

A NATURALIST IN SHOW BUSINESS

or

I Helped Kill Vaudeville

by

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Fanny Hinton, was the head librarian of the Carnegie Library in Atlanta, and was someone I admired tremendously.

The Scripps Institution of Oceanography has for a hundred years had a fine scientific library, primarily oceanographic. When I joined the Institution in 1946, the librarian was Miss Ruth Ragan. She respected books of all kinds, and was a whiz at the Library of Congress filing system, but her heart was not in oceanography; she was, on her own time, a Shakespeare scholar of some repute. Miss Ragan would, I know, have deplored my calling her a "whiz." A similar slang word got her dander up when she was about to retire, and the Library Committee had to find a replacement. The Chairman of that Committee reported to Miss Ragan that they had indeed found someone and that he appeared to be a real "crackerjack." Miss Ragan seized upon the word "crackerjack" and emphatically used it at every opportunity when the Chairman was present, much as Antony used and played with the word "honorable" in his Caesarian eulogy. "Well, that's a problem that your CRACKERJACK will have to deal with." "Surely a CRACKERJACK will be able to understand that."

A strict grammarian, she had no hesitation in correcting any misuse of our language. The Museum, of which I was the Curator, was on the ground floor of her Library building, and I was perforce invited to attend some of the meetings of the Faculty Committee For the Library and Museum. At one of these meetings the Committee was discussing plans for a necessary increase of library floor space. Miss Ragan saw the whole thing as an invasion of her territory, and did nothing to conceal her impatience. At one point, the Chairman, one of the senior biologists at Scripps, brought up the subject of a mezzanine floor which could be built in the high central museum room and used by the library. Miss Ragan, who knew at least the pronunciation rules of several languages, bristled even further, and said "If you must talk about such a travesty, please at least use the correct pronunciation. It is MET-canine! MET-canine!" The chastened Chairman apologized.

The subject came up again and again at subsequent meetings, and the Chairman, apparently remembering that there was a "t" in there somewhere, always referred to the project as the "mezzanine." (It was finally installed after Miss Raglan's retirement. Now, of course, Scripps has a magnificent new library building, Equate Hall, and the old library building, like Miss Ragan herself, is no more.)

Miss Raglan's acerbity was not limited to the library. In 1948, I had an extracurricular live radio program, "The Calendar of Folksongs, " on station KSDJ, which later changed its call letters to KOGO. This was a half-hour show, airing every morning at 7:00 AM and sponsored for one 3-week series by the Sun Harbor Tuna Company. I had to rise early every morning, check the flow of sea water in the aquarium tanks, then drive to downtown San Diego for the program. It was hard for me to get back to work at the Aquarium-Museum before 8:30 AM, but the Director of the Institution, Dr. Carl Eckart, unhesitatingly gave me permission to be half an hour late in the mornings provided my work-day was never less than the required 8 hours. Miss Ragan stopped me one day and said "I hear you are doing a radio program every morning."

I said yes, that was true.

"Well, " she said, "How do you get away with it?"

When Scripps was expanded to become a general campus — UCSD, the University of California, San Diego — and I had been appointed its Director of Relations With Schools, a tremendous new library (later named for Theodore Geisel, better known as "Dr. Seuss") was created. When the new Library accessioned its 500,000th book, a special public ceremony was held. The book in question was a rare folio volume of Shakespeare,. Miss Ragan, the amateur Shakespeare authority, was invited to participate in the ceremony. Although by then long retired and quite feeble, she was able to come up from her retreat in the Casa de Mañana Retirement Home, and to make a number of caustic remarks about the new UCSD Library building. ("That's a fine large building, but I'll wager nobody in it has done anything about the anomalies in the Library of Congress cataloguing system!")

Everyone was just a little afraid of Miss Ragan, and with good reason: she was often right.

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