Our family has always prided itself on its literacy, so when we learned that our friend and neighbor, Foster Milburn, had purchased a dictionary we were interested, of course, and after looking at his I decided that we too should own one. The hard part came in determining which dictionary, exactly, we should purchase. Inasmuch as this was a family project to be decided jointly, we sat down together one evening and went through a number of advertisements of dictionary companies -- and what a wealth of information we gathered! Apparently there were a great many reasons for owning a dictionary -- not all having to do with words -- and it seemed obvious that the first thing to figure out was what we thought necessary in such a book. We discovered that there were many, many different types of dictionaries, and as many prices. More, one could buy one-volume dictionaries, or multi-volumed sets; or one might buy, if he chose, foreign language dictionaries, and specialized ones in countless fields.

The first consideration, of sets versus single volumes, was easily decided: knowing of Milburn's 'thriftiness', we realized that his choice of a one-volume dictionary might have been prompted by economics, and that a multi-volumed set would be more in keeping with our life-style than his. However, as ostentation was the last thing we wanted, we decided to limit ourselves to a modest two-volume set. This proved to contain exactly the same information as a huge thirteen-volume set, but was much reduced in size; and a small magnifying glass was supplied.

Before the final purchase, however, we were greatly tempted by several others, information on which I had cut out of magazines and papers.

"Look at this!" I exclaimed to my son. "If you had but one book to choose in life, **** should be it!"

"Ar - r - r!" he snarled.

"... and it has 'Flags of the World, pulse-raising banners in glorious full color...'"

"I want a book on Baseball."

Appealing to my wife, I said, "It brings not only knowledge but splendor!" and, guess what! There's a free, fifteen-year Reader's
Research Service on any subject, which allows you to ask unlimited questions, except on legal or medical advice: just the thing, isn't it, for Gwennie at school?"

My wife said, "Only twenty volumes? $175? And no legal or medical advice? What about postage? To hell with it." I had to admit my wife was right. Often, she is much smarter than I am in spotting little points that would escape the average person.

"Well, what about this one? It weighs 11 pounds, has 2330 pages, 490 cubic inches, 400,000 definitions -- imagine! -- and all for $30."

"Doesn't mention pictures," said my son. He has always liked books with pictures -- probably that's why he's better in Geometry than Algebra.

"Here's one that's lighter, and has illustrations. It's 5 inches thick and has a 200-year calendar, Tables of Squares and Cubes and their roots, the Constitution of the United States, and a mini-atlas. It's cheaper, too -- about $20."

"Plus shipping, I suppose," said my wife.

"There's a cheaper one still, and lighter: only 7 pounds and 8 3/4 x 11 x 2 7/8 -- that's about 274 cubic inches. Its cover is washable, durable, and indestructible, and..."

"What's 'etymologies'?" asked my wife; and not wanting to hurt her feelings by any display of superior knowledge (for everyone knows that the word has to do with the study of bugs) I said I did not know myself. "It has a richly-stamped, sheepskin binding, " I continued. "Marbled edges, is 12 1/2 x 9 1/2 x 5 1/4 -- that's about 623 cubic inches! More than the other one, and it's thumb-indexed besides! But then again, it's only a one-volume job."

There were so many considerations before we could come to a logical decision! We had not only to think of the price and number of volumes, but the length, breadth, and thickness of each, its weight and the opacity of its paper. Too, the number of entries, illustrations, etc., had to enter the picture: things we would never have thought of had not the Publisher pointed them out. Our heads whirled: but in the end, when everyone had gone to bed, I made the decision myself, and settled on the moderately-priced, two-volume set already mentioned, whose cubic content was not too great, whose weight was not excessive, and which had plenty of illustrations and more than enough words for all of us; and which was somewhat more impressive than Foster's, although not ostensibly so. No sense in 'rubbing it in', as we say. (I felt my decision in the matter to have been justified when one day our neighbor, frustrated at not finding a word in his one-volume dictionary, came over to consult ours! That little key-shaped thing that he wears on his watch-chain, and is so proud of, doesn't seem to help
All this happened some years ago and the present condition of the set testifies to the use we have gotten out of it. For instance, when our new baby became old enough to eat with us at table, we raised her to the necessary height with Vol. 1 (A - O). This caused no conflict as Gwennie could use Vol. 2 (P - Z) for her posture exercises. She would walk around for fifteen minutes or so every day with a volume on her head. Later, as she grew used to the routine, and her neck muscles strengthened, she took to carrying the two volumes at once; but this only occurred when the baby was sufficiently grown to sit at the table without any book. So skillful did Gwennie become in her exercises that she hardly ever dropped the flowers and leaves that her mother was pressing between the pages. Gwennie acquired a beautiful posture and everyone said that she could have become a dancer if only she had not been so short. (I am afraid that early cigarette-smoking rather stunted her growth -- not the weight of the books she carried on her head, as some persons have intimated.)

Our boy well knew my pride in the 'family culture,' and one day, when a student in High School, asked me,

"Hey, man! You know some ways how to measure the height of a building with a dictionary? You know what I mean, how high is it? You know what I mean... Three ways, man."

"Yes," I said, "I know what you mean, but I don't know any three ways to do it. I don't even know one I can think of."

"Well, you see, one way is you drop it from the top of the building and measure the time it takes to hit the sidewalk."

"Yes. There was a formula giving the distance when you knew the time. Do you remember it?"

"No," he said, "but it's in my Science book somewhere, if you need it. Can you think of another way?"

"Not right away."

"How about by Geometry? You remember yours, don't you?" he said, darkly. "Similar triangles."

"Oh, yes. And I think I know the third way."

"Give, man."

"You find the janitor of the building and offer him the dictionary if he tells you how high it is." I was catching on to my son and his heckling, and his disappointed face told me I was right. He's always had a terrific sense of humor.

* * *
I think that a feeling for words and culture and such things must be hereditary, and I believe I inherited my interest from my Mother's side of the family; in particular from her brother, George, my favorite uncle. Uncle George joined the American Expeditionary Force in 1917 and fought in World War One, in France. Before he sailed overseas, my Aunt gave him a tiny pocket dictionary of the French tongue.

"Take it, dear!", she said, half-jokingly. "It may save your life when you need a meal in Paris and don't know how to ask for it!" Uncle George tucked it away in the breast pocket of his army tunic, and both laughed nervously. When he returned after the War he was wearing a Purple Heart, but was reticent about telling of his part in the action: when questioned he would say, modestly, that he had stopped a bit of flying shrapnel from a 'jerry' grenade. This had been deflected, he said, by the dictionary my Aunt had given him! How proud she was, and how often I told and retold the story of my hero-uncle to my school-fellows, adding embellishments of my own with each telling!

Years later, after I had been in the Army myself, we got on the subject of medals in general, and his in particular, over a congenial, relaxing drink at our American Legion post.

"You sure were the lucky one, Uncle, to have kept that French dictionary with you! We might not be here getting tight together if you had forgotten to carry it along with you the day of that barrage."

"Pooh!" said Uncle George. "I told your Aunt that story just to please her. But you're a big guy now and I can tell you what really happened. When I was in Paris I met a cute chick, and fell for her -- she fell for me, too. I've forgotten what her name was, it's so long ago now. Anyway, we used to sit in this bistro -- that's French for a pub -- and drink wine together and anything else we could get hold of. That dictionary was a big help in a lot of ways, you can bet! Trouble was, though, the girl had a boy-friend, or maybe he was her husband, I don't know, and he used to follow us around and watch us from a corner table in the same pub. Say, could we have another beer?" When this had been taken care of, he continued. "I got kind of used to him sitting there and watching us, but one day the girl shouted something in French about a 'pistol', and tried to push me under the table. There was a shot and I felt a sudden twinge in my chest; but the bullet from his small-caliber weapon hit the dictionary, luckily, and didn't do much more than dent its cover -- I only got a scratch. I told the Medics I'd been potted at by a German sniper, and they took my word for it. So it goes," said Uncle George, meditatively. "I couldn't very well tell your Aunt the truth, now could I?" I quite understood, but wished secretly that I had known the real story, for it was much better than the ones I had invented for my friends.

So this will explain how my family and I came to buy a dictionary, and why I think a liking for such things is probably hereditary.