

NUMBER 66
NOVEMBER 1993

Redd Boggs'
SPIROOCHES

REAL LIFE ISN'T SCIENCE FICTION

"Hullo, darling! How was your day? I called your office and the Department secretary said she thought you had just left the campus. You're late..."

"My day? My day was Big! BIG! A couple of hours ago I solved my equation for achieving faster than light travel in interstellar space -- a lot faster than light! It came to me suddenly in a flash. Then I stopped to make some phone calls -- "

"Wonderful! I know you've been worrying about that awful equation for years. Oh, don't sit down. You've got to change. John and Janet are coming for dinner, remember."

"Bother John and Janet! Listen, I called Carl Sagan -- you know, at Cornell; you remember 'Cosmos' on the tube -- and he thinks I should go out to CalTech to work on this. He's going to talk to them out there. He knows how big this is. It's bigger than Newton and Einstein put together! It's the twentieth century *Principia Mathematica* and perhaps the twenty-first century *General Theory of Relativity*. The people on campus here aren't any help. I need lots of input. My equation shows that a spaceship will be able to travel to the Andromeda galaxy in about three minutes, but on the return trip you'll arrive before you leave. The mathematical analysis involved will drive everybody crazy. I'll need to pick the brains of all those geniuses out in California."

"Oh dear. California. We'd have to take Caddie and Timmy out of school in midterm. That's not good -- and there's my work at the Center. I hope this will mean more money for us. Maybe we can afford that Dodge Minivan you've had your eye on."

"Don't worry your pretty head about this just yet. It will take lots of arranging. But the kids will love California. Do you realize that our weather this evening is getting colder by the minute? Must be almost zero by now. Remember, there'll be no more snow and cold weather in Pasadena."

"Oh darling, speaking of the weather outside -- I hope you won't mind putting that big old overcoat back on and hurrying over to the Cork and Bottle for a nice bottle of wine. I forgot all about it. You don't mind, do you? That's a good boy. Now excuse me, I'd better see how things are going in the kitchen. Do be careful driving on those icy streets."

"I will. You know, dear, if I had my equation converted to actual practice right now, I could go to the liquor store and back about a million times in the moments it takes me to put on my coat. Better yet, I'd be back by now, before I even go out. A bottle of wine? What are we having for dinner? Shall I get red or white?"

BESTRIDING THE NARROW WORLD

In the dark hours of early morning recently I half-wakened to behold a sad and solemn procession of shadowy figures "marching single in an endless file" through the passages of my mind. One by one they confronted me and whispered their names, almost inaudibly (for most of them are dead), and proceeded into the remote distance, never to be seen or heard again. Now and then I recognized a familiar face or heard an almost-familiar name, but most of the men

and women were unknown to me. "I am J. Sterling Morton," one of them said dimly. "That's nice," I said, as he merged into the obscurity from which he had appeared. How nice that someone once took upon himself the burden of being J. Sterling Morton. Who were these people, all of whom seemed important or self-important?

These are some of the illustrious names that were breathed expectantly in my ear, but without a chime of recognition on my part: L. Q. C. Lamar, Marcus Daly, Rollin Kirby, William Rufus King, Griffin Bell, King Camp Gillette, Henry B. Plant, Michael Owens, William Morris Stewart, Libby Riddles, Braxton Bragg, Henry Miller Shreve, Jabez Gorham, Alberto Salazar, Ron Evans, Isaac Hull, Alvin H. Hansen, Thomas F. Bayard, Ralph Adams Cram, Sarah Winnemucca Hopkins, Judah P. Benjamin, Dat So La Lee, Charles Bolden, Edward Durell Stone, Cyrus Holliday, Juliette Gordon Low, Minoru Yamasaki, John Bernard Flannagan, William Simon U'Ren, Mariner Eccles, Ellison Onizuka, Jim Ryun, Philo Farnsworth, Myron Floren, Archibald Yell....

Yell, indeed! Shout, scream, holler, if you recognize any name on the list. You may, for these people all are certifiably "famous" in their respective narrow worlds, at least in the opinion of those who wrote the section devoted to "States and Other Areas of the U. S." in the 1993 *World Almanac*. (I had been reading that reference work before I went to sleep.) In the writeups for each state are listed the "famous" persons of that state. But I, for one, never heard of the eminent men and women I enumerated above, or at least can't remember what they're famous for. "The final test of fame," someone said, "is to have a crazy person imagine he is you," but it is difficult to believe that the psychiatric wards are full of people imagining themselves to be Jabez Gorham or Edward Durell Stone.

Some of these allegedly great names come from states that find it hard to discover anybody at all to be proud of. After much deep-browed cogitation, we must suppose, Wyoming can think of only three famous "Wyomingites" and Idaho has only four great Idahoans. It's interesting to learn who some states suppose are native sons or daughters worthy of mention. Some states fall back on the desperate expediency of listing such shopworn celebrities as Lawrence Welk, Billy Graham, Billy Sunday, and Oral Roberts. Several Indian chiefs (Sitting Bull, Cochise, Geronimo) are listed, even though they were responsible for the massacre of many pioneers in the states now proud of them. Missouri lists Jesse James, and New Mexico lists Billy the Kid as celebrated persons of their states. They are famous, no doubt, if not model citizens, but why didn't Wisconsin mention Jeffrey Dahmer? Perhaps it will, in A.D. 2093.

The persons they *do* and *don't* list are significant. Minnesota lists Harold Stassen as a Minnesotan they are proud of, but doesn't list Charles A. Lindbergh, although Michigan does. Lindbergh was born in Michigan, but he is surely one of the most famous of Minnesotans, along with Ignatius Donnelly and Ruth Berman, who aren't listed either. Obviously you needn't be born in a state to be considered a celebrity of the state. Einstein is a famous New Jerseyite, and various persons, including Lincoln, Edison, Whitman, Mark Twain, and Tennessee Williams are listed as famous sons of two different states. (Williams is a famous man of Mississippi and Missouri, but not of Tennessee!) Not many women are mentioned, but the lists are an impressive mix ethnically, judging from the names that I recognize, with at least a sprinkling of blacks, Asians, and Native Americans among the lot. There are numerous movie stars, musicians, capitalists, politicians, and writers on the lists. The only science fiction writer anybody is proud of (unless you count Edgar Allan Poe) is Ray Bradbury. Not even Isaac Asimov or Robert A. Heinlein appears on any list, although they are as worthy of mention, surely, as writers who do appear, Howard Pyle, say, or Edgar A. Guest, Edgar Lee Masters, or Kate Douglas Wiggin.

SPIROCHETE : Number 66 : November 1993. Edited and published at the Sign of the Idle Gestetner by Redd Boggs, P. O. Box 1111, Berkeley, California 94701, for the two-hundred-twenty-fifth mailing of the Fantasy Amateur Press association. "It is love of candor that makes men radical thinkers." — Eric Bentley. The Spirochete heading and the "toucan" illustration are by Gretchen Schwenn, done for the first issue (1964). THE GAFIA PRESS.

At last, I gestured "Begone!" to all the dreary phantoms parading in my interrupted slumber. "Goodby, all you unfamous famous people," I grumbled with a yawn. "Goodby, Mr Cram, Mr Plant, Ms Low. I am glad I met you all. You have succeeded in boring me back to sleep."

I WAS THERE!

One winter morning more than 50 years ago we had all assembled in a classroom of Edison high school in Minneapolis, but the teacher hadn't shown up. Uncharacteristically she was very tardy that day. We sat staring at her empty desk and regarding silently the sign she always kept propped on the chalk tray of the blackboard. Framed and under glass it said in large bloated letters, "FOR VALUE RECEIVED I PROMISE TO PAY." It was the teacher's motto and her obsession. I suppose that long ago she had painfully handlettered the sign herself.

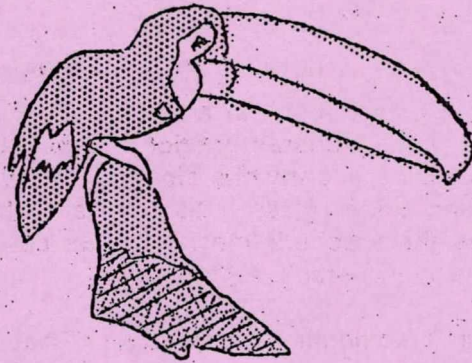
"I'm getting sick and tired of that darn stupid sign," someone said loudly. "That stupid *stupid* sign!" I think he said "darn" and "stupid," nothing more pungent. This was, after all, more than half a century ago, a far different historical epoch from our present abused age, and no young man would have thoughtlessly uttered profanities in the presence of female students. We didn't tote guns to school in those gentle golden days, or scrawl half-literate graffiti on the school walls. But we had our evil moments, nevertheless. The student who complained about the sign had a truly fiendish suggestion. "Let's get rid of that sign!" he said in a loud conspiratorial whisper.

I have forgotten what class it was: social studies, I think, but I still remember the teacher's name after all these years. Out of kindness, however, although she must have passed away many years ago, I will call her Miss (not Ms, a term not yet invented) Hattie Potts, which isn't very close to her real name. She was a large formidable woman with a perpetually angry and pugnacious expression. Perhaps she assumed her belligerent personality to match her dreadnought appearance. At any rate, like Mr Gradgrind of Dickens' *Hard Times*, she supposed that the proper way to teach was to bully and browbeat her students. When you couldn't answer one of her questions in class she would bellow ferociously, "How do you expect to receive a passing grade in my class? Only students who study hard are going to be rewarded! Look at my sign again!" She would stab a thick finger at the sign in the front of the room: "FOR VALUE RECEIVED I PROMISE TO PAY." "See that?" she would shout with heaving breast. "You are going to receive nothing but an 'F' because that's all you deserve!"

I don't believe her tactics were all that successful. At least they didn't make me study any harder. We were more infuriated than intimidated by her harrying, and we were sick of seeing that sign sitting on the chalk tray. When our bold classmate so rashly suggested, "Let's get rid of that sign!" we all shouted, "Yes, that's the idea! Go ahead!"

Thus encouraged, he jumped up and with one eye on the door grabbed the sign. Nobody had ever touched the sign before. I suppose we all expected him to suffer a rain of brimstone and fire out of heaven or to turn into a pillar of salt as in Genesis xix 23-26. Indeed he did hold the sign very gingerly, as if it burned his fingers, but he didn't put it down. He looked toward the window and drew his arm back, as if he might hurl it right through the pane. "Go ahead!" we shouted again. "Get rid of it!" I anticipated with unholy glee the wonderful smash it would make, imagining the windowglass flying in crystal shards, the sign sailing in a beautiful arc to the street below. At the last moment, however, he turned and thrust it anticlimactically but hastily out of sight, flat on its face on top of the built-in closet or wardrobe in the corner of the room beside the door. Barely in time, too, for just then Miss Potts barged into the room, out of breath and flushed of face, glaring at us as we were to blame for her tardiness.

She offered some excuse for being late, then bellowed, "I hope you've spent the time while I wasn't here studying the assignment in your textbook instead of talking among yourselves. If you haven't, heads will roll! Remember -- " Here she turned to jab her finger at the sign in the front of the room. She did the most glorious doubletake I have ever seen, while we secretly rejoiced in our hearts. "Why, it's gone!" she gasped. "What happened to my sign?" We put on our most



A CASE OF TOUCANISM

In the tropical jungle of happy imagination there are flocks of gorgeous toucans, so many birds they outnumber the trees (save the rain forest) and the stars of the Milky Way. They are gregarious, brilliant birds, related to woodpeckers, colorfully plumaged, with enormous canoe-shaped bills: the aracaris and hill toucans, the 24-inch tocos of the Amazon. But only one, a toucanet the size of a jay, perches jauntily on a branch above my desk. He always forgets that he is merely a drawing by Gretchen of a stuffed replica, twice removed from life in the mountain forests of South America, and every November, with squawks and trills, he demands, "Remember me! Remember me! Print my picture!"

innocent faces. She couldn't detect, however hard she glared, a single hint of rampant criminality in the whole class.

She paused unsteadily to get her bearings. "Anyway," she resumed in a smaller voice, "you remember what the sign says, 'For value received I promise to pay'..." It didn't have the same impact when the sign wasn't before us with its black staring letters. Somebody, perhaps it was me, smothered a snicker as she darted her eyes around the room suspiciously.

The sign remained hidden the rest of the semester. Nobody ever told Miss Potts where it was, and her awful power over us was diminished thereby, although she continued to bellow and browbeat us. Perhaps she never found the sign. It may remain there to this day, lying on its face atop the coat closet, fuzzed over with the dust of more than half a century, as lost to memory as Fortunato walled up behind the masonry. In this humdrum world we often learn too late of exciting events that happened when we were alive and aware only a short distance away, and all too seldom are we actually on the scene when they happen. Somebody shoots his neighbor just down the street, but you are at home watching "Seinfeld." They film the scene of a Hollywood movie in a park where you jog every morning, but today you felt a twinge in your hamstring and didn't go. This time I was present and witnessed a world-shaking event with my own eyes, and I have always exulted in the fact. *I was there!*

THE CAPTURED CROSS-SECTION

JEAN YOUNG, Animal Fair, RR 4, Box 47, Decorah, Iowa 52101

I want to say something first about your beautifully written Issues of Spirochete [#63 and #64]. They're always good, but I think this time you outdid yourself. "Walking Around" is one of the finest, bittersweet things you've ever done, I think. What a tragedy-filled last two paragraphs. I wish you had not had to experience that sadness, or that ANYone had to lead the life Sylvia leads, but I am amazed at how you convey and transmute that experience into and by writing.

I LOVED "A Martian Oddity." Certainly Isaac Asimov had an unusual definition of the word "now." Oh well, it's all relative. "Wild Blue Yonder" was a delight, and lighthearted with the "distance of time." I remember that in some situations we sang the "Army Air Corps Song" with "helluva roar" and in others "terrible." I believe that our grade-school teacher allowed us to sing "helluva," after considerable discussion about the circumstances in which one might use the "H" word (times when one just had to refer to the Bad Place and times when one was quoting -- the song counted as quoting, I think). I seem to remember we all felt greatly darling. But perhaps memory plays me false. Maybe I only sang "helluva" to myself, up in the cherry tree or down the lane in the locust grove. Wonderful picture of super-flyboy Sandy (pardon, *Captain Sandy*). Wars made captains out of people who were scarcely out of childhood. That type seems to have vanished somewhere, perhaps in Korea; nothing like that mood seems to have continued to exist by Vietnam days. Probably a good thing.

Back in the good old days we fans wore autogiro beanies.
