How It Began

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Should anyone ask, "Who originated crossword puzzles?" or, "How did the first crossword puzzle get its start?", here are some of the salient facts, as best I have been able to gather them. You see, I have had reason to investigate the history of crosswords. Before the recent appearance of that superb reference work, Colliers Encyclopedia, I was consulted by Major Donald D. Millikin for information on his article about crossword puzzles.

Here, then, is a summary of his report and some additional material for the crossword story. Let's begin at the beginning.

According to most writers on the subject, the first crossword puzzle appeared in print in The New York World, a Pulitzer newspaper now defunct, on December 21, 1913. It was the brainchild of Arthur Wynn. However, it should be noted that the diagram did not have any black squares and that it was called a 'Word·Cross Puzzle. At a later date, Wynn inserted black squares.

Other authorities maintain that crosswords evolved from previous word puzzles that featured words criss-crossing each other. I do not know whether the term "crossword" was created by Arthur Wynn, but his "Word-Cross" does not display sufficient creativeness for a title. M. M. Mathews has stated in an issue of American Speech that The Oxford English Dictionary has "crossword" with the earliest quotation dated 1925, but he believes earlier quotations can be found. As will soon become apparent, he is correct. However, I am digressing, for I started to write that there is a question about whether Arthur Wynn did actually create crossword puzzles or merely improved previously existing word puzzles. Let me continue with the facts, first. I shall try to answer the question of the Wynn authorship later.

Crosswords soon became so popular as a newspaper feature that, "in 1924, the first crossword puzzle books began to appear. Simon and Schuster claim the distinction of being their first publisher, under the name of the Plaza Publishing Company. The authors were Prosper Buranelli, F. Gregory Hartswick, and Margaret Farrar. The date of the copyright was April 10, 1924, with the title, "The Cross Word Puzzle Book."

The daddy of all our crossword magazines seems to have been one published...
in Seattle in 1924 by Puzzle Publishing Company under the rather simple name of "Cross Word Puzzle Magazine." I have never seen a copy or been able to trace one. If any of our Seattle readers (or anyone else) can produce one, I shall be glad to hear from that person.

Another sidelight is a diagramless crossword puzzle. One of the collaborators on the first crossword book, F. Gregory Hartswick, whom I knew well and respected highly, as we were both contest editors who combined our efforts for many newspaper puzzle contests, claimed credit for originating the diagramless. He was puzzle editor of The New York World when Harry Houdini, the ranking magician of the time, was entertaining readers with a Sunday supplement called "Red Magic."

One day, Hartswick came back from lunch and found he had forgotten the crossword diagram, though he still had the manuscript definitions. There was no time to make up a new diagram, so he ran the crossword puzzle with a blank one, because he realized that he could solve it that way in spite of the missing diagram.

I can well believe his story, as I knew that Hartswick was a creative genius. He was the author of puzzle books of various sorts, wrote magazine articles for Esquire, and authored a novel or two. He died in 1948, according to an obituary in The New York Times.

I have little faith in the Arthur Wynn story. He seems to have been mentioned in no other connection than with the crossword origin, and even the spelling of his name is sometimes given incorrectly. I do not doubt that there was such a person or that he presented the public with the first so-called crossword puzzles which had white instead of black squares, but I am not inclined to grant him sole credit until further proof is produced for his originating them.

Returning to the origin of the term crossword, The Oxford English Dictionary actually gives, in its Supplement, the earliest quotation as of 1924 and not 1925. But, as a term itself, not referring to puzzles, but to the use of angry words, the Oxford traces it back to 1676. In its application to a type of puzzle, I have found the name as early as 1880 in a magazine carrying a puzzle department. The magazine was Golden Days and the date was March 6, 1880. Here is an example of the kind of puzzle it called "Cross Word":

"In calf, not in cow;
In pig, not in sow;
In lick, not in lap;
In hat, not in cap;
In made, not in show;
In wind, not in blow;
My whole is a flowerless plant."

Answer: LICHEN.

The method I use in solving this type of puzzle may be of interest. I know that whole is a six-letter word from the six lines of clues given. I also know that each line calls for one letter of the six-letter word, and that the particular letter must be found in the first part of the clue and not in the second part.
Thus, the necessary letter between CALF and COW would have to be A, L, or F, but not C, as C is also in COW. Setting up the following table, I can then anagram LICHEN:

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1. A L F
2. P I G
3. I C K
4. H T
5. M A D E
6. I N D
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I do not know how the transition was made from Arthur Wynn’s WORD CROSS to CROSSWORD, but the choice of the latter title may have been that of somebody else, and even the changeover to black squares in the diagram may not have been of Arthur Wynn’s creation. Until further study of the subject, I would say that the origin of crosswords is still debatable.

**TRIPLE STRENGTH**

Words featuring two consecutive X’s are a rarity in all languages except in Maltese, where they are commonplace. It is with pleasure, therefore, that we report a gentleman in France—in the village of Harly, in the Department of Aisne—a retired constable—whose name is Monsieur JXXX. This unique name includes not two but three successive X’s!

Our authority for this startling intelligence is the February 6, 1968 issue of France-Soir, the most widely distributed newspaper in France. Although the newspaper tends to be sensation-seeking, its information is usually reliable. The paper comments that JXXX is spelled exactly as it is pronounced.

**NAMES THAT DOOM US**

The advance of medicine has finally recognized names as an etiological factor in illness and death. Two recent examples:

1. The Council for Alcoholism in Glasgow, Scotland has compiled statistics showing that persons whose surnames begin with the letter M are eight times as prone to alcoholism as others.

2. The British Medical Association finds that individuals whose last names begin with the letters between S and Z are twice as likely as others to get ulcers and three times more prone to heart attacks. The frequency of neuroses in the S-Z group is 50% higher than in the A-R group. General life expectancy in the S-Z group is 12 years less than in the A-R group.

Both of these reports are from Great Britain. It is high time that American medicine undertook corroborative and amplifying studies. Calling all doctors!