A FORBIDDEN WORD

DMITRI A. BORGMA N N
Dayton, Washington

Some words are considered so offensive to public morals that almost no dictionary ever published has had the courage to include them.

I am horrified to discover that such a word has made its way into the hallowed pages of Word Ways. Casually mentioned in the November 1973 Kickshaws (see page 239) is NITE, an alternate spelling of NIGHT.

Everyone, of course, is familiar with NITE. It is a nonstandard variant, used in the trade press of the entertainment world, in advertising, and in copyright names. Put forth as one of numerous reformed spellings by the Simplified Spelling Board (established in 1906 with the aid of a subsidy from Andrew Carnegie), it has been adopted by other would-be spelling reformers (William Russell, among others), and has had a run in newspapers such as the Chicago Tribune and the New York Daily News, as well as in that show-business publication, Variety. Blanche Jennings Thompson has described it as connoting speakeasies, gin, cheapness, and vulgarity, in contrast with the standard form NIGHT, which suggests quiet, rest, and beauty ("Our Vanishing Vocabulary" in Catholic World, August, 1934).

Although the word is universally recognized and used, it is not a dictionary word. Look it up in your dictionary: you will not find it there. Look for it in another dozen dictionaries of your choice: pocket dictionaries, college dictionaries, unabridged dictionaries, slang dictionaries -- you won't find it in any of them, either. What is the meaning behind this conspiracy of silence on the part of our lexicographers?

It is a "reformed" spelling. The last volume of The Century Dictionary, in publication from 1891 to 1914, lists about 3,500 amended spellings approved by the Philological Society of London and by the American Philological Association. NITE isn't one of them. Two major unabridged dictionaries, Webster's Second Edition and the Funk & Wagnalls unabridged, both teem with thousands of reformed spellings. Somehow, both dictionaries have overlooked NITE.

NITE is considered to be on the slangy side. Check a variety of authoritative slang dictionaries, including the Dictionary of American Slang by Wentworth and Flexner, An American Dictionary of Slang by Joseph A. Weingarten, and A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English by E. again, NITE

Surely, one must recognize the current custom, as in Random House's Dictionary of the English Language, 1961, a study in future?

Most thesauri and standard dictionaries, and other tools of the trade, of Swanfeldt, for example, to mentioning.

Most thesauri and standard dictionaries, and other tools of the trade, of Swanfeldt, for example, are not the word's fate.

NITE does exist. It must carry the odds stacked against it.

First, we have the dictionaries, defined by Swanfeldt.

Next, we have the thesauri, defined by Swanfeldt.

Finally, we have the English language, defined by H. L. Mencken.

Respected a nation, nor a thesaurus.

To define, at least as an ordinary v

end of the road we may know this about NITE, which

nals, which
orals that also include them.

Its way into the Novem-

ter spelling of

nonstandard

>rd, in adver-
n.ous reformed

in 1906 with the
,opted by other

others), and

le and the New
,ication, Vari-

mnoting speak-

the standard

Our Vanishing

English is a language with a long history, and NITE is a very modern word in that language. Examine dictionaries that abound with today's vocabulary: Webster's Third Edition (including the 1971 Addenda Section), the latest printings of The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, Unabridged, and of The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language; examine even A Dictionary of New English, 1963-1972, by Barnhart, Steinmetz, and Barnhart. NITE remains an elusive ghost!

Surely, dictionaries catering to collegiate interests would choose to recognize a word as widely known as is NITE. Search the pages of the current college dictionaries published by Merriam, Funk & Wagnalls, Random House, and World Publishing Company -- your quest remains a study in futility.

Most thesauruses include words and phrases not easily found in standard dictionaries. Check the works of Roget, Allen, Norman Lewis, and others: NITE has mysteriously been forgotten. The same is true of the closely-related crossword puzzle dictionaries: the pages of Swanfeldt, Newman, Slason, and the like fall silent when it comes to mentioning NITE.

Is the desperate hunt for lexical confirmation that a word such as NITE does exist destined to end in failure? No: the indomitable human must carry the search to a successful conclusion, however great the odds stacked against it may turn out to be.

First, we discover the word NITE in a number of unabridged dictionaries, defined as an obsolete verb meaning "to deny or refuse". Clearly, that is not the object of our agonizing quest.

Next, we find NITE given as a synonym for NIGHT in The American Thesaurus of Slang, Second Edition, by Berrey and Van den Bark. That's the word we want, of course. However, this work is a thesaurus, not a dictionary, and not even a thesaurus of the standard language, at that.

Continuing our probe, we find NITE in The American Language by H. L. Mencken (abridged edition edited by Raven L. McDavid, Jr.). Respected a reference work as this book is, it is neither a dictionary nor a thesaurus, and does not satisfy our requirements.

Finally, we turn to a relatively little-known dictionary: The Funk & Wagnalls Standard Dictionary of the English Language, International Edition, first published in 1958. In this singular work we find NITE as an ordinary vocabulary entry, properly defined. We have reached the end of the road. Yet, exultation at our success is tempered by the knowledge that the dictionaries currently published by Funk & Wagnalls, which have superseded the International Edition, have dropped
the word NITE. To put it another way, the appearance of the word was only a flash in the pan!

And such a word is blithely used in Word Ways? How the mighty have fallen! . . . I weep for logology . . .

ANAGRAB

In the December 1974 issue of Games & Puzzles magazine, Richard Sharp describes Anagrab as "the best new game I've learnt during the year", one in which fast thinking is at a premium. Place the letters of a Scrabble set face down on a table, stir well, and turn over letters one by one in a central pool. The object of the game is to form words, either using letters from the pool of visible letters, or from words already formed by the other players. Words formed from the pool must contain at least four letters; words formed from other players' words must use all the letters of the word plus one or more pool letters (for example, a player can grab the word LIVE, add a D from the pool, and form the word DEVIL; another player can grab DEVIL, add E and R from the pool, and form REVILED). A player is also permitted to enlarge and rearrange his own words with pool letters, in order to make them less vulnerable to grabs. Note that there are no "turns" in the usual sense; any player can form a pool word or grab another's word whenever he sees an opportunity. Agree on a dictionary beforehand, and keep it handy to verify the legitimacy of the words claimed; there is no penalty for unsuccessful challenges, but invalid words must be returned to the pool or the players they were grabbed from. To avoid utter mayhem, players should agree on when the next Scrabble letter should be turned up for the pool. The game ends when the pool is exhausted and cannot be replenished, or if no more moves are possible; players then add up the scores associated with the words they still hold.