Compound words result from the union of two or more simple words. They can be phrasal compounds like 'nevertheless' or fused compounds like 'smog' (smoke and fog). Many books on linguistics mention hybrid words: compound words whose simplex components come from different languages. The usual example given is 'automobile', with the Greek-derived auto and the Latin-derived mobile. Other names for these include mongrel words or mule words.

Because of the implication that these were rather rare, they seemed to be a likely subject for investigation. In "A Complex of Compounds" in the November 1978 Word Ways, I identified 111 compound words in a random dictionary search of 1534 words. Surprisingly, over half of these were hybrid -- 59 out of 111.

Of the 52 pure-bred compounds, 48 are Anglo-Saxon, 2 are Norman French ('poison-pen', 'face-saving') and 1 is French ('bonbon'). This suggests the first research project: find pure-bred compound words whose roots are neither Anglo-Saxon nor Norman French. I know of only four (excluding tautonyms like 'bonbon'):

- taxicab (French)
- autogyro (Greek)
- blitzkrieg (German)
- salt peter (Latin)

Of the 59 hybrid words, 51 have one Anglo-Saxon simplex -- hardly surprising, since Anglo-Saxon is a Germanic language, and Germanic languages are famous for compounding. Some of the hybrids found were 'bawspit' (Scandanavian-AS), 'divebomb' (AS-French), 'half-caste' (AS-Portuguese), and 'zebrwood' (Amharic-AS). (Of course, it is possible to hybridize any language with Anglo-Saxon by using the suffix -like with a noun: 'mooselike' (Algonquin-AS) to 'assagai-like' (Zulu-AS).) This suggests the second research project: find hybrid compounds whose roots are not Anglo-Saxon. Again, my list is quite short:

- amberjack (Arabic, Hebrew)
- asafetida (Persian, Latin)
- automobile (Greek, Latin)
- grotesque (Italian, French)

Good hunting!