MERLIN X. HOUDINI, IV

Since solving Dave Silverman's problem of dividing a 6-letter word into two 3-letter words in all possible ways -- a total of ten word pairs -- I have toyed with the idea of doing the same thing to an 8-letter word, dividing it into pairs of 4-letter words. The number of possible combinations here is 35, and Silverman implied that finding more than half a dozen pairs was impossible if one sticks to the Second and Third Editions of Webster's Unabridged.

Using only the Second Edition as a base of operations, I have devised a complete solution to the problem. Since not all of the words used in my solution would instantly be recognized by the average ten-year-old, I present the solution in annotated form, followed by a suggestion as to how you can improve on it yourself. My function is to show you the way, and then to let you implement that way on your own.

We begin with the 8-letter name ESTHONIA, a variant spelling of ESTONIA given in the Gazetteer section of the Second Edition. Its derivative adjective, ESTHONIAN, is found in the body of the dictionary. Here are the 35 word divisions:

- HONE, AITS: aits: a name for islets in a lake or river, used in certain parts of England
- SEAT, HOIN: hoin: to overwork or ill-treat, used in certain parts of England
- OATS, HINE: hine: a variant of hind still found in certain parts of England
- TIES, HANO: Hano: the name of a Tewa Indian pueblo in northeastern Arizona
- TOES, HAIN: hain: to spare or save, an Irish and Scottish term
- OTIS, HENA: Hena: a Biblical city destroyed by the Assyrians
- SHOE, ANTI: anti: a person opposed to something
- INTO, SHEA: shea: an African tree (we prefer the simpler definition, "a masculine first name")
- HIES, ATON: Aton: a variant of Aten, the solar disk worshiped in ancient Egypt
- NEAT, HOIS: hols: certain Hawaiian yams
- TINE, SHOA: Shoa: a people in Ethiopia
- NOTE, HIAS: hias: hawk parrots
- HEAT, SION: Sion: a variant of Zion, a hill in ancient Jerusalem
- SANE, HOIT: hoit: to move along clumsily, a Scottish term
HOTE, NIAS  hote: a variant of hot still used in certain parts of England
Nias: a language spoken on a small island west of Sumatra

OATH, SINE NOSE, HATI  Hati: a name for the heart, in the religion of ancient Egypt

NAOS, HEIT  heit: a word used to urge on an animal, a Scottish term

HATS, IONE  Ione: a young noble of Pompeii, in Bulwer-Lytton's The Last Days of Pompeii (we prefer the simpler definition, "a feminine first name")

SETH, AINO HITS, AEON  aeon: alternate spelling of eon

SHOT, AINE  aine: elder; senior

HENS, IOTA NASH, IOTE  nash: British slang meaning "to go away" (we prefer the simpler definition, "a common surname")
iote: a vintage spelling of jot. Although this spelling does not appear in Webster's Second, The Oxford English Dictionary shows it to have been in use as late as the 17th century

SHIN, ATEO  Ateo: a Polynesian god said to have been the progenitor of man

SHON, ITEA  shon: an "elder statesman" spelling of shun, harking back to the 16th century

THAN, OISE Olise: a river in northern France, included in the Gazetteer section

THEN, IAOS  iaos: wattled honey eaters

THIN, OSEA  Osea: an Apocryphal name for Hoshea, Israel king

THON, ASIE  asie: to sink down. Although not in Webster's Second, it appears explicitly in Webster's First; asie is a variant of asye, recorded as in use as recently as the year 1275

NEST, AHIO TINS, AHOE  Ahio: in the Bible, one of the uncles of King Saul
Ahoe: in the Catholic Bible, one of the grandsons of Benjamin

ANTS, HOIE  hoie: a small coasting vessel, usually sloop-rigged. Although not in Webster's Second, it appears explicitly in Webster's First; the Oxford English Dictionary records its use in the 17th century

TONS, HAIE  haie: grass cut and cured for fodder. Although not in Webster's Second, it appears explicitly in Webster's First; the Oxford English Dictionary records its use in the 17th century

EIAO, NTH'S  Eiaoa small island in the Marquesas, recorded in Webster's Geographical Dictionary, an amplification of the Gazetteer section of the Second Edition
Each word in our language, irrespective of the part of speech it represents, forms its plural by adding an apostrophe and an S. The plural of NTH as a quotation noun, or citation form, or hypostasis, in NTH'S.

It is not impossible that you would like to upgrade the quality of the solution just unfolded before your astonished gaze. In that case, you may wish to explore the potential inherent in another pair of words. Assuming that you are particularly irked by the use of NTH'S, I suggest that you replace it with CRWD, the name of an ancient Celtic stringed instrument. The word is in the Second Edition, prodigally spelled with 5 letters: CRWTH. The more economical 4-letter form is in The Oxford English Dictionary. Mix CRWD with EIAO and you have COWARDIE, a more economical spelling of COWARDICE also found in The Oxford English Dictionary and there assigned to its proper station within the current quatercentenary, with an example of its use dated 1578.

From this point forward, you are on your own!

ENGINEERS AT PLAY

Recently the MIT Technology Review challenged its readers to compose a four-by-four word square using sixteen different letters of the alphabet, with the additional stipulations that all words must come from the same dictionary, and that none be plurals or proper nouns. The only solution meeting all of these requirements, composed by George H. Lopes, was published on page 61 of the July/August 1974 issue. All words can be found in Webster's Second; in fact, all but YPIL (a variant spelling of ipil, a Philippine tree) can be found in Webster's Third. As a lagniappe, the word FLAT is traced out on one of the two diagonals.

(R.R.R.)