THE NATIONAL PUZZLERS' LEAGUE

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The editorship of Word Ways brought me into contact with the National Puzzlers' League. Founded in New York City on July 4 1883 as the Eastern Puzzlers' League, this organization has for more than a century been dedicated to the construction and solution of rhymed word puzzles, a pastime as popular in the nineteenth century as the crossword is today. As an example, consider the charade

Every ONE should act his TWO
Which I ALL to do; do you?

in which ONE is "man", TWO is "age" and ALL is "manage", or the rebus

TUNE
That song has no soul.
How boring! How WHOLE!

in which WHOLE is "uninteresting" (UN in TE resting). In addition to puzzles such as these, members also constructed and solved letter-substitution cryptograms and various word forms such as squares, diamonds, pyramids and rhomboids. Instead of using their real names, members almost always adopted pseudonyms such as Ab Struse, Senor (his surname was Rosen), and Dee Sweet (phonetically "dix-huit", for Ruth Roufberg, whose initials are represented by the eighteenth letter of the alphabet).

The National Puzzlers' League was quite active in the 1920s and 1930s, when it had a roster of 400 members. In addition to publishing a monthly magazine, the Enigma, it sponsored two conventions each year in various cities of the northeastern United States. However, as its members grew old and died, fewer and fewer new ones replaced them. For more than thirty years the League declined in membership; conventions, held only once a year after the Second World War, ceased after 1957. By 1970 the League was on the verge of extinction with 100 members, only 30 of whom were really active in constructing or solving puzzles.

Fortunately, the League had gained one enthusiastic recruit in 1966 in the person of Merlin (Murray Pearce), a 30-year-old Bismarek, North Dakota accountant who had heard of the organization through the pages of Dmitri Borgmann's Language on Vacation. A Word Ways subscriber as well, he wrote me in June 1970 to suggest an exchange of complimentary subscriptions and advertisements between the editors of Word Ways and the Enigma. I had already written their editor, B. Natural (William Bryan) in 1969 with the idea of placing an advertisement for Word Ways in the Enigma, but he wrote back that the NPL would hardly benefit Word Ways since it had fewer than 25 members, all between 75 and 90 years old. I didn't then know it, but he, along with a number of other League old-timers, had a grudge against Word Ways because Dmitri Borgmann had used much NPL material without permission or adequate attribution in Language on Vacation. Merlin pointed out that the editorship of the League was to change hands in August, and I would then get a more favorable reception. Indeed this was true; Pamapama (Henry and Catharine Petroski) ran a Word Ways ad in September 1970 and April 1971, and I reciprocated on the back cover of Word Ways in November 1970, February 1971 and February 1973.
In May 1971 Merlin wrote of the result: "From the NPL’s point of view, at least, the advertisements in Word Ways have paid off handsomely. We must have a couple of dozen new members during the last few months, and most of them came from Word Ways readers." He was right; in a letter to Viking (Eric Bodin) in late 1971, Faith and I identified as coming from Word Ways a host of enthusiastic new NPL members and contributors, including Nightowl (Mary Youngquist), Stilicho (Dave Silverman), Lyrrad (Darryl Francis), Treesong (Philip Cohen), Tut (James Rambo), Pete Troleum, Rho, Fun, Burnt Sack, and several others who did not take pseudonyms. It seems fair to say that new blood from Word Ways subscribers was the most important single factor in rejuvenating the National Puzzlers’ League; Nightowl took over as editor of the Enigma in November 1971, and Treesong and Tut were prolific puzzle-innovators. I took quiet pride in my role as midwife to the NPL’s renaissance, and to my introduction to the League of such later stalwarts as Ulk (Eugene Ulrich), Tweaser (Timothy Wheeler) and Newrow (Edward Wolpow).

The NPL in turn provided Word Ways with a steady flow of subscribers which we wouldn’t otherwise have found, typically at least thirty each year. However, few of these became active contributors to Word Ways, preferring the rhymed puzzles of the League.

But I was no onlooker, using the NPL solely as a source of Word Ways subscribers. From the start I participated in both puzzle-making and puzzle-solving, taking the joint pseudonym Faro with Faith for this purpose. One reason for this name was the chance for Peggy, Lois or Susan to contribute under the pseudonym Faro’s Daughter; Susan actually did so with a few horse-oriented puzzles. I quickly got the hang of solving and in August 1970 began sending in lists of answers to the rhymed word-puzzles, to be scored and recorded in the monthly solvers’ list. I never missed sending in a list, and by 1986 only two long-time members could claim longer consecutive strings, Blackstone since 1965 and Amor since 1967. Aided by Faith, who set as her goal solving about one-third of the Enigma puzzles in an evening or two before turning the magazine over to me, I soon became a fairly adept solver, usually getting more than 90 per cent correct, and occasionally earning a “complete” (all puzzles for that month solved). In 1973 I missed only 28 of the 710 rhymed word-puzzles all year, fewer than any other puzzler. My highest percentage of puzzles solved was 97.1 (736 out of 758) in 1974, but by then other solvers were doing even better, and I was only fourth in the ranking. As the years went by, I still enjoyed solving Enigma puzzles, but I found them ever harder to do, and I was loath to spend vast amounts of time scanning word-lists to solve a particularly recalcitrant flat. By 1985, I had sunk to thirteenth in the yearly ranking of solvers. Even so, owing to the fact that the rejuvenated League regularly published more than twice as many puzzles per year as it had even in the palmy days between the wars, I eventually stood quite high in the ranking of total puzzles solved. By 1985 I was exceeded by only Blackstone, Fiddle, Ifandor and Larry. However, at the end of the year I was overtaken by Treesong and dropped to sixth place. Had I continued solving beyond November 1986, I might have improved my position to second, since these four members were all much older than I was—but it is likely that several solvers joining the NPL after I did would by then have overtaken me.

I constructed a fair number of flats in the early 1970s, but then my muse deserted me and I had barely 200 in all by 1986. After I acquired the Bell Labs anagram dictionary in 1975, I specialized in ten-letter transpositional puzzles, writing ones based on the following:

- factorials-solfataric
- franchised-archfiends
- chocolates-eschatocol
- terminates-martensite
- ablastemic-masticable
- toadflower-floodwater
- motherland-enthraldom
- antebellum-unmeltable
- mansioneer-Emersonian
- imprecates-spermaceti
- Lebensraum-mensurable
- vespertine-pretensive
asperities-patisserie         impression-permission         Florentine-nonfertile
tapestries-striptease        interlapse-presnetial        episternal-Alpestrine

I sometimes threw in even longer ones, such as

desperation-Esperantido      oscillations-colonialist        investigations-tenovaginitis
Septentrionic-interceptors   cephalometric-petrochemical

Unfortunately, these weren’t very well-known words, and it was not easy to write verses connecting two often-disparate concepts.

The Enigma has always been remarkably free of taboo words referring to sexual intercourse or excremental activity. In 1959 HoHo snuck the word TWAT past editor B. Natural by hiding it in a rhymed word-puzzle talking about a stewardess serving TWA tea. Unaware that the phrase “If you see Kay” was an old one, having been exploited by James Joyce in *Ulysses*, I resolved to conceal it so well in a flat that the editor, Mangie (Marjorie Friedman), wouldn’t suspect what was happening. So I sent her an acrostical engima based on “clishmaclaver” (CLImax, SHare, MAid, CLAim, VERify):

A. “Maxine, hear me!
   You cannot top this tale--Kay’s lechery
B. A red-hot bliss...”
   (Maxine demurs, “I’ll have no part of this!”)
C. “...I deem it true.
   I heard it from Kay’s servant girl, one who
D. I’m sure would know...”
   (Maxine replies, “I plead it can’t be so!”)
E. “...if you see Kay,
   You’ll know it’s true--she’s in a family way!”

In war, ships sink when lips are loose;
Now wagging tongues a lass traduce.

To me, the offending phrase stuck out like a sore thumb; the first solution word, climax, as well as the topic of the verse, seemed guaranteed to point to it. When I sent it to Mangie in February 1985, she commented that clishmaclaver was a lovely word, practically onomatopoeic, and I awaited the puzzle’s appearance in an early issue. As months went by and nothing happened, I concluded that she had detected my trick and was waiting for me to make the first move. Then, to my surprise, it appeared in the August 1985 Enigma. I subsequently learned that she was completely unaware of the double entendre, and puzzled by Newrow’s oblique question “Was I the only one [to see it]?” In addition, the puzzle received ten kudos (votes for favorite), the most I ever received for one.

Actually, I already had a bit of a reputation for off-color puzzles, for in May 1981 I had the following homonym on burro-burrow published:

A FIRST carries cargo around;
In a SECOND a woodchuck is found.
If this is unclear,
You cannot, I fear,
Tell your ass from a hole in the ground.

Commenting on this in a spoonergram puzzle, Hap (Harry Hazard) called me a ribald punner to match a piebald runner. And it received nine kudos, a record for me up to that time.

Merlin wrote a review of League operations for 1971 which appeared in the May 1972 Enigma. This included lists of the top ten solvers for all puzzle types, as well as for each individual type (rhymed puzzles, word forms, cryptograms). Intrigued, I decided to apply statistical techniques to analyze the data further. In particular, I realized that I could assess whether differences in the scores truly reflected differences in individuals’ solving ability, reference library and persistence, or whether they could be explained by statistical fluctuations (such as seeing 48 heads in one throw-down of 100 coins, and 53 heads in a subsequent one). This could be achieved by transforming the data from binomial form by the so-called arc-sine transformation, leading to scores with known and constant variance. In fact, not only could differences among solvers be determined, but also differences among months—which ones were significantly harder than average, which ones easier. This, in turn, would enable me to assess the performance of people who had missed one or more months during the year. To put solvers who had contributed few puzzles on an equal footing with those who contributed many, and therefore had fewer to solve, I used for my raw data the ratio of the number of puzzles solved to the total number of puzzles not authored by that person. I wrote all of this up for an article which appeared in the June 1974 Enigma, giving results for 1971, 1972 and 1973 using this methodology. I doubt if anyone else in the League really understood the statistical techniques I had used, but the results were easy enough to understand.

I asked Merlin to send me his tabulations for 1974 when he compiled them in early 1975, so that I could repeat my analyses. However, when the time came, he was too busy with income tax work to do anything until after April 15. Feeling that the summary data should appear as soon as possible, I dropped everything and worked out the lists of the top solvers and the top puzzle-producers, both with respect to puzzles and number of kudos awarded. This material, combined with an update of my statistical analysis of the previous year, appeared in the May 1975 issue on schedule. From then on, I was the self-appointed producer of the yearly statistics on solvers and composers.

In March 1977 I published in the Enigma a new way to assess puzzle popularity, to take into account Treesong’s observation that hard puzzles were discriminated against in kudos counts because few, if any, people gave kudos to puzzles they were unable to solve. I suggested that each puzzle could be plotted on graph paper having the coordinates (y = number of kudos received, x = number of people other than the author to solve it). In such a plot, praiseworthy puzzles would correspond to those points which had no other points both above and to the left (that is, none with both fewer solvers and more kudos). Typically, five to eight puzzles would fall in this category, including several of the hard ones that Treesong felt were being overlooked. However, during the next decade so many good solvers joined the League that very few puzzles had fewer than fifteen solvers, and the number of hard puzzles identified by this method began to decline. I decided instead to tabulate the puzzles having the greatest ratio of kudos to solvers other than the author (the points on the graph connected to the origin by the steepest slopes).

What I was trying to do was determine the probability that a puzzle would earn kudos, given that it had been solved. Those who hadn’t solved a puzzle might also feel inclined to kudo it after seeing the answer, but I argued that they, not having struggled with the solution to the puzzle, were not as qualified to intelligently judge its worth. I recognized that the data I had for
calculating these probabilities was imperfect, for I had no way of identifying the actual people who solved a particular puzzle, only the total who had done so. Some of the kudoers might, in fact, be non-solvers, leading potentially to probabilities greater than one.

I was bothered by another non-synchrony between solvers and kudoers--certain solving teams, notably the husband-wife pair of Nightowl and Hap, submitted a single solving list but separate kudos lists. This, at least, I could correct, so in the May 1985 Enigma I wrote “To keep the solvers and kudoers in synchronization, Hapowl are allowed only one vote since they send in only one list.” I was stunned to receive a letter from Hap beginning “You stupid arrogant blackguard! Just who the hell do you think you are to decide we are ‘allowed only one vote’ for favorites?” and Nightowl added “Your unthinking, pointless, ‘synchronization’, which in fact merely accomplished discriminating against Hap and me, has infuriated us...we expect a full retraction and admission and in the Enigma, not just privately to us.” Realizing that my phraseology had been unfortunate, I explained in the next Enigma that my intent had been to synchronize all such kudos and solving lists, but Hapowl had been the only ones to whom it had applied in 1984. However, I did not yield on my right to calculate measures of solving and composing performance as I saw fit, providing that I clearly explained what I was doing. I feared that I would be exposed to further vituperation by the offended pair at the 1985 National Puzzlers’ League convention in Denver, but fortunately Hap and Nightowl did not come because of the former’s health (he had suffered a mild heart attack the previous winter). Because of Nightowl’s well-known letter-writing abrasiveness, I received perhaps more sympathy than I was entitled to, and I was quite moved when, at the business meeting, Merlin proposed an expression of appreciation for my work as statistics compiler which resulted in a standing ovation. When it came time to calculate the 1985 statistics, I quietly modified my method to allow two solutions credits to correspond to two kudos credits for joint solvers submitting separate kudos lists.

In 1976 the National Puzzlers’ League resumed its annual conventions. These were usually held on a long weekend, from Friday dinner through noon on Sunday, at a hotel or on a college campus (Princeton three times, the University of Syracuse, the University of Indiana) in July or August. I attended every one, although in 1978 I was able to partake only of the Sunday morning breakfast and the prize awards, because Lois had decided to get married the day before. I have never felt particularly at ease in large groups where social interaction with strangers was required. (I found technical meetings such as those of the American Statistical Association so distasteful that I stopped going to them very early in my professional career.) Why, then, did I like NPL conventions? I think it may have been because the early conventions were small, typically 25 to 40 people, and involved people I was already well acquainted with through correspondence. More often than not, when Faith and I would arrive at a lobby filled with other members, there would ensue an hour or more of greetings and animated conversation before we even checked into our room! It is true that I didn’t greatly enjoy the various puzzle competitions, especially the solo ones which resembled a test-taking session at college; my mind, confronted with puzzles on a sheet of paper and a time limit in which to do them, usually tended to freeze, and I did poorly in these endeavors. I found more appealing the team competitions, often of a light-hearted nature; here, my slowness of response was not so evident. These competitions, generated by Willz and others, were often varied and inventive. As conventions grew in size, I knew fewer and fewer people there really well, and I became less and less enamored with the highly competitive atmosphere. The last one we attended was in Toronto in 1991.

When Sherlock Holmes (Palmer Peterson), the last of the great form constructors of the National Puzzlers’ League, died in June 1979, he willed his puzzle books and magazines to Merlin. In the fall of 1980 Merlin conducted a mail auction for the benefit of the League treasury
to sell off duplicates in his collection. I was most attracted to forty or so issues of the Ardmore Puzzler, the premier puzzle magazine issued between 1899 and 1909, and a nearly-complete run of the Enigma from 1928 onward. My bid of $340 captured all the Enigma issues prior to 1970 (when my own collection began) plus about 25 Ardmore Puzzlers. Looking over this wealth of material at the start of 1981, I formulated a statistical project: the tabulation, for each member, of the scores he had made solving puzzles, and the number of puzzles of each type he had published in the Enigma. The achievements of former members would, I felt, put into perspective the present-day achievements recorded in my annual statistics. I worked off and on at this project for the next two years, filling in the gaps in my Enigma collection with issues borrowed from Al Gebra (Bob Hooke) and later with complete bound volumes of the Enigma from 1910 through 1924 owned by Treesong.

At the 1981 NPL convention in Syracuse, I volunteered to be a member of a committee formed to prepare a centennial history of the League for its 1983 anniversary. At first, I visualized my data as being useful for various appendices. The more I thought about the matter, however, the more obvious it was that a book such as the centennial history could not be readily written by a committee; there was too much interrelation to carve the book up into self-contained parts. Furthermore, it was quite clear that any writing must be preceded by an extended immersion in back Enigma issues to dig out the relevant material. So, I began another systematic pass through my Enigma collection, jotting down relevant snippets of history under many different headings, as well as biographical notes on members. However, I couldn’t complete the survey until I had copies of all Enigma issues extant prior to 1910. Merlin, the only member with a reasonably complete collection (he was the NPL historian), photocopied for me a set in January 1983. (The preceding Thanksgiving, I had visited the Library of Congress and spent a day abstracting a couple dozen issues they had from 1903 to 1906.)

In mid-March 1983 I began writing the history, and by mid-June, in a sustained burst of feverish activity, I had typed up 14 chapters plus rough drafts of 3 more. After the big push to get most of the history done before the 1983 convention, I let the last few chapters languish. In any event, there seemed to be no great hurry. Treesong had volunteered to prepare the manuscript in camera-ready form on a Kaypro personal computer, to be purchased by the NPL and subsequently given to Mangie for editing the Enigma. However, he did not take possession of this until May 1984. As he by then found himself quite busy with his new monthly newsletter, Graffiti on the Sphinx, he did very little on the history. He typed the introduction and part of the first chapter in the spring of 1985, but didn’t get around to completing the chapter until the fall. By then, even more delay seemed inevitable, for he proposed that Sibyl (Judith Bagai), a new NPL member with professional editorial experience, yet the manuscript.

I used the time to polish various chapters, and add tidbits of information to the narrative. Readers such as Merlin and Willz (Will Shortz), who received copies of the manuscript, seemed to like it. I was especially warmed by Willz’s words:

I was delighted and impressed...The chapters were so enjoyable that I found myself reading more slowly toward the end so I could savor the good feeling longer [April 1983]

I was struck again by how good it is. I like how you’ve organized and laid out the facts of the League’s history in a fairly complete way--it gives the reader a good feel for the old days, the controversies and the changes...By now I must have read Arty Ess’s account of Gi Gantic’s visit [to Rayle Rhoder] on 15 different occasions, and it still makes me laugh [January 1984]
In the fall of 1983, old-time NPL member Wick (Charles Wickham) died, and his widow passed along his puzzle papers to Willz for disposal. One of the important pieces of NPL history was a complete run of Wick's letters to the Quill, a round-robin letter among prominent League members between 1925 and 1953. Larry (Loris Curtis), another Quill member, had also saved his letters, so I borrowed them, and used both sets to write a centennial history chapter on the round-robin letter. Wick had a number of strongly held opinions about Easterners (he came from Ohio), blacks, and Jews, and often expressed these in pungent terms. Thinking these quotes would make Wick more human (I was mindful of HoHo's comment elsewhere "It's about time someone painted us a picture of the old-timers that showed them as human beings and not as dressed-up old fuddy-duddies"), I included them in several paragraphs. When I showed this chapter to Larry, Willz and Blackstone (Paul Thompson), all three protested the Jewish comments, arguing that his widow and son would be embarrassed by these revelations. Willz also argued that Wick's anti-Semitic opinions were not relevant to puzzling, but on this I disagreed--his feelings were expressed in conjunction with the admission of a Jew to the Quill. I finally compromised by cloaking his remarks in anonymity, as a "member of the Quill", and this seemed to satisfy everybody.

During 1984 I spent quite a bit of time tracking down the names and pseudonyms of all 2000 NPL members since 1883 who had taken pseudonyms, with a few of their vital statistics such as puzzles solved, puzzles composed, conventions attended and offices held. It was my intent that this should be given in the appendix, one line per member. This was omitted from the final book, but on Willz's suggestion I prepared it as a separate manuscript on my computer at the beginning of 2001. NPL Treasurer Mercury periodically supplied membership updates; in 2006 this corpus was placed on the NPL website where it received regular updating.

When Treesong stayed overnight in Morristown in December 1984 while on a job interview at Bell Labs, I gave him seventeen of the chapters; the eighteenth, on rhymed verse puzzles, I turned over to him at the NPL convention in Denver the summer of 1985. The history, in its final form, was divided into three sections. After an introduction which described earlier attempts to write such a history, the first section consisted of three overview chapters setting the stage for the formation of the NPL and its early years of struggle, describing its long decline from the 1930s to the 1970s, and finally its subsequent renaissance. The second section of the history consisted of twelve in-depth chapters about prominent puzzlers (Arty Ess, Remardo, Arty Fishel, Rayle Rhoder), and important trends (collaboration in puzzle-solving, the great debate over the relative importance of rhymed verse puzzles and word forms, pseudonyms, the rise of the crossword and its effect on the League, etc.). Finally, the third section consisted of three chapters summarizing the history of the rhymed verse puzzle, the word form, and the cryptogram. I was rather proud of my completed opus, feeling that it was likely to be my most important contribution to the National Puzzlers' League.

In early March 1983, I tried to pinpoint the site of Pythagoras Hall on Canal Street in New York City, the building in which the founding meeting of the League had been held. It turned out to be on an entrance plaza of the Manhattan Bridge to Brooklyn, constructed in 1909. (Willz searched without success for a postcard of this building, and much later I noticed that it briefly appeared in a scene in Ken Burns' 1999 twelve-hour TV series on the history of New York City.) In early June I got the idea of holding a mini-celebration of the NPL centennial by imitating the founders, who took a walk across the recently opened Brooklyn Bridge after adjournment. At first I thought it would be nice to sponsor a walk starting at the Brooklyn Bridge, passing by the Pythagoras Hall site, and ending at the 10th Street apartment of Rho (Paulina Kreger), but this
fell through when she turned out to be in Connecticut that day. It was too late to get a notice in the Enigma, so Faith and I mailed invitations to New York area puzzlers. Twelve showed up, including Senor (Dave Rosen) from Buffalo, at the meeting-place in the park in front of City Hall. It was a hot humid day, but clear, and a breeze off the water made the Brooklyn Bridge excursion tolerable. We walked as far as the pier on the Brooklyn side, retraced our steps, and went a mile north to the Pythagoras Hall site and dinner at a nearby Chinatown restaurant, enlivened by firecrackers exploding in the street outside. Willz, one of the participants, later wrote:

That was a nice centennial walk last week! It was a very enjoyable afternoon, and the turnout was just fine. I'm glad you thought of it and that we got together and did it.

Senor added:

It was nice to see you and Faith on the Fourth of July for the NPL centennial Brooklyn Bridge crossing. Too bad that we couldn’t attract more Krewe to walk with us on such a gorgeous and historic occasion.

At the 1985 convention Treesong reported that he had only to type up the history, and that it should be available at the time of the 1986 convention. However, when 1986 rolled around, he had only typed four chapters. The job of placing the history on the computer was farmed out to a number of volunteers, each using his own computer and format. These were then passed along to Sibyl for copyediting. She took her job seriously, and during much of 1986 and 1987 peppered me with queries and changes of phraseology. (I soon grew tired of what appeared to be a never-ending process, but generally acceded to her suggestions unless they altered the meaning.) Then the copyedited chapters had to be retyped in order to get them into a common format. In 1990 the NPL board, exasperated by the lengthy delay in this process, authorized Merlin to take over if Treesong did not retype at least three chapters a month. But Merlin didn’t move any faster than Treesong. At the 1993 convention Merlin reported that 12 out of 18 chapters had been retyped, and by the end of the year the remainder were completed. But still nothing happened! Then a fresh problem arose. Tyger, who in 1994 had volunteered to help get the book produced, reported in 1996 that current word processors no longer supported the computer format selected in the 1980s, and the book had to be redone in WordPerfect, an unexpectedly tedious job. After this had been completed in 1997, the book was sent to Uncanny, Willz and Nightowl for comments and corrections. In 1998 Willz spent several months at the computer incorporating these changes and polishing the final copy. The book, more than 400 pages in length, was privately printed in the late summer of 1998 and distributed at the end of the year free to NPL members who requested it. I stored a number of copies for the NPL in my basement.

My greatest regret was that old-timers like Larry, Ajax and Blackstone did not live to see the finished book. Their contemporary, Al Gebra, did, writing “I found what a fascinating book it is...I congratulate you on writing such an interesting story around the wealth of facts that you assembled...it reads like a good novel.” (Of all the book’s readers, only he, Ab Struse and Twisto had the length of membership needed to evaluate it against their own memories.)

Apparently in recognition of the yeoman work I had performed in writing the history, Mangie and Senor, respectively the editor and treasurer of the League, asked me in early July 1983 if I would consent to being nominated for president in 1984. The real work of the League was performed by the other officers, and especially the editor, who were routinely reelected from year to year, but the president in recent years had been a largely honorific post. In fact, his only
responsibilities seemed to be to write an annual message published in the January Enigma, and to preside at the business meeting at the convention. Though I felt a little uneasy at being even in nominal charge of an organization of 300 highly-opinionated and outspoken individuals (what if something went wrong in 1984?) I was flattered by the recognition this implied, and accepted their offer. As it turned out, no one else was nominated, so I duly became president on January 1, 1984.

I had read a lot of presidential messages while preparing the centennial history, and I found them as predictable as a political speech or a television sitcom: thanks to the members who elected him, even though he is unworthy of the honor; thanks to the editor, treasurer, etc. for doing the real work; and view with alarm (prior to 1970) or point with pride at (after 1970) the health of the organization. Desiring to say something a bit different, I tried to exhibit both pride and alarm simultaneously. Pride was easy; I noted that “we are truly in the second golden age” of the NPL, both with respect to puzzle quality and convention programs. Alarm was more difficult to summon up. I raised the question that Enigma puzzles might now be so difficult, to satisfy the needs of the experienced members, that we were running a danger of discouraging the beginner. I originally suggested three ideas for helping the neophyte: (1) put super-tough puzzles in a separate section not to be scored, (2) abolish monthly scoring and annual statistics entirely, and (3) not count in the scoring any puzzle solved by (say) fewer than five per cent of the solvers. The last idea I had obtained from Blackstone in a conversation at a regional puzzle meeting near Boston the preceding November. Mangie correctly felt that the first two measures were rather extreme, but reluctantly allowed the third to be included in my message. I was a little surprised when no one praised my idea, and Nightowl, Hap, Alf and Tweaser preferred the status quo. Nightowl felt that it would arbitrarily throw out good (i.e., highly-kudosed) difficult puzzles while retaining bad (non-kudosed) ones that a few more people were able to solve. Worse, I was put on the defensive when Blackstone wrote me disavowing that he had ever made the suggestion I had attributed to him in the Enigma, and in fact didn’t agree with it. When I heard nothing from new solvers, I began to feel that I was agitating on behalf of no one; obviously, most recent League members rapidly acquired the skills necessary to solve hard puzzles and didn’t need coddling. The NPL was overwhelmingly populated by keenly-competitive types who weren’t in the least interested in eliminating those puzzles which best demonstrated their intellectual prowess. Had it been presented in the Enigma, my idea to abolish scoring entirely would have been hooted down! I had brought up a non-issue, and it was somewhat embarrassing to have it revealed as such.

I didn’t look forward to my other duty as president, that of conducting the annual business meeting. Faith lent me a copy of Robert’s Rules of Order which I studied beforehand; I hoped that nothing controversial would come up. One piece of business I knew would be raised was that of increasing the dues, then $7 per year, to cover the increased cost of producing and sending out the Enigma monthly, estimated at $8.90. At the meeting, there was a bewildering series of proposals, counter-proposals and retractions. The size of a dues increase, and even the necessity for one, was warmly debated. Eventually it was voted that the matter be left in the hands of the officers to decide. The acoustics of the room weren’t too good, and I felt that I had barely been in control of the meeting.

During the fall Nightowl and Hap sent a blizzard of letters to the officers arguing against a raise in dues on the grounds that the treasury was currently in balance—the difference of $1.90 per member was being made up by gifts and by interest on the $6500 of League assets. The pro-increase people argued that the assets had already been reduced by the purchase of the Kaypro computer, and would be further depleted by the expenses of the centennial volume when it was printed. I favored the deferral of a dues increase until such time as operating expenses began to
drag the assets down and one could more clearly see how large an increase was needed. However, I was in a minority; the dues were raised to $9 later in the fall.

Mangie suggested that I stand for election again in 1985, but I demurred, feeling that the honor ought to be spread among others as a reward for meritorious League service. And what if 1985 proved less tranquil than 1984, and I was forced to exercise real leadership, to mediate among warring factions? I knew that in such a situation I would inevitably disappoint some people who would then think ill of me, frustrating my strong desire to be universally admired as president. Faith was approached to run, but declined. I felt it was time a woman had the job, since the last one in the post was Bam who had died in office in 1973; I wrote Philana after the convention to inquire whether or not she would be willing and she accepted.

I may once have been the victim of a practical joke at a convention. The final competition on Saturday evening at Boulder in July 1985 was one in which teams of four or five people were given piles of newspapers and asked to discover various sorts of wordplay such as long internal palindromes, a word and its beheadment, and the like. One challenge was to find a short paragraph containing all the letters of the alphabet. Afterwards, several people went out to Swensen’s, a nearby restaurant, for food and puzzle talk. I heard the next day from Willz and Hudu that the group had discovered two food descriptors (short menu paragraphs touting individual dishes) that were pangrammatic; later the latter mailed me a copy. Indeed, they were short enough to convince me that they were probably not accidental pangrams. But who had composed them? When I tried to verify their existence by looking at other Swensen’s menus (it was a national chain like Howard Johnson), I was unable to find the descriptors anywhere, and when I wrote Swensen’s about it I got no answer. Gradually it dawned on me that the descriptors were probably mythical, having been adapted from near-pangrams actually found on the menu.

I was rather surprised at the end of the Boulder convention when Mangie sounded out Faith and me about taking over the editorship of the Enigma. My initial reaction was that it would be an extremely confining job, with the requirement that the magazine be issued every month, and that I would simply not have the time for both it and Word Ways, even though I had recently retired. Still, Mangie pleaded with such earnestness that I was reluctant to say flatly No; furthermore, she indicated that any decision to quit was still in the indefinite future.

On June 17 1986 she put the question more insistently:

I hope you’re ready for the question. I think I put it to you a year ago at convention, but then it was sort of theoretical and in the vague future. Now it’s less so. So are you, as I very much hope, willing to take over Enigma editorship? It won’t be this month or next, but not too terribly far off. It’s almost definite that Senor is moving away from Buffalo; and it’s not only that I’d have a very hard time doing the job without him, but, even more important, I feel very strongly that I’d like to quit while I’m still what passes for ahead, instead of hanging on till the members are trying to figure out a tactful way of getting rid of me...

So, what should we do? Faith, thinking of the difficulties of scheduling vacations and the like with a monthly deadline, was strongly against accepting, but I was ambivalent. I knew I could ill spare the time, but I was curious about the real nature of the job. Like combat duty in the army, I suspected that one could only appreciate what it was really like by experiencing it. I had a feeling that the inherent tension between editor and contributor was much more strongly experienced in the Enigma than in Word Ways, reflecting NPL members’ passionate interest in puzzles. I was
attracted to a job which, in sharp contrast with the meaninglessness of much of my late Bell Labs career, promised to make a real difference in the lives of a number of people. There was no doubt that this was the most important job in the National Puzzlers' League. Perhaps a more selfish motivation was the desire to be remembered in the NPL long after my departure from the scene, much as the highly revered Arty Ess had been (he had held this post for thirty years, from 1923 to 1953). I was a little tired of solving, especially begrudging the inordinate amount of time that I now found myself spending to keep my solving score high; the editorship would offer a convenient excuse for abandoning this quest. (I argued to myself, in fact, that some of the time I needed for editing would be freed up by no longer having to solve.) And finally, I was seduced by Mangie's testimony to the deep satisfaction the job had brought her:

I feel I must tell you that these last nine years have been among my very happiest; even when the flak was thickest I never for a moment considered quitting...I'm pretty sure you'll never regret the decision. I volunteered for the job, have never--even when the Rochester pressure [a steady drumbeat of criticism from Nightowl the past few years] was the most objectionable--regrettet it. I'm still amazed, and delighted, that I had the brazen nerve... Hope you'll enjoy it all as much as I have done; I'm sure you will.

And finally I argued, perhaps a bit too complacently, that I was at least as well qualified as anyone in the NPL to perform the editorial job. I had Word Ways experience as an editor, considerable knowledge of NPL history from my work on the centennial book, and knowledge of what makes a good puzzle from my extensive solving experience (only a handful of current members had solved more puzzles than I had). This was in accord with my philosophy that I should give preference to those volunteer tasks for which I had unique qualifications (noblesse oblige).

None of these arguments particularly impressed Faith, and it was only with the utmost reluctance that she finally consented, after a good bit of arm-twisting by Mangie at the Boston convention in July. I agreed that we should step down in favor of any qualified volunteer who might appear in the future--although as a practical matter I couldn't then identify any such person who had the time and inclination to do it, other than the highly-controversial Nightowl.

In any event, Mangie did not want to see her arch-enemy Nightowl resume the editorship. Conceding that Nightowl as editor might well have a tendency to factionalize or polarize the NPL, I agreed to her plan that the transfer be handled quietly, being okayed by the NPL Board rather than at the annual election of officers. And so it was that we began our editorial tenure in December 1986, one month before Mangie would have started her reelected term. Nightowl was justifiably incensed at the way the transfer of power had been handled, and was only slightly mollified by my assurance to her that when we stepped down as editor it would be handled through normal elective channels.

In order to lighten the editorial load somewhat, I eagerly accepted Mangie's offer that the printing continue to be done at Buffalo, a stratagem which freed me from further concern about an issue after the tenth of the month when I mailed it to Copy Cat Press. I didn't want the added headache of negotiating printing details with a new printer, plus arranging for the stuffing of envelopes, the affixing of address labels, and the delivery to the post office each month. Not only did Mangie kindly agree to all of this, but she also retained the back issues for a few months in order to mail out replacement copies, sample copies to new members, and the like.

Faith and I soon worked out a division of labor. I handled all the editorial correspondence and vetting of new flats plus the preparation of camera-ready copy on my Olivetti electronic
typewriter. After I selected an assortment of flats from the files, she carefully checked the tagging with respect to the dictionaries. In addition she gave the entire issue a final proofreading after I completed the typing. Every couple of months, I sent out a batch of new forms to Senor and new crypts to Alf for checking, continuing an arrangement instituted by Mangie.

So how did the editorship work out in practice? After the novelty had worn off, I was somewhat chagrined to admit that I had bitten off more than I could readily chew, at least if I intended to put out a product of such high quality that it would be generally acclaimed as such. (In my avocations, I had been accustomed to taking on doable challenges, ones that I felt fairly sure I could discharge with competence and approbation.) I had, in fact, been misled by my Word Ways experience. In that magazine, I had always enjoyed a free hand in deciding on the format and content, and even more important I had felt free to modify material sent in for publication. Such modification was seldom if ever challenged, perhaps because I was recognized by my contributors as the obvious expert in the new and somewhat ill-defined field of logology. (My only complainant was Dmitri Borgmann; even such well-known authors as Willard Espy and Martin Gardner didn’t object to my blue pencil!) What I didn’t realize until I was well launched as editor was that the Enigma was an entirely different kettle of fish. Here, the contributors were themselves experts in a narrow well-defined field—or in any event thought themselves to be experts. Many considered themselves at least as competent as any editor with regard to the construction of Enigma puzzles, and had not allowed Mangie to make any changes (or at most minimal ones) in their flats without prior consultation and negotiation. Mangie of course informed me of this state of affairs, but I did not truly realize on how short a leash the editor was kept until I overstepped the line a few times with unfortunate results.

My most egregious gaffe occurred in April 1987 when, bothered by the meter of a line by Tweaser, and not understanding the fact that it alluded to actors in the movie version of The Caine Mutiny, I changed a line from

Marvin, MacMurray, Ferrer, Tully, KEY;  
Johnson and Francis in conflict with Bogie...

...to

TITLE, a story that’s authored by KEY:  
Johnson and Francis in conflict with Bogie...

Unfortunately, the answer to KEY, F.G. Marshall, was not the author of the book. Tweaser was, naturally enough, upset, but his protests were mild compared with those of Sibyl, who severely upbraided me for unilaterally mangling his flat without consultation. Sibyl, one of the “don’t-touch-a-comma-of-my-flats-without-consulting-me” school, perhaps feared a similar fate might befall one of her contributions. In fact, I encountered her wrath in August 1987, when I converted her rebus rubric “ten” to “X” to better accord with the reading “IX and I in Roman” (I argued that the answer should be a Roman numeral as well), and in July 1987 when I loyally relabeled her antigram for American Telephone and Telegraph (“one damn cheap line rate—great help”) an anagram. Only a month earlier, in June, I got Noholds Bard upset with me when, fearing that the clueing was misleading for a duck being FLOAT and ALOFT in the line “When him sit, him NEAR; when him don’t, him FAR”, I tried to insert “is” before “FAR” but mistyped this in front of “NEAR” utterly garbling the meaning. In December I found myself apologizing to Arachne when I destroyed the acrostic “Hudu Manx deadline” in a combiflat, by neglecting to indent certain lines in order to save space.
All this left me a bit demoralized and on the defensive. I made a point of consulting with composers via postcard if I proposed making any substantive change in their verse, and usually was able to obtain permission; however, I found a few NPL members, notably Visitor and Banterweight, were bad news—they had a tin ear for meter yet stubbornly defended their phraseology. Faith and others suggested that I simply refuse to print their material, yet I felt that each member of the NPL had a right to appear in the Enigma if their work could be brought up to a nominal level of competence.

There seemed to be a law of diminishing returns operating as well. I sensed that I was being regarded as a nitpicker if I negotiated too vigorously for changes in a puzzle; at least tacitly, I was expected to give the composer a break the next time a point of difference between us arose. And, although I thought that my suggestions represented improvements, I wasn’t certain that they would be perceived as such by the average reader. There were no universally accepted standards for quality of meter, length of verse, proper enigmaticity of clueing, use of non-Websterian words and the like.

Although I injudiciously edited only a tiny minority of puzzles (certainly less than one in a hundred), I made typographical errors much more often. Although these could be corrected in the following issue, leaving solvers a month to find a solution to the corrected puzzle, still they caused a certain amount of grief. It soon became apparent that typos were much more to be deplored in a puzzle magazine than in an expository journal such as Word Ways, for solvers would scan puzzles in minutest detail to obtain clues to the answer. I felt frustrated at my inability to ferret them out beforehand, even with Faith’s help. After I messed up Double-H’s only puzzle in both the February and March 1988 issues, he irately wrote:

I do not understand how the errata/addenda can require nearly a half-column of each issue. If more care were made when printing the puzzles, a mere three or four lines should suffice. Nor do I enjoy discovering mistakes while solving. After a cursory attempt at solving the March issue, I found at least a half-dozen errors. While an occasional typo is forgivable, most of the errors in recent issues may have been detrimental to correct solutions; e.g., missing rubrics, incorrect enumerations, mistranslated anagrams.

It seemed as if the only cure was to take the time to proofread again and again—and time was something I didn’t have.

Faith had her own theory for this insistence upon puzzle accuracy: when solvers had to invest so much time and energy to obtain a complete solution to the Enigma puzzles each month, they became keenly aware of any impedimenta, however trivial. I was a bit surprised in the fall of 1987 when people began to complain, first in the crypts and later the puzzles as a whole, that they couldn’t distinguish a comma from a period. At first I tried such makeshift arrangements as a vertical bar to indicate any internal period in the cryptograms, not wishing to incur the expense of a new daisy wheel, but finally in January 1988 I gave in and purchased a replacement.

Another example of the unwillingness of the members to forego possible information occurred in the spring of 1987. Hot suggested a modification in the tagging system to recognize the primacy of Webster’s Ninth Collegiate over the Second and Third Unabridged Editions: in particular, he proposed that if a word or phrase were found in the Collegiate, that no tag at all be given. (Previously, this no-tag convention had been exercised only if the word was to be found in both the Second and Third Editions.) If the word were not in the Collegiate, then the specific
unabridged edition would be indicated (or both, if appropriate). We tried out the new system in the early months of 1987 and rather liked it (if a word were in the Collegiate, no further dictionary look-ups were necessary), but Nightowl protested vigorously at the fact that she could no longer be sure which, if any, unabridged edition contained the Collegiate words. In particular, various word lists she was using were based on one or the other of the unabridged editions, and she resented having to undertake word searches in them without assurance that the word was actually present. She brought the matter up at the business meeting of the 1987 convention and was successful in having the desired information restored—that is, it was necessary for us to indicate the presence or absence of a word in all three references. Faith was not particularly pleased at this turn of events, for it meant more work for her; she found that she was spending the better part of two days each month laboriously checking words and phrases in all dictionaries, all for an apparently minor benefit to the solver. At the convention some members privately urged us to speak up if we could not live with Nightowl’s tagging change, but I shrank from the verbal give-and-take this would require.

Most editors can, if they choose, muffle criticism by refusing to print critical letters or suitably editing the ones they do print. The Enigma editor did not have this privilege, for in January 1984 Treesong began publishing Graffiti on the Sphinx, a mimeographed monthly newsletter of six to twelve pages (probably equal to the Enigma in total word count) as a forum for reader discussion of puzzles in the last few Enigmas, general puzzle philosophy, chitchat on conventions and crossword puzzle tournaments, etc. Mangie was less then thrilled by its appearance, regarding criticism of a given puzzle as implied criticism of her editorial judgment. I took a more relaxed view of the newsletter, regarding it as feedback on what people liked or didn’t like in a puzzle. No doubt people would be more frank in a letter to Treesong than they would in a letter to Faith and me. From the pages of Graffiti on the Sphinx I did learn that some people thought that versification could stand improvement, that too many non-Websterian words were used as keywords in puzzles, and that rules such as “do not place keywords adjacent to each other” were waived too often. But what people really detested were cryptograms using excessively-obscure words, most notably Nightowl’s January 1988 “Tchai trickles midst rukh; urbane mpret, spry khatib galumph, chomp dukhn, slurp from lekythoi, laud Lakshmi”.

Besides the Graffiti on the Sphinx feedback, I regularly received a letter from Nightowl detailing the mistakes she and Hap had found in the latest issue, along with queries as to why I had done certain things in the Enigma. Since Nightowl was an early solver, this meant that I could include her corrections and emendations in the next issue, camera-ready copy of which had to leave for Buffalo only two weeks after people had received the preceding issue for solving. Nightowl’s steady litany of criticism had gotten under Mangie’s skin when she was editor, and a bitter feud soon developed between them. I resolved not to let the same thing happen, reminding myself that Nightowl had the best of intentions (maintaining the high quality of the Enigma) even though she expressed herself in undiplomatic ways. (Faith didn’t even grant this, believing that Nightowl was principally motivated to prove her superiority to succeeding editors.) Her waspish tongue was so well-known to NPL members at the time we took over as editor, that a group of a half-dozen or so set up a private betting pool, the winner being the one who most closely predicted the first time I would receive a letter from Nightowl impugning my character and judgment in the spirit of the “arrogant blackguard” diatribe I had received from Hap some years before. This provided me with a reason to prove that I could, unlike Mangie, get along with her without getting upset. I was in fact successful, for the latest date (December 1987) came and went without our having a falling-out. Still, I found her a most difficult person to correspond with, for it seemed as if I were always defending actions I had taken. Furthermore, I discovered that her criticism and questioning was presented in a manner that admitted of no rational
discussion of opposing viewpoints. She regarded her position as right, and would seldom if ever concede that another viewpoint had its merits. And, like an elephant, she never forgot, reminding me months later of some already-discussed editorial lapse if it served to illustrate a new point. (When once I complained about a metric problem in one of her verses, she endlessly reminded me of my inconsistency in noting it whenever I ignored a more serious lapse in someone else’s verse.) I found her insistence on consistency of editorial decision-making especially annoying, since it was my belief that composers ought to be treated in different ways, according to their experience and talents.

Most editors can call on reviewers to offer an independent opinion of the material they propose to publish. The editor of the Enigma does not have this luxury, since his readers are the putative solvers of the puzzles under consideration. Occasionally I sent a puzzle to Nightowl for an opinion concerning its suitability, but obviously I could not do this for all the puzzles in an issue. As Nightowl was fond of reminding both Mangie and me, the only way an editor can truly determine whether or not a puzzle is fairly clued is by solving it himself—but neither Mangie nor I had the time to do this for all the puzzles submitted for publication.

Mangie was famous in the NPL for her long chatty letters to correspondents, extending to many other topics than puzzles. In fact, this letter-interchange was perhaps that part of the Enigma editorship that she valued most highly. I found extensive letter-writing somewhat of a burden rather than a joy. I could talk easily enough on the immediate subject at hand, that of suggesting possible modifications to people’s puzzles, but small talk came harder. Partly to avoid having to think of things to fill up a page with, I soon restricted most editorial correspondence to postcards. Perhaps this made others see me as colder and more distant than Mangie.

As I had realized from the outset, Faith’s principal objection to the Enigma editorship was the constraints it placed on volunteer and vacation activity. We could plan to be away from home for little more than two weeks at a stretch, and that had to be rather carefully positioned in the latter half of the month. I had to admit that I sometimes felt like a batter in a batting cage, facing an automatic pitching machine which served up balls to hit in rapid succession. I mused whether this aspect of the editorial job might be ameliorated by having co-editors, so that each editor could have two weeks of intense activity followed by six weeks of more-or-less free time. Faith thought the idea was crazy and that it would never work. To my mind, the most awkward part would be the sharing of the puzzle files, but there were enough of these that they could be easily divided in two.

Faith’s other objection to the editorship was a little more unexpected. She pointed out that she only did things which she knew she could do to perfection, and as a consequence was more distressed than I at the drumbeat of criticism from Nightowl and Graffiti on the Sphinx. I reflected that this might be explainable by the fact that she had been a volunteer most of her life, rarely holding down a paying job. The rules of volunteerism are somewhat different: one can in clear conscience urge an employee to do better work (in the tacit belief that since he is working for money, he may be less than passionately interested in doing a competent job); but a volunteer can be presumed to have a much greater interest in his work, and the question of whether or not he is putting out his best effort should not be raised by the recipient of his labor. Though neither Nightowl nor Graffiti on the Sphinx explicitly told us to shape up, Faith felt that this message was implicitly present in the criticism that did appear. In effect, she took the attitude “If you can’t say something praiseworthy to a volunteer, don’t say anything at all!”
Although I had less of a free hand than I could wish for in the editing of puzzles, I was able to make at least a few changes in the Enigma format. I had always been somewhat dismayed at the helter-skelter appearance of the Enigma pages, particularly the way in which extra puzzles (such as anagrams, piecemeal squares, cryptic crosswords) were scattered through the issue to make pages come out even, and how the kudos scoring was seldom next to the flat scoring. I quickly arranged for Manx, the official scorer, to supply me with combined flat and kudos scoring starting at the top of a page, to which I added the answers from two issues ago, and filled out the remaining space (to complete the page) with extra puzzles, these not to appear anywhere else in the issue. I labeled dictionary phrases by enclosing them in brackets, and listed simple-to-solve puzzles in the new-member column. Acting on a suggestion from Willz, I introduced a double-column format for housekeeping details like new members’ names and pseudonyms, corrections and additions to the puzzles of the preceding issue, comments on the puzzles in the current issue, treasurer’s report, convention news and the like; I also presented solutions to forms in a more expanded format and added the pseudonym of the composer to each. Looking at the 2500 Ixaxar flats on file (a number that swelled to 3500 during the following year), I sorted them by subject matter and inaugurated a plan of presenting four to six flats per issue on a common topic (hair, King Arthur’s Court, baseball, courtroom trials, academic discipline, card games). During the summer of 1987 I created an index of all past anagrams and antigrams in order to determine whether an anagram submitted to me had been previously used. (I was motivated to do this after printing LOVE THE CAR for A CHEVROLET in July 1987, only to have Nightowl remind me that she had composed the same anagram in August 1984.) Each time I gave the answer to an anagram, I noted whether or not other anagrams had been created on that base. (There were cases in which at least ten different anagrams had been created on the same base over the years.)

I was not successful, however, in instituting one change dear to my heart: the rearrangement of the kudos list so that it was indexed by flat rather than by kudos-giver. I had been annoyed during my years as annual statistics compiler by the fact that I had to rearrange the kudos list to determine how many kudos a given flat had received, and felt that people seeking to ascertain the popularity of their own flats might well agree. Such a reordering looked at first as if it might take up more space because of the repetition of people’s names instead of the repetition of flat numbers, but I realized that, if one combined this list with another list showing the number of solvers of each flat, and abbreviated names to the first four letters of the pseudonym, the new ordering would actually take up less room in the Enigma. I was unable to persuade either Manx or his successor, Philana, to make such a change, even though it was quite easy to program on their computers; the most Manx would provide was the number of people kudoing each flat following the number of people solving it. Had I been compiling the scoring list myself, it would have been a simple matter to make the change and see how people liked it, but, depending upon Manx and Philana for this material, I could not in good conscience insist upon this change against their wishes. I was learning that the editor of the Enigma had considerably less latitude for innovation than the editor of Word Ways did.

It seemed to me, in fact, that among his many other skills the editor of the Enigma had to practice those of the diplomat. Far from having a free hand in the editing job, he had to be constantly aware of his constituency and their differing hopes and expectations. He had to keep on good terms with often bitterly opposed factions within the National Puzzlers’ League. He had to try and strike a compromise between opposing demands for (say) longer or shorter flats, or for more versus fewer diagamorphs. I sometimes wondered, with my desire to be liked by all and my strong abhorrence of conflict, whether I had the right temperament for this sort of editorial work. Was it not at least possible that the Enigma editor should be a strong-willed person who, by the force of his leadership, commanded the respect and allegiance of his readers, who could carry out
innovations without having to get permission beforehand? (Certainly leadership such as this was highly regarded in more important offices such as President of the United States.) But before exercising such leadership, it was essential for the editor to articulate a coherent philosophy as to what constituted a good Enigma puzzle—how to weight the various components of good meter, good rhyme, fairness of cueing, interestingness of keywords, and cleverness of story.

I took greatest pride as editor in the on-time appearance of the Enigma. Even when my mother died on November 7 1987, the December issue was not delayed (although it was not fully proofread). I also took great pride in the special issues: a February 1987 salute to the preceding editor, Mangie, followed in July by Issue 1000, a 24-pager (the longest one since 1938) containing some 126 flats, an all-time record, plus a five-page retrospective article highlighting the state of the League at Issues 100, 200, etc. Praise for these two issues was most generous and gratifying. I also took pains to create long obituaries for several old-timers, notably Amor, Sakr-el-Bahr, Fiddle and The Gink. For this, I drew upon my extensive indexing of the Enigma which I had done a few years earlier for the centennial history. Most people seemed to like these as well, although I did receive one negative vote from Double-H. Acting on a suggestion from Ulk, I reinstituted in November 1988 the “Hoozoo in Puzzledom” column, biographies of prominent members that had frequently appeared in the Enigmas of the 1920s and 1930s.

On March 13 1988 Sibyl in a telephone call offered to take over the editorship of the Enigma whenever we grew tired of the job. It took us only two or three days to accept her offer, and agree to step down by the end of 1988. After all, we argued, could we be sure that her offer would still be open a year or two down the road? Better accept it now while we were sure of a replacement. And during the past year it had become increasingly clear that, as a result of the Enigma, I was slowly but steadily falling behind on most of my other projects.

The normal way to pass the editorship was to ask for nominations for 1989 officers, including the editor, in the July Enigma, and let the membership know the new slate of officers on the ballot, sent with the October issue. However, with no hint from us that we were planning to retire, members would assume that our name was to appear on the October ballot, and no one would enter a competing name for editor. To make the election truly fair, I felt that the membership must know in advance of the ballot that the post was open. In fact, Nightowl had explicitly asked for such information from us when we decided to step down, and we had agreed to tell her.

Knowing the antipathy Nightowl held toward Sibyl, I felt certain that she would decide to run if she heard that Sibyl was a candidate. Knowing also her capacity for invective and stirring up trouble, I felt also that this would lead to a bitter and divisive campaign. I originally thought that the announcement of our retirement should be in the July issue, when nominations were called for, but I soon realized that this could poison the atmosphere at the Berkeley convention later that month. I proposed that an announcement appear in August instead, and hope that Nightowl did not get wind of what was going on prior to that time.

The only person I told of our intentions was Hudu, the 1988 president of the NPL. However, Sibyl leaked the information to a few trusted friends such as Tweaser, Mangie, Merlin and Treessong. These people almost unanimously urged me to bypass the election process entirely and have the NPL Board appoint Sibyl editor in my place, either before or immediately after the election. I felt rather strongly, in view of the fact that we had been appointed by the Board in 1986 immediately after Mangie had been re-elected editor, that we should have an election this time in order to reassure the membership that this post was not merely passed on to someone
chosen by the previous editor. If we had Sibyl appointed in advance of the election, then Nightowl would certainly contest the election, and nothing would have been gained as far as bitterness and divisiveness was concerned. If we had Sibyl appointed after the election, we would be repeating the legal but morally indefensible action that Mangie had taken.

In the face of Sibyl’s distress with my plan to announce our retirement in the August issue, I suggested that if the nominations were kept open until September 10 (the date I planned to mail the October issue with ballot to Copy Cat Press in Buffalo), then it would still give Nightowl a couple of weeks to respond to the announcement of our retirement in the September issue (which she would receive August 25).

In May I heard by telephone from Treesong that the NPL Board had unanimously (except for Faith and me, who weren’t even aware that anything was going on) voted that we should say nothing in the Enigma about our retirement before the October ballot, effectively disbarring Nightowl from running. I was unhappy with their decision, but decided that I had to go along with it. In any event, it would provide a convenient excuse for Faith’s and my role in the pre-election process should Nightowl ever find out about it (as she was sure to do eventually) and upbraid us for not letting her know of our intentions as we had promised to do.

Convention came and went with no leak to Nightowl; we made a point of not associating with Sibyl too much lest it arouse suspicion. However, on July 29, a couple of days after we had returned from our post-convention vacation trip to Washington and Oregon, I received a telephone call from Nightowl asking if the rumors she had heard of our retirement were true. I admitted it was so, and asked how she found out about it. (She wouldn’t say, but I later learned from Sibyl that Dirty Jack had gotten wind of it from Pen Gwyn and asked Mangie about it, and Mangie had conceded it was true.) Nightowl of course regarded Sibyl’s proposed editorship as a disaster for the League, and quickly announced her intention to run against Sibyl. Secretly, I was pleased by this turn of events—we would have a fair election after all, and both candidates would learn the amount of support they had among the membership.

Nightowl proposed that I publish in the October issue policy statements from both candidates to accompany the ballot. I thought this was a fine idea, and eventually persuaded Sibyl to submit one. In addition, I announced our plan to retire in the September issue after all, and gave a short biography of both Sibyl and Nightowl there. When I published the policy statements in October, several of Sibyl’s partisans complained that Nightowl’s statement was mere puffery, consisting of a recital of her past accomplishments as Enigma editor. I argued that to the contrary it implied "this is the type of editing you can expect in the future." I was especially galled by a letter from Merlin, whom I had always regarded as fair and levelheaded, accusing us of publishing self-serving puffery which indicated a strong bias on our part toward Nightowl in the election. Since we had been leaning over backward to present a nonpartisan tone in the Enigma, I found his letter extremely distressing, and I was even more upset when most of it was printed in the next issue of Graffiti on the Sphinx. Fortunately, Eric wrote a fine rebuttal, making better than I could my points about Nightowl’s policy statement, and also defending us stoutly against the charge of partisanship.

What had especially drawn Merlin’s wrath was the appearance in the policy statement of a ten-year-old quote he had made in the Enigma regarding the high quality of Nightowl’s editorial work. He claimed he should have been consulted beforehand about having this published, as it did not represent his present beliefs. I argued that it was clearly dated, and that no imputation of present belief could be drawn from it, but I agreed to print his protest in the next Enigma.
During the month of October we had the fun of watching the ballot totals mount each day. Somewhat to our surprise, Nightowl ran a stronger race than we had expected, perhaps because people were reacting in sympathy to the attacks on her in Graffiti on the Sphinx, perhaps because people remembered that her earlier editorship had done much to rescue the League from the near-oblivion of the 1960s. In any event, when the balloting was over it was clear that Sibyl had won, but only by the relatively narrow margin of 97 to 79, with 2 abstentions. Nightowl herself was not dissatisfied with the outcome, as she had apparently expected to be beaten. I pointed out to her that if Sibyl were one-tenth as bad an editor as Nightowl predicted she would be, she (Nightowl) would be a shoo-in in the election a year later. We were reasonably convinced that there was no chicanery in the election process (in particular no ballot duplications), but we sent the ballots to Hudu who insisted that he examine them for possible fraud.

We ended up voting for Nightowl. Although we felt that both candidates were technically highly qualified for the job, we had misgivings that neither would respond well to the inevitable criticism and don’t-change-my-flats injunctions from many composers. On balance, we decided to stick with the known rather than the unknown—Nightowl had, after all, issued a quality magazine for six years. Still, we were not unhappy with Sibyl’s win; after all, the Enigma had prospered in the past through a diversity of editorial viewpoints and new ideas.

As things turned out, Sibyl remained editor for seven years, through the end of 1996. In the summer of 1991 Willz, distressed by the fact that the NPL Board had reserved to itself the right to decide various League matters (such as the location for future conventions) that had been formerly voted on by members attending conventions, decided to run a rival slate of officers and asked me to stand as president. Although I was not anxious to return to the hurly-burly of League politics, I agreed, and was in a measure relieved when I lost to the incumbent, Trazom, receiving 64 votes to his 104. Nightowl took this opportunity to challenge Sibyl as editor, but also fell short, 47 to 122.

Nightowl continued to send in puzzles and solutions for several years after her failure to regain the editorship in 1988, eventually extending her record of consecutive complete solutions to 177 issues since she ceased to be editor in 1978. However, there continued to be much friction between her and the NPL Board, which culminated in her resignation as an active member of the League in November 1992. In early 1993 she wrote a twelve-page open letter giving her side of the story, and in May she started a monthly newsletter, the Ag Mine, for other disaffected puzzlers. Typically four pages long, it attracted only a handful of contributors. (She published it until August 2003, and died of cancer on January 31, 2004.) I tried to help her along by sending in puzzles.

My principal series of puzzles consisted of variations on the doughnut riddle. In April 1947, Al Forsythe, a friend of my father’s, gave me the riddle “Mad about money my name might suggest, but good taste about nothing describes me the best.” I proposed this puzzle many times over the following years, from Lantern Hill campers and counselors in 1947, to my daughters in 1965, and to Nightowl when we visited her in Rochester in 1973. Beginning in October 1994, I devised thirty of these riddles:

“Maureen O’Hara” this word seems to say, but it’s really a fog that just won’t go away
“Scandal: Montana” this word might suggest, but foul-mouthed invective describes me the best
“Layers of jewels” my name might suggest, but plans for a battle describe me the best
Cat abuse? Dog abuse? This I suggest, but fleet-footed canine describes me the best
A diamond? A fake! my name might suggest, but symbol of Ireland describes me the best
“A place to plan battles” my name might suggest, but prison official describes me the best
“Unconscious unconscious” my name seems to say, but it’s clear I am neither cloudy nor gray
“What to do if no towel” my name might suggest, but my meaning is various, rightly expressed
“What golfers do first” my name might suggest, but a spot made for sitting describes me the best
“This little piggy” my name might suggest, but unproven story describes me the best

Sex-by-the-numbers my name might suggest, but a bet raised by winnings describes me the best
“Exile the monarch” my name might suggest, but processing money describes me the best
“Sex in the back seat” my name might suggest, but machines idling workers describe me the best
“Prisoner’s workbench” my name might suggest, but village-based lawman describes me the best
Instructions for Brutus my name might suggest, but Jewish philosopher tags me the best
Moral perfection my name might suggest, but nun-of-the-future describes me the best
“Country of beavers” my name might suggest, but consignment to Sheol describes me the best
“Ask about arson” my name might suggest, but a dialogue with minister describes me the best
“Protest by Sonny” my name might suggest, but knife-wielding tradesman describes me the best
“Girl with bikini” my name might suggest, but Biblical reading describes me the best

“Water the booze” my name might suggest, but a glance to the right side reveals me the best
“Our treat” (welcome offer) this word might suggest, but burden or stigma describes me the best
“Bankroll a psychic” this word might suggest, but Bible believer describes me the best
“Anticipate speeches” this word might suggest, but televised ball-players show these the best
“Fog covers Warsaw” my name might suggest; Rush Limbaugh, attacking, embodies me best
“Query relations” my name might suggest, but post-midnight carriage describes me the best
“Annoyance in tavern” my name might suggest, but continuous gunfire describes me the best
“End of a rooster” my name might suggest, but adult refreshment describes me the best
“Reagan campaign slogan” I might suggest, but in nuclear orbit I’m never at rest
“Brew tab of five bucks” my name might suggest, but fat lady singing describes me the best

The answers are: miasma, billingsgate, stratagems, whippet, shamrock, warden, limpid, sundry, settee, legend, parlay, banking, automating, constable, Maimonides, novice, damnation, litany, butcher, lesson, margin, onus, fundamentalist, expectorations, polemist, pumpkin, barrage, cocktail, electron, and finale.

Although I first discovered the National Puzzlers’ League in Language on Vacation, I had three earlier opportunities to learn of its existence. Cyrus Bernstein, our neighbor across the alley at 3643 Brandywine Street, joined the NPL in New York City in 1933 and took the pseudonym Cy Colley, but dropped out after he moved in 1939 to the house at 4601 Reno Road. We didn’t discover the NPL connection until his visit to the funeral home immediately after my father’s death on March 14 1991. Oscar C. Kurtz joined the NPL in Illinois in 1934 and took the pseudonym O’Casey. He was the father of Tom Kurtz, one of my best friends when I took graduate work in statistics at Princeton, but Tom never mentioned his father’s interest to me. (O’Casey had a fine collection of Enigmas dating back to 1910, which Treesong scooped up in the early 1970s.) Finally, Bob Hooke joined the NPL in North Carolina in 1933, taking the pseudonym Al Gebra. I knew him well at Princeton, particularly after he became my boss at the Analytical Research Group, but he never revealed his interest in word puzzles to me. Had he done so, I might well have joined the NPL in 1952 instead of 1970, and very likely would have been the purchaser of the Oedipus collection of all back issues of the Enigma, which vanished from view in 1966.