Webster’s Dictionary defines colloquy as mutual discourse. Readers are encouraged to submit additions, corrections and comments about earlier articles appearing in Word Ways. Comments received up to a month prior to publication of an issue will appear in that issue.

In the February 1975 and May 1977 issues, David Stephens presented a palindromic correspondence suggesting that Napoleon’s celebrated “Able was I ere I saw Elba” was the result of a liaison with a young woman named Ada. Not so, says George Grieshaber of Wyoming, Ohio; the March 1820 issue of Journal Optique demonstrates that the saying was not even written down correctly in the first place:

As Napoleon was approaching his island of exile, a sympathetic sailor offered him an old telescope to preview the site. This instrument was worn, dirty, and rusty, and as Napoleon used it, he received a permanent eye infection. When people later asked him if his bad eye was congenital, he gave them his stock answer: Able was eye ere eye saw Elba.

F Juniper of Twin Oaks, Virginia notes that Darryl Francis’s “long hyphen” is technically known as an en dash, commonly used to indicate a range, as in “pp. 6–9”. Its use as a “strong” hyphen is well-established in America, but seems to be recent and not to have spread to Britain (altho H. W. Fowler in the 1926 edition of Modern English Usage pointed out, not very hopefully, that such a device would be convenient). The rules for the en dash vary from publisher to publisher. Some use it whenever the elements of a compound are on an equal grammatical footing, as in “red–green contrast” or “positron–electron annihilation”. Others use it for such compounds, but only when one or the other yokefellow contains a hyphen or a space, as in “phonon–free–electron interaction” or “Lloyd George–Winston Churchill government”. At the other extreme, some, including Time, use it for all hyphenations connecting complex forms, even if the other element is a mere prefix. Hyphenation is in the same chaotic state that English spelling was in 400 years ago. Fowler complained about it, to no avail. It has been said that the hyphens in Biblical Hebrew are largely incomprehensible, so it seems that the tradition is a long one and unlikely to be broken down soon.

Darryl Francis has collected many further examples from Time magazine between March 28 and May 16, 1977: Academy Award–winning, anti–strip-mining, co–managing editor, Echo I–class, ex–pro foot–
baller, Grammy Award-winning, John Dean-like, mini-radio receiver, New York-based, non-oil producing, post-Viet Nam, post-World War II, Ralph Nader-affiliated, receptionist-cum-presiding spirit, Red-flag-waving, super 8-size. (Three more can be found in the Timely Neologisms article, elsewhere in this issue.)

Charles Holding recently came up with a 13-letter well-mixed transposal of two Webster Second words inexplicably overlooked by the Bell Laboratories transposition study of the Air Force list: PLEURONECTOID and NUCLEOPROTEID.

William Sunners suggests that it might be interesting to extend Charles Bostick’s study of word-pairs which sound alike but differ in one letter (such as oar, or) to ones which differ in two or more letters (such as straight, strait). He adds (primer, primer) to the Bostick list, and Boris Randolph adds (carries, caries). Ralph Beaman notes the existence of the surname Le Secq in the July 7, 1977 Wall Street Journal; if the Q is not sounded in this name, the pair (Secq, sec) takes care of one of the two missing letters. Anyone for J?

Darryl Francis wonders why Dmitri Borgmann didn’t comment that PSEUDOFEVERISHLY can be divided up into eight two-letter words, all of which appear in either Webster’s Second or Third (and none are obsolete). Philip Cohen feels that the concept of “interestingness” of a word should be made less subjective; the touchstone is to insist that the word have a property that is shared by relatively few other words. To demonstrate that the property is indeed unusual, draw a random dictionary sample of (say) 20 words, and show that none of them have the property in question. This does not solve the whole problem, however, for one must also decide whether the property is itself interesting. Here, simplicity and conciseness is the touchstone: the fact that a word is a palindrome is likely to be more interesting to people than the fact that a word has at least four letters, each repeated three or more times, even though the probability of randomly selecting a word of the first type is (likely) greater than that of selecting a word of the second type. As more and more properties are allowed, the chances of proving that any word has at least one interesting property get better and better. Assuming that properties are independent of each other (no doubt a gross simplification of reality), and assuming that each property characterizes five percent of all words as interesting, then the probability that a random word fails to be interesting with respect to any of one hundred different properties is $1 - (0.95)^{100}$, or 0.994!

May errata: Darryl Francis points out that Weston Hare was not the first person to discover that ETAOIN SHRDLU can be rearranged in the word OUTLANDISHER -- Darryl's prior discovery of this was briefly mentioned in the February 1973 Kickshaws. (He adds that the word can also be found in the English Dialect Dictionary.) David Stephens corrects a word in the second palindrome in "A Tart Reply to Napoleon" -- on the third line of page 100, non-immoral should be non-amoral. In "Speech Play", nishi suku samurai should be nishi muku samurai.

Timothy J. Wheeler of Shelbyville, Indiana adds another strange paradox to Jezeble Q. Xixx's February 1977 list: self-abuse is the same as self-gratification.

Ralph Beaman sends an addendum to "Up Your Wordpower" -- GENITALIA looks like "made in Italy" but is really "born in Italy".