PUZZLE BUSTERS

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> Editor's Note: The National Puzzlers' League recently cele-
> brated its centennial with a three-day convention held in
> New Brunswick, N.J. in July 1983. The following account,
> reprinted from the March 1937 American Magazine, entertain-
> ingly describes an NPL regional meeting a half-century ago.
> Rufus T. Strohm, editor of the Enigma (the official publica-
> tion of the League), wrote in April 1937 "The article in the
> March American Magazine about the League and the Krewe
> is a swell job, and the author Jerome Beatty (pseudonymical-
> ly J. B. Griswold) has the thanks of all of us for giving
> so accurate a picture of us and our activities. It is comfort-
> ing to discover a writer who can discern in us something
> more than an assortment of nuts."

The world, I heard tell, was recovering from some of its goofi-
ness. The golf nut, spouting the dull details of how he holed out
from a sand trap, had not been suppressed. And no law had been
passed, alas, abating the bridge fiend. But on the credit side,
it appeared, was evidence that the puzzle addict was being quiet-
ly exterminated.

No longer, for instance, did you find a half-done jigsaw puzzle
on almost everybody's library table -- with all the pieces there
except the three the dog chewed up, the cute little rascal. Almost
never any more would a grown man pull out of his pocket a couple
of nails, twisted together, and dare you to unlink them. The cross-
word craze had died down to such an extent that you could often
read for an hour at home in the evening without being asked for
the name of a musical instrument beginning with "X", or for a
three-letter word meaning "an Australian ratite bird."

I was quite sure we were working back toward some slight rat-
ionality in our amusements. But the bubble burst. I found I was
living in a fool's paradise. Yes, I discovered The National Puz-
zlers' League, Inc., which has as its motto, "Puzzling, the nati-
onal intellectual pastime of America." It is a body of highly intel-
ligent men and women, in a closely knit union, who are deliber-
ately spreading their insidious doctrines in the hope that some
day every one of us will go around asking such silly questions
as (1) "Give me a word in the English language that has three
double letters in succession?" (Can you guess the answer? You'll
find it in Answers and Solutions, along with the answers to other
puzzles in this article.)

The National Puzzlers' League has been in existence for fifty-
three years. It has members throughout America, in China, Hawaii,

and Europe. It has held 106 semiannual conventions -- sometimes called "nut-meets" -- for which the most expert puzzlers in the country spend several days putting together word squares with such outlandish words as "sacchuma," "apalasit," and "halecium" and fussing over sentences like "Any labor I do wants time," until they find that the letters can be rearranged to make "Rome was not built in a day."

They play with words and letters, scorning the jigsaw and the mechanical puzzles as a trout fisherman scorns a worm. They live double lives, one which ordinary folks who don't know a rebus from an omnibus, the other in Puzzledom, a world of their own, which they call "Thedom" for short. In this world are lawyers, actors, army and navy officers, storekeepers, doctors, a convict, educators, a street sweeper, clerks, a nudist, salesmen, advertising men, ministers, government employees, laborers, politicians, farmers, and capitalists. Many of the members are shut-ins. In "Tnedom" you are rated only by your ability to create and solve puzzles. A crippled youth ranks high and experiences the thrill of leadership, while a college football star, just a beginner, is a nobody. A college professor has to take a back seat, while a freshman receives the admiration of one and all.

The League publishes a monthly magazine of puzzles and news of "Tnedom," and when a puzzler dies, the length of his obituary does not depend upon his standing in the outside world. Although the late James M. Beck, former solicitor general of the United States was one of the founders of the League, he lost interest in puzzles in his later years, and his death was recorded in brief paragraphs.

You probably never heard of Edwin Smith, of Ardmore, Pa., who in his later years became blind and made baskets and felt his way along the streets of his home town selling papers, and who became totally deaf before he died. But he was one of the most expert of puzzlers. It was said he could create anagrams in his head -- such as discovering that the letters in "modulation" could be rearranged to make "I am not loud" -- and his word forms were beautiful to behold. When he died, the Puzzlers' League published a 36-page memorial edition of its magazine to tell what a great man he had been.

The first inhabitant of "Puzzledom" I met was a kindly, talented, somewhat elderly educator -- assistant principal of one the New York high schools. He seemed to be a perfectly normal gentleman until we spoke of golf, and then he said, "I was down in Scranton playing with Arty Ess and--"

"With what?" I asked. I thought Arty Ess must be some new kind of golf club.

"Arty Ess," he said. "He's a puzzler."

"He certainly is. What's the answer?"

That's his nom," he said, as if that cleared it all up. "His real name is Rufus T. Stronm. He edits The Enigma, our national

magazine."

It turned out that every puzzler has a nom de plume. My friend, the professor, was known as C. Saw! Arty Ess is an author of engineering textbooks and assistant dean of the faculty of a correspondence school. On his trip to Scranton, C. Saw had also seen Primrose, who teaches architectural draftsmanship in Baltimore. Arty Ess had just heard from Amanovlettus, a letter carrier in Franklin, N.H., from N. Jineer, a woman graduate engineer from Cornell and Columbia, and from Gi Gantic, a St. Louis physician who speaks 17 languages.

I was to learn that in "Tnedom" puzzlers take on a new identity. Sometimes they don't know each other's real names and seldom do they inquire as to their vocations. Once you get into their charmed circle, you must choose a "nom," and that's You from then on. Some puzzlers begin as youngsters and choose "noms" that, to put it mildly, are a bit silly when applied to grown men. Miss Fitts, for example, weighs more than 200 pounds and is an official of the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad.

Most puzzlers make no attempt to conceal the fact that they call themselves such names as Hokus Spokus, I. D. Cipher, Madda Boutem, and Dhumbb Bhelle. They are true to the cause, and glory in their peculiarities.

Obviously, this is a state of affairs not to be considered lightly by those of us determined to preserve the democracy and to prevent it from being turned into a nation of nuts. They are everywhere, spreading their propaganda not only among grown men and women, but among the youth, encouraging them to (2) search for four words that contain neither A, E, I, O, U, nor Y. (Can you find them? I did.) And, by the way, what are the longest words that can be written using only the letters in the top row of your typewriter keys (qwertyuiop)? I'll save you the trouble: "proprietor" and "typewriter."

Two conventions a year aren't enough for the puzzlers. In such cities as New York, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Baltimore, Detroit, Norfolk, and Boston are local clubs that meet once a month.

C. Saw took me to one of the New York meetings. He began to introduce the members by their real names but soon had to give up, for he knew them only by their "noms."

One of these was Plantagenet, a cultured gentleman, eager to explain the mysteries of "Puzzledom." I was later to look him up in Who's Who and learn that he was sixty-six years old, curator of the Paterson, N.J. museum, holder of a Bachelor's and a Master's degree from Harvard, a Phi Beta Kappa, an author, editor, genealogist, mineralogist, lecturer, debater, single-taxer, and vice-president of the Esperanto Association of North America.

In a group of a dozen puzzlers I said to Plantagenet, "I suppose that you people scorn the crossword puzzle."

"Oh, no," he said.

"But isn't it a diversion mostly for folks with ordinary minds?"

There was an ominous hush. I could feel electricity in the air.

Bunny, a woman puzzler, came to my rescue. "Plantagenet," she said in awe, "won the crossword championship at Boston."

"Oh, gee!" I replied.

About thirty of us sat down around a huge table. Others were in chairs back against the wall. The program was mostly in charge of three young men called Twisto, Ab Struse, and Figaro. Before the program started there was a business meeting. The most important business was to order the mimeographing, for the members, of a list of 1000 ten-letter words -- from "abductions" to "zygobranch" -- in which no letter was repeated. Ab Struse had been working on it for three years. The words are used in cryptograms to make them hard to solve.

The president of the club was just announcing that the Philadelphia puzzlers were inviting the New York puzzlers to attend a party, when C. Saw happened to think of something. He jumped up.

"Give me," he said, "a 6-letter word of one syllable that, when you take off the first 2 letters, makes a 4-letter word of 2 syllables."

The Philadelphia party was forgotten. Forty puzzlers reached for pencil and paper, and silence descended.

In a few moments one announced, "I have a 5-letter word. If you take off the last 2 letters you get a 3-letter word of 2 syllables."

"It won't do," said C. Saw firmly.

"It's boast," said the puzzler. "Isn't that close enough?"

Another puzzler shouted, "I have it! It's plague! Take off the first two and you get ague."

That was correct.

"And," said the proud puzzler, extending his research farther, "take off the next 2 and you have ue, which is the Greek prefix for 'good,' spelled backward."

"Ah-a-ah!" breathed the puzzlers in devout admiration.

I struggled to my feet and staggered over to a sideboard and gulped two glasses of water. For a few minutes, all was a blank, and then I found myself back at the table looking at mimeographed sheets of puzzles that had been passed around. Silence that was to continue for 40 minutes by the clock, hovered over the meeting. There was nothing to do but try to solve them.

There was a group of anagrams. I knew that in a real anagram you turn a phrase into another of similar meaning, using the same letters. I started on (3) HOT AIR, ED, and had to restrain myself

from jumping up and shouting "Eureka!" when I discovered the answer. I went to work on (4) MAN PAYS CENT IN HOLE, and found it quite easy.

Next, I tackled a transposal "By Reynard. Verse by Figaro." C. Saw explained to me that in such a transposal ONE was a word of nine letters and TWO was another word made of the same nine letters rearranged. (5) Here's the puzzle:

> There was an old woman; two sons had she,
> And never at all could they agree.
> Their ideas were as ONE as day and night,
> And nothing was settled without a fight.
>
> But one day the mother (though she was loath)
> At last decided to whip them both;
> And that was the first time they formed one view --
> They both decided to perpetrate TWO!

First I tried the word "different" in place of ONE. But the letters didn't rearrange into anything. I took a look at TWO.

"What," I thought, "would two such naughty sons want to perpet-rate on their dear old mother?"

Socko! TWO came to me in a flash! I fussed with the letters and got ONE -- I had solved it!

This seemed to be child's play. I was about to start on another when the referee called, "Time!" There were 17 puzzles. I had tak-en 40 minutes to solve 3 of the easiest. Most of the members had solved them all. I wasn't as smart as I thought. (You might see how long it takes you.)

One that the members called very simple was a transdeletion. They said the poetry wasn't so good as it might have been and the story was quite gruesome, but that the word building was clev-er. In the verse the numbers indicate the number of letters in the missing word. As you build, you add a letter and rearrange them to make another word. For instance, ONE is "a." TWO is "at." THREE is "tap." FOUR is "rapt." (6) Now see if you can get the others:

> A SEVEN clad in overalls, with ladder, brush, and pail,
> Came upon a new, expensive TEN.
> Without ONE moment's hesitancy he began to flail
> The keyboard with his smudgy hands and then
> The mistress of the house walked in and saw him playing there;
> But he, so FOUR in making noise and racket,
> Kept sitting TWO the instrument, serene and unaware
> That she would promptly THREE his skull and crack it.
> And this she did with great assistance from a baseball bat,
> And gave his dome a beautiful ELEVEN.
> A NINE was necessary, and he wore a metal hat
> And stitches were required (forty-seven!).
> The doctor was an amateur; he chopped and chopped and chopped
> With his scalpel and his SIX and all his stuff.

The hours on the clock sped by before the butcher stopped,
And what was left was hardly quite enough
To call a head; beside, the poor man got a dose of EIGHT.
He went quite daffy and then began to FIVE
In the manner of a maniac. He truly lost his pate.
Is it a wonder he's not alive?

There followed trick questions, read aloud: (7) On the one-cent stamp, does George Washington face right or left?" (8) Count quickly, from 10 to 5 backwards." Then came this one: "If you were a young woman who abhorred hirsute adornment would you rather be kissed by George Bernard Shaw, William Powell, Chief Justice Hughes, or Babe Ruth?"

A pretty, black-eyed young puzzler declared instantly, "Puzzle or no puzzle, I'll take William Powell!"

The right solution was "Babe Ruth," but they cast the rules to the wind and promptly gave her the laurel for the best and quickest answer of the evening.

Anagrams and queer questions are known as "flat" puzzles, because they are expressed in sentences or verse. There are 2 schools of puzzlers: "flattists" and "formists." Among the former are the solvers of cryptograms, who consider themselves a little better than other flattists who enjoy anagrams and charades. The formists solve all sorts of puzzles, but like best to construct and solve the word forms -- squares, diamonds, pyramids, and other forms that read the same both ways. (9) Here's a simple 5-letter square, from Real Puzzles, one of the two puzzle books published by the League.

The word that goes across the top and down the left edge of the square is "a hollow, muscular organ." Second is, "a lighted coal." Third is, "to misuse." Four, "to treat, as by rubbing or coating, with resin." Five, "inclination." This is child's play.

Such formists as Xquiq -- pronounced "squeak," like a rusty hinge -- have word libraries that require a 14-foot shelf. They include special lists of all 3-letter words, 4-letter words, up to and including 11-letter words. The "eight-list," for instance, contains 170,000 words, is in 4 volumes, mimeographed and bound, and sells for $25.

Dictionaries often disappoint the puzzlers by not listing words they think should be in there.

There was the case of "carefree," without a hyphen. It was a grand word to use in an "eight square" because it contained 3 "e's." But it was in no dictionary. Nearly 10 years ago the League decided to put it in.

For years ministers, doctors, lawyers, and educators battled doggedly and fearlessly for the word. While others were crying, "We Want Beer," the puzzlers declared, "We Want Carefree." They wrote scathing letters to the editors of dictionaries, adopted resolutions, appointed committees. And at last victory perched upon their banners! One of the two publishers of dictionaries surren-

dered.

You would think that after such a glorious victory the puzzlers would be satisfied. Not these fellows. Now, headed by Plantagenet, they want to put "heesh," "hiser" and "himer" into our official language. It seems that in the hurry and bustle of this world, more time and energy than you would ever guess are wasted by using the phrases "he or she," "his or her," and "him or her." The English language needs neuter personal pronouns, and every thinking person will join in the battle.

On Bank Night at the movies, for instance, look how much time could be saved. The man on the stage would say, "If heesh will step forward with hiser ticket, we will award the prize to himer."

One member is trying to get "undies" in the dictionary, but he has been unable to assemble a following, for the other members realize his activity is not for the good of humanity but for a self-ish reason. He wants to legitimatize a puzzle he created on the phrase "undies made" (undismayed).

Many members compete in national puzzle contests. Wick O'Cincy won $10,000, Hokus Spokus won $3,500 and $1,000, and Phil O. Log-er won $2,000. You may remember the days when, on the radio, prizes were offered to those who would construct the most 3-letter or 4-letter words using only those letters found in the advertiser's slogan. There aren't any of those any more. Members of the Puz-zler's League put them on the blink. The puzzlers would merely take their 3-letter or 4-letter lists (the 3-letter list contains about 5,000 words), copy the words that qualified, and the advertiser would be dumbfounded to receive a hundred perfect entries. He'd have to give prizes for all of them.

Usually a puzzler is a good mathematician. Nearly all play ex-cellent chess and bridge, but their main interests outside their jobs are puzzlers and puzzling. Bright? Very. But what makes me wonder is that in one breath they say that they are sane citizens and in the next contend that solving puzzles is "restful and relax-ing"!

If any reader wants to test hiser ability to rest and relax, let himer see if heesh can solve these in five minutes:

(10) What's this word? OF-OF-OF-OF-OF-OF-OF-OF-OF-OF
(11) Rearrange these letters to make a phrase that means the same thing: EVERY CENT PAID ME

A noted psychologist says that if you have the qualities of gen-ius it is possible (12) to arrange these letters into a word, with-out the use of pencil or paper, in 30 seconds: LOBSISPE.

Did you do 'em? Good! So did I! and fifty more, since I first met C. Saw. My nom de plume is "Ima Nutz" and I'll be seeing you at the next Puzzlers' convention. I will, that is, if my keeper will let me out of my strait jacket.