

THE SEARCH FOR GADSBY

A. ROSS ECKLER
Morristown, New Jersey

The novel Gadsby, written without the letter E by Ernest Vincent Wright in 1936-37, is one of those books that many people have heard about but few have seen. It has been alluded to in books on wordplay (for example, in the appendix to the Dover Publication 1961 paperback reprint of Bombaugh's Oddities and Curiosities), in magazines (one page is photographically reproduced in an article by John R. Pierce in the September 1972 Scientific American), and even in books on other subjects (Ronald Clark's The Man Who Broke Purple, 1977). The book is extremely rare; according to The Book of Lists 3 by Amy Wallace, David Wallechinsky, and Irving Wallace, a copy with dust jacket once sold for \$1000.

When I decided to obtain a copy for my library, I didn't realize what I was getting into; the search, in fact, took more than three years.

I began the search quite conventionally, by visiting old bookstores in New York City along lower Broadway and Fourth Avenue. So that I might eyeball bookshelves more quickly, I also visited the New York Public Library at 42nd Street and Fifth Avenue to examine the only copy I knew existed -- a small book bound in red, with the title lettered across the spine in small type instead of along the spine in larger letters. Some of the book dealers I visited had heard of the book, but none had it in stock or recalled having it in stock at an earlier time.

The next step was to place my request in the hands of a bookfinder service. But which one? Numerous ads by such firms appear each Sunday in the New York Times Review of Books, all promising vast resources and prompt service. While pondering this, I read an article in the August 8, 1976 New Jersey section of the Sunday Times about the Princeton Antiques Book Service in Atlantic City, which had been rated "the most successful book title searcher in the country" (with a 75 per cent success rate). I waited a few months for any surge of orders to abate (perhaps an unnecessary precaution), and placed the Gadsby problem in their hands at the start of 1977. They reported back every three months, but at the end of a year had to admit defeat in locating the work through "advertising, want lists, our stock and dealers co-op".

At this point, I began to realize that if I were to find Gadsby I would have to take a more active role. I knew from Robert Ian Scott's Word Ways article on the book in August 1977 that it had been completed in early 1937, when it was mentioned in a New

York Times article dated March 23, but it was not published until 1939, by the Wetzel Publishing Company of Los Angeles. Wright died in the National Military Home in Los Angeles on October 6, 1939, reputedly the day the book was published (according to The Book of Lists 3). Apparently Wright had had difficulty in locating a publisher, for Wetzel was a vanity press which published books for a payment supplied by the author or a financial angel. Ordinarily such publishers make little effort to place books in bookstores instead turning over the unsold inventory to the author. What had happened to this inventory after Wright died? He never married, as far as is known, so that his estate would have passed on to a brother or sister, niece or nephew, or more distant cousins.

In January 1978 I wrote Boris Randolph of Los Angeles to help me in tracking down Wright's estate. He quickly obtained his death certificate, but Wright had died intestate and there were no papers in the Surrogate's Office regarding the disposal of his estate. Veterans Administration files in Los Angeles and Denver both contained the name Ernest Wright. The Los Angeles file referred to a different man, but the Denver file was correct. According to it, royalties from the book were provided by A.W. Mumford, a Chicago publisher. Wright requested that after his death royalties be sent to his sister, Mrs. M.W. O'Leary, 285 Tremont Street, Newton, Massachusetts. Attempts to locate Mrs. O'Leary or any descendants failed; no one responded to a notice in a couple of Newton weekly papers, and a visit to the house by Eric Albert of Medford, Massachusetts drew a blank from the current tenant. A woman next door who had lived there since the 1940s had never heard of Mrs. O'Leary, either.

Boris Randolph was successful in locating Mrs. Elizabeth Wetzel, a sister-in-law of the publisher, in the Los Angeles telephone directory. I immediately wrote her for information about the publication and disposal of Gadsby, and received a reply from Mrs. Ralph McIntosh of Arcadia, California, the daughter of the late publisher. Mrs. McIntosh reported that there were no surviving records of the Wetzel Company, and no caches of unsold books when her mother's estate was settled in 1976. She did have a personal copy of Gadsby, but she wasn't interested in selling it to me.

What next? Perhaps other relatives of Ernest Vincent Wright could be traced. His death certificate stated that he was born in Boston, Massachusetts on March 26, 1871, the son of Henry Wright (born in Belchertown, Massachusetts) and Clara A. Clarke (born in Lowell, Massachusetts). On August 24, 1978, I spent a few hours in Belchertown to research the Wright family history of the nineteenth century. Cemetery records in the town hall, plus Congregational church records in the Belchertown Historical Association, didn't reveal much: the most likely line appeared to be that of Jonathan Wright (c1788-1861) and Apphia Preston (c1790-1868), who had three children, Albert, Henry Abbey, and Lucy Apphia. Of these, Henry (1814-1885) married Christina Hawes (c1819-1856) in 1838, and was the sealer of weights and measures in Belchertown during the late 1840s. There was no information about children, but it seemed plausible that Ernest's father, also named Henry and probably born

in the 1840s, could have been a son of this man.

Federal census records offered further hope. The 1880 census has been indexed by surname for each state, for all families in which there was at least one child ten years of age or younger. I checked the Soundex files at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. in November 1978 under the surname Wright, fully expecting to find a family headed by Henry with a son named Ernest born in 1871. Alas, no luck; a full search of the Wrights in Massachusetts revealed nothing. Perhaps they had moved to some other state, or been overlooked by the census-taker.

When I read The Man Who Broke Purple, Ronald Clark's biography of the cryptanalyst William F. Friedman (1891-1969) published by Little, Brown in 1977, I was much intrigued to discover that Friedman had been interested in Gadsby, and had "long made great efforts to get copies of the book", succeeding after World War II. On March 7, 1979 I had lunch in the cafeteria at the Murray Hill branch of Bell Laboratories with David Kahn, author of The Codebreakers, who at the time was carrying out a technical writing assignment with the company. When I mentioned my Gadsby search to him, he commented that John Friedman, William's son and a Bell Laboratories employee, had once told him a story about a cache of Gadsby books. I at once got in touch with John, who confirmed the story but was hazy about the details: his father had told him that he had once met an executive of the Pacific Telephone & Telegraph Company who had a stockpile of Gadsbys in a Los Angeles warehouse. John didn't recall the man's name, but did add that he met him at the New Jersey shore about the summer of 1959, when the executive was working at American Telephone & Telegraph in New York, and that he subsequently went to Pacific Northwest Bell. Looking over the names of the 29 people who were vice-president or above at Pacific Telephone between 1957 and 1961, I was attracted to the name of Walter Straley, who was based in Southern California and later the Pacific northwest; tracking him down through the Bell System Pioneers organization of retirees, I eventually located him at Borrego Springs, California. He was my man, but it proved to be a dead end: "I do remember meeting and talking to John Friedman in the late 1950s, and I am sure we talked about cryptology and the book written without E's but, unfortunately it was not I who had a supply or knew where there was one."

John suggested I write the George C. Marshall Research foundation in Lexington, Virginia, the repository of Friedman's books and papers. They reported that they had three copies of Gadsby, and gave further details of Friedman's search for copies of this book:

W.F.F.'s attempts to find a copy of the book for purchase were unsuccessful. Professor Howard P. Robertson, and author friend visiting Los Angeles were asked and their aid was solicited to find a copy in Los Angeles or the vicinity of that city. They were unsuccessful. Prof. Robertson stated in 1956 to W.F.F. that only a very few copies of the book were ever printed, and that

none was available in the usual book sellers markets. However through diligent efforts and the cooperation of the Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company, 3 copies were obtained.

Could these three copies have been the "cache" John Friedman recalled? Also in the Friedman files was a card from International Bookfinders of Beverly Hills dated July 4, 1956, indicating that they had been searching for the book for Friedman ever since March 1954, and a letter from someone named Hortense in August 1956 reporting failure in her Gadsby search.

At this point, prospects for locating a copy looked bleak indeed. But, unknown to me, the ingredients for a resolution of my search were by then nearly all in place. In June 1978 Will Shortz submitted an article to Word Ways describing how to acquire old puzzle books; in it, he mentioned in passing that he had purchased a copy of Gadsby for \$25 at an antiquarian book fair in New York City. Hoping for similar results, I went to one at the Sheraton Hotel on April 19, 1979. Perhaps half the dealers I asked were aware of the book's existence, but no one had a copy. In December 1978, Bill Rawlings of West Vancouver wrote me that he wished to dispose of his three-volume set of Levine's pattern word list; could I find a purchaser through Word Ways? I wrote back, asking him to set a fair price; he did not reply. Sometime in the late spring of 1979, when I was actively writing and telephoning Will Shortz about plans for an NPL convention session, I asked him if he'd be willing to sell me his Gadsby. He demurred, but in turn proposed a trade involving Levine's pattern word list, which he greatly wanted but had been unable to find. Remembering Bill Rawlings' letter, I realized that success was at hand. I first contacted two North Jersey owners of Levine's first volume to see if either one was willing to part with his copy. When both said no, I wrote Bill Rawlings in June, asking if he still wished to sell. We quickly agreed on a price of \$54, and at the National Puzzlers' League convention at Stamford, Connecticut in July 1979 the long-hoped-for trade finally took place. My search for Gadsby was over, although much mystery remained about the existence of a hidden cache of this book.

A SPECIALIZED DICTIONARY ON CRIME

Ralph DeSola's Crime Dictionary was first published by Facts on File in 1982. The 240-page second edition, published in 1988 for \$24.95, contains more than ten thousand entries, including criminal argot, historical and literary allusions, medical and psychiatric expressions, names of well-known prisons and terrorist groups, and terms associated with alcohol and drug abuse. This book is fun to browse in. Did you know that a bullet shot through the heart sometimes causes an involuntary rictus or laugh in its victim, leading to the phrase "the last laugh"? Or that to be "castored" is to be assassinated by a pinhead-sized castor-bean pellet shot from the tip of a cane or umbrella at close range?