chain must have grossed not less than L30,000 (6000 x L75) for Quigley, and very likely much more.

The Key Plan chain was operated by IM Consultants via a mail forwarding service supplied by the bank the chain money was to be deposited at (ref. 185). Banks do not reveal customer information to enquirers and none of the signatories were in the telephone directory. The Key Plan letter contained the story of how someone got a BMW out of the chain letter (ref. 186). People copying the letter would substitute local 'names' of BMW winners, which would prove interesting when differing versions of the same letter were sent to the same person. One person noted that Bob Price of Totnes met the fellow with the BMW in one letter, while in another it was P.W. Thornton of Redcar who knew the chap. *"Now the chances of two conversations, hundreds of miles apart, taking exactly the same turn are incredibly slim."*

Chain letter operators often sell a cheap product with their chain letters, and tell their victims that this therefore made the chain legal as a marketing scheme. Global Pioneers charged L270 for a bundle of glossy magazines and newsletters containing information on climbing the ladder of success.

What was more to the point in climbing this ladder was in recruiting additional subscribers, *"thereby creating a financially lucrative chain-letter"* (ref. 188). The Money Network appeared in Britain in 1990 and was a copy of an American chain scheme called Money Unlimited. It was a L10 chain ostensibly selling products to other members at L10, so as to assure marks that it was legal. What was different about it though, was that it claimed to be using a proven principle *"found on ancient Egyptian scrolls"* (ref. 189).

Postage Stamp Chain Letters.

A 1948 Newfoundland chain letter was commented on as follows: *"Six names are on the list. You send 35 stamps to the first, cross out that name, and add your name and address to the bottom of the list. To the other five names you send copies of the letter as received by you, which states that by keeping the chain unbroken you will eventually get 15,625 letters with 35 stamps in each. We say don't be a sucker, even if the list of names has Rev. before five out of the six names on the list with addresses in Italy, Egypt, and Quebec."* (ref. 9).

The venerable firm of Stanley Gibbons were not immune to stamp chain letters. Their columnist C.W. Hill once complained about these letters in 1953 (ref. 8) and cited a five-name letter in which one was supposed to send ten stamps catalogued by Gibbons at 3d or better. The lucky person at the top would have then received 31,250 stamps.

In 1955, British chain letters were using National Savings Stamps, and the chairman of that organization, Lord MacIntosh, was moved to warn the public. Three years further on, the Savings chain was still circulating. At a press

conference (ref. 158) he read out a five-name letter and said: *"I have never found anybody who gets a penny but somebody must get a rake-off somewhere."* The denunciations had no discernable effect, as the chain was still a subject of news reports in 1961 (ref. 159). By 1962, further denunciations had to include the note that the heading on the chain "With the authority of the National Savings Movement" was entirely unauthorized (ref. 160). A spokesman said if they found who started that, then legal action would be taken.

The editor of a stamp magazine reported on a five-name letter at this time (ref. 5) which asked for ten stamps and promised a grand total of 31,230 stamps. This appears to be the same one reported by Gibbons two years earlier.

Stamp clubs were sometimes imposed upon because of the availability of membership lists. In 1955, the operator of the Bison Exchange and Correspondence Club remarked about: *"... chain letters ... being revived by foreign collectors as indicated by two recent chain letters, one from a Spanish club member, the other from a Cuba non member."* (ref. 198). In 1980 an 11-name letter asking for 30 stamps requested that 10 letters be sent to friends and the 11th to Carlos Lofos Leal from Chile. He was Secretary of Club Salva, and said that anyone sending a letter to him would get four issues of his magazine free (ref. 83).

The Dying Child Chain Letter.

A modern version of the chain letter, now propagated on the Internet as often as through the post office or company bulletin boards, is the appeal of a dying child who wants to break the world record for most postcards received. This chain letter is insidious and far more damaging than money

chains because it does not burn itself out. As bad as the 1935 chain letter was in plugging up the mails, it had only a few weeks effect, since the chain overloaded quickly and people quit it or broke it in disgust. The dying child appeal never stops; it mutates in spreading but the people who spread it don't mind the cost of a few postcards. The end result is that post offices are still being swamped with millions of pieces of mail.

On December 23, 1960, an appeal got started for Doris Ridgeway, a girl dying of bone cancer in Hardy, Virginia. It was transmitted through radio networks and via U.S. military bases and soon swamped the local post office with 600,000 Christmas cards, letters, and other items (ref. 13). That appeal eventually trickled off, partly, I suspect, because other appeals came along later and diverted the flow.

The next appeal was for 'Little Buddy' of Paisley, Scotland, just west of Glasgow. He was said to be dying of leukemia and had five months to live. He wanted to get into the GUINNESS BOOK OF WORLD RECORDS for receiving the most postcards. Newspapers spread the story worldwide. About 2 million cards were sent (ref. 15). This was about early 1983 and as late as 1987 was still having an effect. Some say he was a hoax started in fun by a Scottish radio club. In contradiction to this is a published report from the local postmaster (ref. 126) as follows: "The appeal is now closed and the organizers have placed adverts to this effect in CB magazines. ... The Post Office box was ceased on 22 June 1983. Items coming to hand receive normal returned letter branch treatment. To the best of our knowledge it was not a hoax."

In 1989, the dying child was David, either from Bedfordshire, England, or West Palm Beach, Florida, depending on which chain you believed (ref. 14).

The current dying child appeal is for Craig Shergold, a boy in Carshalton, England, who at the time was 7 years old and dying of a brain tumor. He asked for get-well cards through a chain letter, and got them, more than 16 million in a year. He also had an operation for his tumor in 1991 and has since recovered, but the cards still keep coming. The Children's Wish Foundation, which helped in that appeal, now has a warehouse full of mail it can't open and more still come. The Foundation has been wholesaling postcards to dealers, who in turn re-sell in bulk lots (ref. 125).

Worse yet, along the way, the appeal mutated into a business-card chain, not get-well cards, and the name variously mis-spelled as Schergold or Sherfold. The unrelated Make-A-Wish Foundation of America started getting them as well, and had to set up a special phone line to divert cards. It is estimated that 100 million letters have been received from this chain. Efforts to stop the chain via publicity in newspapers and television have been futile (ref. 10). In 1998, a business card version circulated in Calgary, Alberta, asking for 10 to 20 cards to be sent to a fictitious address in Atlanta, Georgia. Shergold, by now a young man and cured, had received 250 million cards, and had been on British television appealing for people to stop sending cards (ref. 199).

A Deliberate Post Card Chain.

Postcards for material gain may not seem a logical first choice for chain letters, but in February 1906, the British postcard manufacturer Raphael Tuck and Sons managed the trick.

They sponsored a chain postcard competition, which had to use Tuck cards only, thus boosting sales (ref. 111). The rules were complicated, but simplified were that entrants chose a charity to send cards to and the charity receiving the most cards won prizes. Over 200 chains were going by September 1906, but since most of the charities were local ones, the chains did not propagate that well. Most of the postcard chains were in England, but some involved the USA. Funnily enough, almost seventy years later a descendent of the original family denounced chain letters in the British House of Commons (ref. 112). Raphael Tuck, Labour M.P. for Watford, urged the government to act against chain letters.

Internet Chain Letters.

The Internet carries chain letters, some the usual money type, others of which are hoaxes. An example of the latter is the Good Times virus hoax, which starts with a preliminary message that if the user receives a subsequent e-mail with the words "Good Times" in the subject header, then the user's computer will be destroyed by the virus. The user is urged in the most hysterical terms to send the message to everyone they know to avoid this calamity. Since computers can spam (broadcast to thousands of users at once), this leads to other users being constantly spammed and re-spammed by new users unaware of the hoax. The virus later sends the phrase "Good Times" in the subject header, causing a severe reaction in gullible users who see it and think they now have to have their computer scanned and re-loaded. New variants such as Penpal Greetings, "Win A Trip", and "Returned and Unable to Deliver" constantly appear, which are essentially the same thing.

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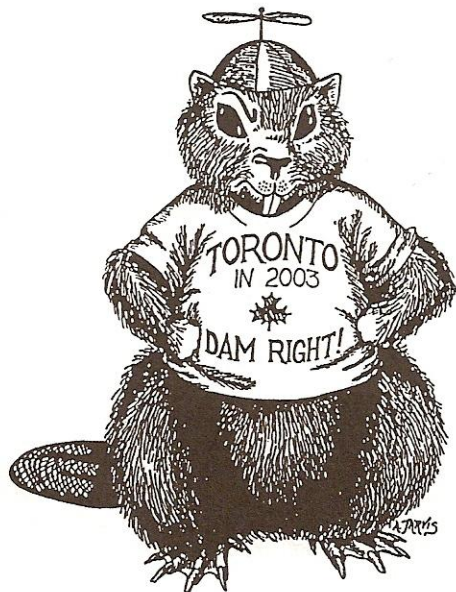
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