

This is the Year

Along Powell street in San Francisco, a couple of months ago, a bedraggled black man staggered toward me and mumbled plaintively, "What year is it?"

Well, frankly, I sometimes wonder about that myself. I looked up at the brand-new calendar just now, worrying that time might have stopped in mid-flight, much as the clock did the other day in the big wind, or maybe was retreating rapidly. The calendar page seemed to ascribe the proper date to the afternoon that was just reaching its end behind the hill toward the bay, but in my mind's eye I could see the calendar busily accumulating pages, shuffling from an unseen hand. The dates seemed to flutter backward, in a topsy-turvy madness, as if the old movie cliché of calendar leaves falling away to indicate the passage of time were being run in reverse. It seemed to be 1954 again, or at least 1964.

I mean, I have been contemplating the SAPS roster. On hand are not only Art Rapp and Nancy Rapp, but Burnett Toskey and Howard DeVore. And even more surprisingly, Dave Rike! Ray Nelson! Bob Briggs! G. M. Carr! William N. Austin! G. M. still lives at 8325 31st N.W., Seattle, too, although Bill Austin has moved from 4327 West Brandon in the same city. (No doubt this happened about 30 years ago.) I regret that another Seattle fan, Royal H. Drummond, is beyond even the long reach of the indefatigable Arthur H. And of course there's Dian Crayne! She tells us that she lives in Orange county these days and is self-employed as a, uh, computerist. (Is there such a word, or did I just invent it?) Nevertheless, she sounds like the Dian of old, as melodious of ping as ever, and no doubt just as beautiful. There's many a happy vibration in all those names.

Even so, I own that I feel a smidgin of sympathy for Megret Stull's remarks in Words in the Wind #2 (SAPS mailing #145), where she expresses some doubt whether SAPS is as revitalized as it seems. After all, a sunburst of old familiar names doesn't necessarily make a good apa. "It may look," Ms Stull says, "as though [SAPS] is regaining health -- membership is increasing, page count is higher. But most of the recruits seem to be first-generation apa-hacks, 'old sailors, drunk and asleep in their boots, catching tigers in red weather.'" Actually, I don't think anybody presently in SAPS qualifies as a "first-generation apa-hack" -- Don Wollheim, Jack Speer, and Sam Moskowitz aren't with us -- and dreaming of tigers -- the burden of Wallace Stevens' poem that she quotes -- is at least preferable to the grey conventional thoughts of others. But I suppose Meg has a point.

PENSEROSO



NO.2 JANUARY 1984

Arthur Wing Pinero, in his play "The Second Mrs Tanqueray" (1893), had Paula Tanqueray say, "The future is only the past entered through another gate." I think that remark demystifies the future a little, and we see that time is all of a piece. I don't think we should worry too much who is a member of SAPS as long as he/she is interesting and articulate. I would not claim that 1954 or 1964 is preferable to 1984 or 1994. I think we ought to be optimistic enough about SAPS and SAPS' future not to worry about such things. "There is more day to dawn," Thoreau said at the end of Walden. "The sun is but a morning star." In contemplating the state of SAPS/1984, that's the thought to keep in mind.

In the Dawn of the World

"...I'm on my way to heaven;
Gonna tell you just how I feel,
I'd rather ride a wagon and go to heaven
Than to hell in an automobile."

-- Uncle Dave Macon,
"From Earth to Heaven"

One of my earliest memories is of riding on the high, swaying seat of a small wagon drawn by a horse. The horse was being driven by my grandfather, Chalmers Robinson, and we were on our way to throw away some household trash in a dumping ground somewhere out of town -- the town of Staples, which is in north central Minnesota, where we lived. I must have been no more than three or four years old. We glided gently along to the clip-clop of the horse on a country road where the sun shone brightly, the wind was fresh and clean, and the dirt road was untraveled, at least just then, by any other vehicle besides ours. We could hear the warble of meadowlarks that sang from the fenceposts along the way.

I wish that I had realized then that it was a historical moment in my life, and engraved all the details on my mind. All I remember are the general impressions. Maybe it was the last time that my grandfather, an old farmer in the years before he moved to town, ever held the reins of a horse. He died only a few years later. And surely it was the last time I ever rode in such a primitive contraption, back in the bright morning of the universe.

Another of my first memories is of accompanying my Uncle Wint to the farm equipment dealer in downtown Staples to pick up a farm tractor he had just purchased, or else to test drive a tractor, I am not sure which. I don't know why I went along on this occasion; I don't remember any other similar time. At any rate, after I climbed up on the tractor with him, we trundled slowly down the street with the motor roaring and the vertical exhaust spouting dark smelly fumes. But only a short distance away, the tractor conked out in the middle of what seemed to me to be a busy intersection. After trying in vain to get the tractor started again, my uncle jumped down from the big saddle seat, and strode away to get help, leaving me in sole possession of the stalled vehicle.

I looked fearfully at all the traffic whizzing around me. Cars of all shapes and sizes seemed to be rushing past in all directions at

reckless speeds -- surely a misapprehension, for the town was small and quiet -- and I could stand it for only a few alarming minutes. I descended from the tractor in haste, scampered to the nearest curb, and hurried home, much shaken by the experience.

These two memories seem somehow to bracket a change that was going on in the world back then -- a change surely not entirely for the better -- a long long time ago, when I was still in kneepants.

Incoming Egoboo

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It was good to hear from you -- a voice out of the past. It has been a long time since we stood face to face -- would it be as much as 40 years ago? From time to

time I have thought of you and wondered where you were and how the world was treating you.

Over the past year I have been ill and few letters have been written. My wife, also ill, has helped me to carry on a minimum of business correspondence, only that which was absolutely necessary. During brief periods when I was able to work, I was at the desk trying to complete a new novel, which has been almost two years in the making. Today, feeling more fit than I have in some time, I cleaned off the desk for what I hope will be the final sketch of work to get the novel finished. The desk was a mess and as I dug through it I found the copy of *Penseroso* #1 which you mailed me a couple of months ago. At the time I had made a mental note to write you my thanks for sending it to me.

I am pleased by the kindness you voice concerning my first story, "The World of the Red Sun." So far as its literary quality is concerned it was a fairly bad effort, but as my first it has held a special place in my heart, and I'm delighted to know that it is still remembered.

But I am more pleased, I think, by your deep perception of that day in which it was written. It was, as I recall it, a simple time. We had a depression, with millions out of work, while I, by the grace of God, hung onto a job that paid so poorly it barely put food on the table. I remember the tragedy of realizing that I needed a new suit if I were to retain any decency. The suit cost, I recall, \$18, and when I finally bought it, the \$18 reduced our small backlog to panic proportions.

Aside from the depression, however, there were no problems such as we face today. There was no nuclear menace, no arms race, no perceived drug problem, no nose-to-nose confrontation with another super-power. Life, while it might be hard if you were caught in the depression, still was a fairly uncomplicated process. You felt some comfort and had some hope -- and writing of whatever kind, science fiction or otherwise, reflected this.

I don't, by writing this, negate the technical progress and the hopeful change of public attitude we have made since that time. But I do realize that we have paid a dreadful price for that progress. This is nothing new, of course. Progress always carries a price tag. I guess I wouldn't want to go back to 1931. I'm not the kind of old man who drools over the past. But there is some comfort in going back and recalling how it was.

EC: Thanks for the letter. I'm glad you're feeling better. It looks like this whole issue is devoted to reflections of the past!

New Adventures Among Old Magazines (2)

● "Red April, 1965" (Frank K. Kelly), Wonder Stories, March 1932.

Frank K. Kelly, whose most famous stories were "Crater 17, Near Tycho" and "Star Ship Invincible," once projected World War 1 -- which was 14 years in his past -- another 33 years into his future. The result was a story called "Red April, 1965," his vision of what World War 2 would be like. Obviously, he didn't foresee who the opponent would be.

Of course that war came quicker by some 24 years than he predicted and it wasn't at all as he imagined it. The story illustrates some of the perils of science fiction trying to predict the future. We are aware that history repeats itself, but how and when and where and in what unlikely guise is forever hidden from us. Surely the future will not resemble the past and a good deal of imagination must be brought to bear on the facts of history before any tenable vision results.

World War 2, as conceived by Kelly in 1932, hardly resembled World War 2 as it actually happened in any respect. He describes various aspects of the future, the YMCA attendants, dugouts, Lewisite gas, that were merely recycled gimmicks borrowed from World War 1 and not at all characteristic of the later war. In fact, at least one character in the story comes from an even more ancient time. Sam, the captain's black servant, "who had followed him to the front," seems to come out of the American Civil War.

The flying squadron in the story, called "Krenski's Red Circus," is another World War 1 phenomenon. It smacks of the days of Manfred von Richthofen and his adversaries. These fliers of 1965 might as well be fighting "dog fights" with Fokkers, Nieuports, and Spads. Kelly does foresee something of the future roles of the air force and armored divisions, but he doesn't comprehend that war might become more fluid and mobile as a result. He imagines a static war, not much different from that of the trenches in France, 1914.

Perhaps his greatest error is in depicting the robot pilots that direct the Red "gravity cruisers." They are not part of the mechanism of the aircraft -- what we would call computer-like now -- but instead are merely kin of Grag and Adam Link: clanking humanoid monsters. One robot pilot is described as follows: "It took its place at the controls, shot out the three arms toward the high bank of keys, and flung a switch." Such "robots" often have appeared in serious science fiction of course -- perhaps even down to the present day, for all I know -- but this silly conception, among many others, makes "Red April, 1965" seem impossibly ludicrous from this remove. For we have the wonderful advantage of hindsight, peering back into time, 19 years back to the year 1965, and another 33 years back to the dim year of 1932.

PENSEROSO is published occasionally for the Spectator Amateur Press society by Redd Boggs, P. O. Box 1111, Berkeley, California 94701. This is issue #2, January 1984, SAPS mailing #146. Heading by Lee Hoffman.
THE GAFIA PRESS. p-2445707