

# A HISTORY OF WORD PUZZLING

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The National Puzzlers' League, founded as the Eastern Puzzlers' League in New York City in 1883, is devoted to the creation and solution of versified word puzzles, as popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as crosswords and cryptograms are today. In the fall of 1998, the League privately published *The National Puzzlers' League--The First 115 Years*, a 380-page bound volume issued free (upon request) to its members and available to others for \$14 plus postage (the editor has copies available).

The main body of the book, written by Word Ways editor Ross Eckler (faRO), consists of eighteen chapters. The first three survey the League's history, including brief biographies of the founders, the wide variety of puzzle activity in general in the late 1800s, and convention activities. One chapter summarizes "decline and rebirth", from the peak activity in the 1920-30 era to the near demise of the NPL in the late 1960s. Next come twelve chapters of traditions, controversies, and personalities. Early "giants" such as Rufus T. Strohm (Arty Ess), Theodore Meyer (Arty Fishel), Edwin Smith (Remardo), and Blanche Wheatley (Rayle Rhoder) are featured. The final three chapters cover puzzle types: the square, the cryptogram, and the flat (the versified word puzzle). The appendices have 167 of the best flats published in *The Enigma* (the NPL's monthly magazine) from 1910 through 1997, an index by Will Shortz (Willz) to articles in *The Enigma*, and a table of conventions and *Enigma* editors. A separate index booklet was compiled by Alan Frank (Alf).

Word Ways readers are, perhaps, unfamiliar with this book's long and painful gestation. The history was commissioned in 1981 and was scheduled to be published in 1983, the NPL's centennial year. Many members worked hard on the project during those years. However, committee members in charge of the production phase bogged down on the copy-editing task, including placing it in computer-readable format. During the fifteen years that the book remained in limbo, the computer files had become obsolete, requiring complete reformatting when Will Shortz revived the project in 1997. When I received for checking, in early 1997, what was purported to be the "final" version of the chapters from the redone files, I was horrified at what I saw. No two chapters had the same format or style. Fonts, punctuation, spelling, layout--you name it--nothing was consistent. The chapters with rebus and form examples were an incomprehensible jumble. Any copy editing done in the 1980s was no longer evident. I found factual errors, especially in areas where I had

firsthand knowledge, and factual inconsistencies from one chapter to another.

Most troublesome--the history ended at 1983, making the book of minimal interest to more recent League members. The ball was bounced back to Eckler's court--he updated the eighteen chapters to include NPL statistics and history through the end of 1997.

But the chapters were still in very rough format, needing the eye and hand of a competent, professional editor. Will Shortz stepped in, took over the most tedious, painstaking part of the production work as an unpaid adjunct to his professional duties as New-York Times Crossword Editor. He put together a sheet of manuscript style and specs for me to use in my final proofreading. Then he spent literally days at the computer, putting the proofread manuscript into consistent, precise copy-edited form. Result: one of the neatest, most error-free books I've ever read. (I usually read even library books with a pencil nearby to correct--lightly of course--typos and misspelling!)

Ross Eckler states in his introduction: "I have made generous use of quotations from various Enigmas, believing that one should let people speak for themselves whenever possible." This is one of the strongest features of the history, along with quotations from letters of members to each other. Such documented personal details about members are of great help to historians. (I wonder what the NPL historian of 2098 will find to report, with the trend to transitory, disposable e-mail now seemingly the norm?) Other thoughts that occurred to me as I read the book:

- Page 84 mentions that Dmitri Borgmann's debt to the NPL was amply repaid when Murray Pearce (Merlin) joined as a result of reading *Language on Vacation*. An equally stellar puzzler, James Rambo (Tut), also joined after seeing the NPL mentioned in *Language on Vacation*.
- The 8-year struggle in producing *A Key to Puzzledom* in 1906 surely foreshadowed the struggles to produce this history!
- Mary Fontaine (Squirrel), born in 1911, could be added to the list of oldest known current members (page 268).
- The discussion of various Guides on page 143 is a bit misleading. The 1977 and current Guides were not "revisions" of the 1958 edition, but entirely new books. Also, the 1977 Guide (not just the current one, as stated) had essays on composing, etc.; some of these 1977 essays were carried over to the current Guide.

My quibbles about the book are few; most come from Eckler's departure from reporting documented history to editorializing and speculation. In the chapter on "what's the good word", I was said to have "firmly held the line" as editor in not allowing the "three archetypal four-letter" obscene words in *The Enigma*. I don't recall any puzzles being submitted with these words while I was editor, so how did I "hold the line"?

The only truly objectionable statement I found is on page 97, a prime example of editorialization: "...editors must try to convince League members--a superintelligent but easily offended group, who can sometimes take puzzling too seriously--that it's only a game, not a combination Graduate Record Examination and 'Jeopardy!' TV quiz show!" I find lumping everyone in the NPL except the editor into the "easily offended" category indefensible; as a former editor, I did not find this statement applicable to my dealings with members. Do NPL members shed the "easily offended" status upon assuming the editorial mantle and reacquire it upon leaving the editorship? More generally, good game players prefer to have consistent rules to play by. It's much more satisfying and fun to play any game by the rules, whether it's solving Enigma puzzles that are correctly constructed and presented, competing in a crossword puzzle tournament, or playing chess or Scrabble with friends.

But these quibbles aside, this is a marvelous book, one that will be treasured by NPL members and enjoyed by the general reader. (What a pity that many longtime NPL members, several of whom worked on this history, have died since 1983 and never got to see the book.) Many thanks to Ross Eckler for his remarkable job of searching old issues of The Enigma for information and organizing it into logical sequence. Equal thanks and praise are due Will Shortz, without whom we would never have seen the book in print.