AN AFTER-DINNER MINT

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The article "Words, Non-words, Nonsense Words" in the May 1971 Word Ways touched briefly on coined words. By this I mean words not in any dictionary, not in the spoken or written literature, in fact not in any known place -- but "words" that should be words, at least in the mind of some logologist. The article concluded that words coined only for their logological uniqueness were examples of bad logology.

Now this was a reasonable and rational conclusion. And it certainly draws a line. But just as certainly one that may be challenged.

In searching to resolve these problems, I reviewed the many coined words that have appeared in Word Ways. When I started, I believed that I could draw some new, perhaps farther out, line.

I found -- as you, readers of Word Ways, knew all along -- that one may slip easily from letter combinations that apparently are words, to those that logically should be words, to those that are clever fabrications, to those that are outrageous fabrications.

I concluded that the burden belongs on the author. Let him defend his coinage. Let him live with his coinage. And for those few with no conscience, let them suffer the gibes of their fellow-logologists.

Give me your hand, dear reader, and I'll take you on a postprandial stroll. When, and if you can, I'll go any farther, then turn around and go back.

Consider the three entries in Webster's Third Unabridged: TWO-HOLER, THREE-HOLER, and FOUR-HOLER. Who would dispute there is a ONE-HOLER? Yet there is no such dictionary word. Certainly the word is highly logical; and the type of privy is indisputably more prevalent.

But if one, two, three, and four, why not a FIVE-HOLER? And a SIX-HOLER? And an EIGHTY-NINE-HOLER? None of these, to my knowledge, has any "logological interest". But suppose they did; what is the difference?

Let's now consider some "words" that may be of interest to students of logology. For our subject, I choose that which has seemed to generate more coinages than any other: Pair Isograms. (A Pair Isogram is a set of different letters used twice in scrambled form in a word.) Let's look how only per

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The verb OPPOSE occurs in most if not all English dictionaries. Related to it is the noun OPPOSER, just about equally common. Now, Webster's Second Unabridged, the Oxford English Dictionary, and probably others give the verb REOPPOSE. Thus, can we not expect a noun REOPPOSER? The plural of this, REOPPOSERS, is a ten-letter Pair Isogram. To my knowledge it does not exist as a word. Yet I can't be absolutely sure.

As the authority from this point on, the real words (if you can distinguish them from the fabricated words) are from Webster's Third Unabridged.

The verb or noun TWIST has a related noun TWISTER. Since the combination WIRE TWIST is a noun, used in reference to fabricating shotgun barrels, people or machines that do this must be WIRE TWISTERS. Has anyone ever seen any? Can you prove there are none?

Well known is the verb SHANGHAI, meaning to drug a man to serve as a sailor. The present participle is SHANGHAILING. By forming the gerund and then the noun, I arrive at SHANGHAILINGS, acts of drugging men for forced servitude as sailors. Where is the literature reference?

Many companies have departments, divisions, and sections. Certainly, in many large companies, there are -- or must be -- bulletin boards labeled SECTION NOTICES. Would someone please furnish a picture of one?

An uncommon, but legitimate, word is NOTIDANOIDEA. This is the name for a suborder of sharks. Can you dispute that their qualities are NOTIDANOIDEATE? Where is the person who has used this word? If someone did once, would this be a real word, or simply a nonce word?

The name of the morning glory family is CONVOLVULACEAE. Would anyone question that a plant unlike this has the adjective UNCONVOLVULACEAE?

An early American concoction was brewed from the plant INDIAN REDROOT. This is defined as equivalent to REDROOT. In turn, this is given equal to NEW JERSEY TEA. Further, this is listed as a synonym for INDIAN TEA. May anyone challenge the existence of INDIAN REDROOT TEA? I have searched high and low in books on potions and herbs and in accounts of American Revolutionary activities without finding this combination. But I haven't looked and can't look everywhere. Now, if this brew were in short supply, it could well be RATIONED INDIAN REDROOT TEA. Are you aware I have led you to the combination of a Triple-8 Isogram of 24 letters?

So, dear reader, it is far better to let language guide us, difficult though it may be for the enthusiastic logologist anxious to plug a gap in his array of words.