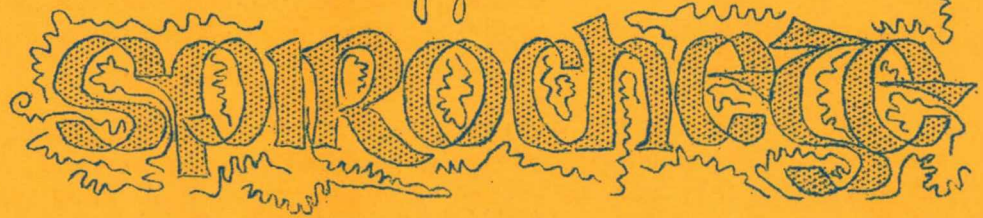


No.41



Redd Boggs'



IN 1937, WHO WOULD HAVE BELIEVED

That the Japanese
That Hitler
That Orson Welles
That John W. Campbell Jr
That Wollheim and Moskowitz
That the Manhattan Project
That White Sands New Mexico
That Francis T. Laney
That IBM
That Neil Armstrong
That FAPA

GLIMPSSES BETWEEN THE BOXCARS

When I'm about to go to sleep in these somber times I switch on my Radio Shack clock radio which is tuned to "Music Till Dawn" on KKHI-FM, or sometimes -- whenever it's on the air past midnight -- to KDFC-FM, the Bay area's other classical music station. I always program the radio to shut off in exactly 23 minutes. That's the average time it takes me to doze off. Usually I'm sound asleep by the time the radio quits in a little crash of static.

Once in a while, though, I can't fall asleep so easily. Sometimes it's the music -- one night a Beethoven quartet, another night Mahler's "Das Lied von der Erde" -- that keeps me wakeful. But usually it's just fret and worry. I lie restlessly, rearranging the pillow and staring into the darkness. I've never tried counting sheep to overcome insomnia, but the other night, when "lying awake with a dismal headache," I devised a game almost as useful for the purpose. My notion was to go back over my life, starting from as far back as my memories go, and call to mind one incident for each calendar year till I had progressed right up to the present time. That seemed to me like a routine that would soon bore me into drowsiness and slumber.

It turned out to be more of an intellectual exercise than I expected. I have a few memories from the time I was no more than three years old, although my mother assures me that these are false memories. That is, the things really happened, but

she supposes that I remember them at secondhand, only because she talked of them when I was small. The trouble with this theory is that they are relatively trivial incidents that she would have been very unlikely to have mentioned. I am sure they are real recollections.

But that's for the age of three. Scanning over the times when my mind was working full-time to record memories I discovered several long years -- 1937 was one of them, the very year in which FAPA was founded -- from which I was unable to recall a single specific incident. The effort of trying to remember jarred me awake instead of lulling me to sleep, and all to no avail. Think of it: 365 days (in one case, 366) in a row that were so unmemorable that I couldn't recall even one hour, or a minute, of them! Of course I could remember where I was living at the time and in general what I was doing, but not a single incident came to mind. Don't forget that this was while I was lying half-asleep in the dark of 3 a.m. without anyone or anything to prompt me. I had nothing but haphazard free-association to guide my reverie. In daylight, alert and concentrating hard, with books, diaries, and other possessions close to hand, my memory for the year 1937 and other blank years works much better.

Picking out one incident from some years was easy. Like everybody else who was around then -- the number of people who weren't has increased amazingly of late! -- I can remember vividly what I was doing on 7 December 1941 and on 22 November 1963. Remembering incidents from certain other years was easy, too: 1942, the year that I entered the armed forces and had many experiences that remain burned or scarred into my consciousness; and 1965, the year that Gretchen and I arrived in the Bay area.

Those were eventful years, 1942 and 1965, and that being the case it's odd that the particular incidents I called to mind from those years were very trivial, unimportant events. Of 1942 I remembered first of all nothing of the first shock of induction at Fort Snelling, Minnesota, or of the grueling weeks of basic training at Jefferson Barracks, Missouri. Instead, I remembered a pastel incident that happened on the troop train in early August of that year.

We raw recruits were on our way from Jefferson Barracks to the "repple depple" at Salt Lake City. In Missouri and all the way across Kansas the midsummer weather was hot and sultry. But at dusk -- it must have been of the second day on the train -- we stopped somewhere in Colorado. None of the other G.I.s moved; they must have been too dazed and stupefied by the heat and the other vicissitudes of travel; but for some reason I bestirred myself. I think it was because it was my first trip west, and I was excited to find myself in Colorado. I walked to the vestibule of the coach and peered out. The doors were open, but we were in the railroad yards

SPIROCHETE : Number 41 : August 1987. Edited and published at the Sign of the Idle Gestetner by Redd Boggs, P. O. Box 1111, Berkeley, California 94701, for the two-hundredth mailing of the Fantasy Amateur Press association. "The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it also seems pointless. But if there is no solace in the fruits of our research, there is at least some consolation in the research itself. The effort to understand the universe is one of the very few things that lifts human life a little above the level of farce, and gives it some of the grace of tragedy." -- Steven Weinberg. The Spirochete heading is by Gretchen Schwenn.

with no station platform alongside. By leaning out and craning my neck I could see that the train lacked a locomotive. They were changing engines. I jumped down into the cinders beside the track and walked slowly up and down, stretching my legs and breathing deep.

In the darkness I could barely read the sign painted on the end of the freight office. It said Deer Trail, which later I learned from an atlas is the name of a small town not too far east of Denver. I had never heard of it before. I was almost alone, and the evening was very quiet and peaceful. I imagined rather than saw the mountains in the near distance, dark and blue in the night, but I knew that we must have reached the high country above the sweltering plains. It was still warm and stuffy on the train, but out here a fresh sweet wind was blowing from the west, and the stars were glimmering overhead. It was a welcome relief from the blistering sun of daytime. For the first time in a month I felt comfortable. I shivered a little in the wind as I studied the sky and found the familiar old Big Dipper. It felt good to be cold. I didn't especially mark the moment, then, as one to remember for the rest of my life, but it still lives, soft and fragrant, in my memory.

As I said, 1965 was an eventful year for Gretchen and me. More strange and unusual things happened to us in that year than in any other of our life together. But as I lay abed in the darkness I remembered one of the most minor events of that year. I remembered the evening that Gretchen and I went over to visit Bob Chazin, one of various visits to him in those times. Bob lived then on Russell street, just west of Telegraph, a congested area, and we had to park halfway down the block from his house. As we climbed out of the car, slamming the car doors, a woman appeared at an upper window of one of the houses lining the street. She wasn't a hooker on the alert for business, for it wasn't that sort of neighborhood. Perhaps she was expecting her husband, or the arrival of visitors.

I couldn't tell whether she was young or old, black or white, blonde or brunette, as she stood silhouetted against the light, but for some reason I was inspired to serenade her. "Sweet Adeline, for you I pine," I sang, not very musically, but with lots of feeling. Even to my own ears I sounded as hoarse as Jerry Cruncher, but I continued: "In all my dreams, your fair face gleams, you're the flower of my heart, sweet Adeline!" I kept gesturing to Gretchen to join me in a duet (I really needed a barber shop quartet), but she was too busy laughing. The woman remained in the window, perhaps becroggled and transfixed. She probably supposed that, like Mr Flood, I was well-soused, but I wasn't. Just a touch pixilated.

For a moment I thought I sensed something more in the scene than the incongruity, the farce, and the humor: some element of mystery and masquerade. But I must have been mistaken, for I must have sounded like a prairie dog howling at the moon, and what's the puzzle of that? It's mere instinct, and the serenade is artistic and mystical, except when it is done so badly. No wonder Gretchen laughed. But the woman didn't. Perhaps that's why I remember the moment, and in thinking about the past remembered it in advance of everything else that happened in 1965.

Even so it's strange that random, unimportant incidents instead of significant ones came to mind when I was remembering my life. Why do certain pictures of the past stand out above others? It's like sitting on a railroad train (does anybody ride trains anymore?) and staring out of the window while the train waits unmoving on a sidetrack. A fast freight roars by on the main track. It's all a streaking darkness punctuated by brief sudden flashes of the sunlit green hills beyond, seen between the boxcars as the train races past. It makes a strobe effect: momentary flickers of light amid the empty blur of the boxcar sides, each as vivid as strokes of lightning in a summer storm. Life is sometimes like that.

THE RED BALLOON

All the other balloons in particolored bunches of three fluttered and danced futilely in the wind. Each of them tugged without success at its string tied to the radio antennas of cars in the used car lot, but a little red balloon got away. I don't know how it happened. A cord broke, or slipped out of someone's grasp while he was trying to moor the balloon in place. It floated away in an instant.

Caught in a momentary downdraft it sailed dangerously low over the rushing traffic on San Pablo avenue, blown this way and that in the eddies and back-currents till it resembled an errant puppy being chased by children. Then it caught the freshening breeze and began to rise. It lifted lightly over the rooftops on the east side of the street, flying higher and higher, faster and faster. At last it was doing what balloons are meant to do: to ride the wind and to fly free. I don't think it ever looked back at its captive fellows far below.

As it soared toward the Berkeley hills that hem us in to the east it was drifting higher than they stand, a swaying, buoyant little sphere on a glorious voyage in the vastness of the sky. In only a minute or two it became a distant bobbing dot, still a vivid red, against the white clouds that trailed mistily over the tops of the slopes. Then it reached the altitude of the higher clouds. It passed between two towering cloud-castles, came into view again momentarily, then disappeared forever into the overcast. When it was last seen it was still ascending.

Perhaps it climbed to the very edge of space after a while, 14 miles up, where there is hardly any air left, and even in daylight you can glimpse the brighter stars of the galaxy. I hope it had its look. Perhaps it didn't. More likely it ripped apart from inner pressure in the lessening atmosphere, or had its frail skin seared away by the summer sun once it rose above the clouds. But for a little while it must have been fun to be a red balloon. It must have waited for today.

REMEMBER ME TO HAROLD WAY

I drive to the post office in difficult traffic. It's raining drearily and a truck is stalled on University avenue, clogging all but one eastbound lane. I circle the block near the post office and the only parking spot I can find is on Harold way, the one-block street around the corner. Standing in the cold drizzle I fumble out my coin purse. The meters on Harold way, unlike other parts of town, take only nickels and quarters. I'm fresh out of nickels, and grudgingly squander a quarter in the meter, thinking maybe I should have taken a chance after all and left the car beside an expired meter. Through the puddles I splash my way to the post office.

Inside, I have to wait till a man who rents a nearby box opens his box, looks dolefully at his handful of mail, closes the box, and gets out of the way. I spin the dial of Box 1111 twice -- the first time I must have hit the wrong combination -- and finally open the box. I stand tall and peer in. It's on the topmost tier, just a little above eye level. I don't believe my eyes. I reach in hopefully, elbow-deep, without result. I pause a moment in anticipation with the box still open. Perhaps they are still distributing the morning mail, and if I wait a little they will stick my mail in from the other side. But it's all for nothing. The only thing the box contains is air and a little dust. I close the box with a dismal clunk and walk away emptyhanded. Nobody loves me anymore.

Wollheim's hand was lifted and FAPA was born!
