

Bay View

Rolling in His Grave

At least one San Francisco lawyer had a sense of humor

By Jack Boulware

The phone call to the rare book and special collections department of the San Francisco Public Library two weeks ago was about chickens.

The caller, claiming to be associated with Kentucky Fried Chicken, said she was tracing the origins of a recent well-traded Internet rumor that KFC changed its name because its chickens aren't actually chickens, but rather chemical mutations of chickens. She asked librarian Andrea Grimes for help locating a particular source — the May/June 1995 issue of *The Nose* magazine, a satirical publication of which I happened to be the editor for a long, and financially questionable, six years.

Grimes tracked me down at *SF Weekly* seeking help with her problem. The library has Issues 1 through 26 of *The Nose*, she said, but no May/June 1995 edition. She asked if there was another issue the library had not received, one that may have mentioned the KFC debacle?

There was no Issue 27, I told her. The magazine folded — aggressively, and with much drama — in April of 1995.

But I had to know — why does San Francisco's library even have all 26 issues of *The Nose*, bound in volumes in its special collections department?

They are, it turns out, part of the Schmulowitz Collection of Wit and Humor (SCOWAH), the world's second largest collection of humor and folklore, eclipsed only by the House of Humour and Satire collection in Gabrovo, Bulgaria. The collection, which resides on the sixth floor of the main branch, was begun in 1947. It now numbers more than 20,000 volumes, spanning four centuries, representing over 35 different languages and dialects, with more arriving each year. Among the rarities included therein are joke books, cartoons, magazines, humorous essays, academic studies, and unusual historical folklore about topics like Greek pirates, umbrellas, and railroads.

Scholars and comedians occasionally make their way to the collection to conduct research, and little boys often drop by to read the Tin Tin comics. But most San Franciscans have never heard of this archive, unless they wander into the main branch around April Fools' Day, when the library puts a portion of the SCOWAH on public display for two months.

For this odd assemblage of knowledge, the city may thank a late local attorney named Nat Schmulowitz.

According to the library, Schmulowitz was a graduate of UC Berkeley and Hastings Law School, and practiced as an attorney in the city. His most famous case was the 1921 trial of Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, the silent film comedian accused of murdering a young woman at the St. Francis Hotel. After

two heavily publicized trials, Schmulowitz and his team succeeded in obtaining a not guilty verdict for Arbuckle.

But Schmulowitz wasn't just a well-regarded barrister who belonged to civic groups like the Commonwealth Club and the Library Commission. He possessed a belief in humor that bordered on the cosmic. In a 1947 speech before the Judicial Conference of the U.S. Circuit and District Judges of the 9th Circuit, Schmulowitz indicated that laughter was essential to a healthy life:

"A vain man, a frightened man, a bigoted man, or an angry man, cannot laugh at himself or be laughed at; but the man who can laugh at himself or be laughed at has taken another step towards the perfect sanity which brings peace on earth and good will to men."

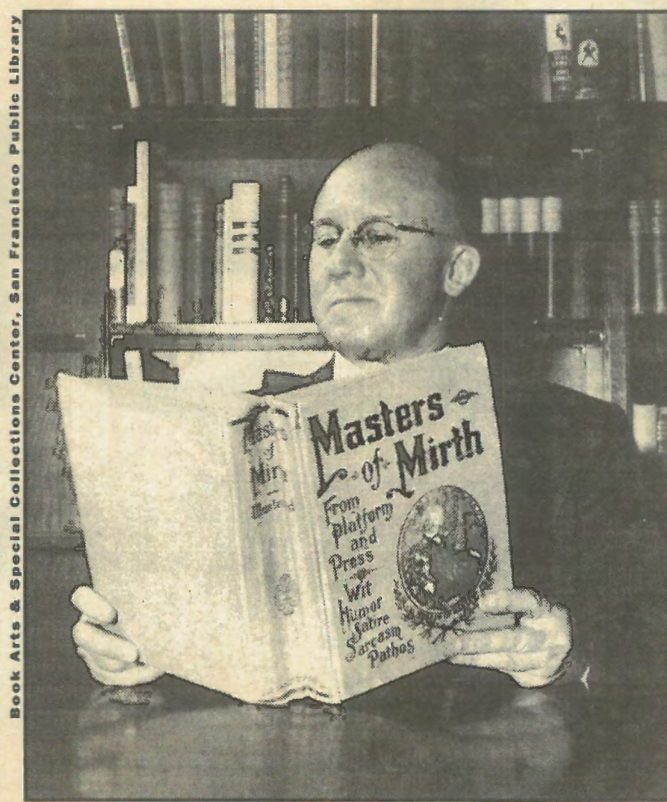
Throughout his life, Schmulowitz scoured all parts of the globe in a voracious search for humor. His tastes ran far, from obscure fables and bizarre anecdotes to witty plays and comic memoirs. But entertaining friends and family with his collection wasn't enough. On April 1, 1947, he donated 93 volumes to the San Francisco Library, allowing the public to share in his treasure trove. Three years later the library opened a special room to house the SCOWAH. Throughout the years, Schmulowitz continued donating books to the collection, up to 100 items a month. Over half the collection, approximately 14,000 volumes, was amassed by Schmulowitz himself.

After his death in 1966, his sister Kay continued to support the collection, donating funds and more humor materials, until she passed away in 1984. Neither had children, but cousins who live in the Bay Area are quite proud of their relatives' peculiar collection.

"I think it's an amazing gift that not enough people know about," says Debbie Herzfeld, a San Francisco real estate broker and the great-niece of Nat and Kay Schmulowitz. Herzfeld remembers when her great-aunt and -uncle kept the collection at the penthouse apartment they shared. "There's so much history there — the *Mad* magazines, the Marx Brothers stuff," she says. "The fun thing is to remember looking at these books in their home over the years, and then watching it grow to the size it is. It's exciting. To me, it's a shame that more people don't participate in the use of it."

Upon completion of the library's new main branch, the collection was split up. English-language portions are currently shelved on the sixth floor, with the remainder stored in the basement. But all of it is open to the public without appointment. You just find what you need in the catalog, and someone will fetch it for you.

Librarian Susie Taylor has worked with the SCOWAH since 1977. She says the one consistent element of the archive has always been its humanity. Schmulowitz seemed to be curious about any culture, whether it was Africa, Sweden, or ancient Greece. His tastes occasionally ran into political incorrectness, but always retained a positive spirit about the subjects he collected.



The late Nat Schmulowitz.

"There's a certain element of folksiness to it," says Taylor. "That comes through when you pick up some stupid pamphlet by some salesman. He really was very eclectic in his collecting, but it did happen with the human interest, whether it comes from laughing about something, or a deeper psychological understanding about people, and what makes them human. The complexity of human beings. When you say 'wit and humor collection,' a lot of people think simply of the jokes, but this includes another strain of literary wit and wisdom."

Andrea Grimes wheels out a rack filled with 20 or so books, all highlights she has pulled for me from the SCOWAH shelves. Several of the volumes are by contemporary humorists like Woody Allen, Penn and Teller, Cynthia Heimel, and San Francisco's own Josh Kornbluth. But the older selections are genuinely odd.

"This is one of my favorites," she says, and hands over a small weathered booklet titled *Memoirs of a Stomach*. Published in 1853, and written "by a minister of the interior," the entire volume is structured from the point of view of someone's stomach. One section describes the stomach's experience with a pack of boys: "All of a sudden I received such a thump as made me fancy, I was knocked clean out of the osseous framework wherein I lay."

The Wonderful Drama of Punch and Judy, by Papernose Woodensconce, Esq., contains illustrated limericks such as:

"There was an Old Man who supposed,
that the street door was partially closed;
But some very large rats,
ate his coats and his hats,
while that futile old gentleman dozed."

A fat anthology titled *Masters of Mirth* describes a speech called "Among the Mormons" by humorist Artemus Ward; the author printed up tickets to his reading that said, "Admit the Bearer and one wife."

Folklore Fights the Nazis: Humor in Occupied Norway, 1940-1945 presents the

"A vain man, a frightened man, a bigoted man, or an angry man, cannot laugh at himself or be laughed at."

Nat Schmulowitz, library benefactor

contents of four joke notebooks kept by young women during the Nazi occupation. A 1904 book titled *At the Sign of the Barber's Pole: Studies in Hirsute History* presents straight-faced essays on the philosophy of beards, wig-stealing, and "the moustache movement."

This handful of books is so far-reaching in its obscurity, it would be impossible to stumble across at random. *African Proverbs*, from 1962, lists reminders like "Move your neck according to the music," and "The toad likes water, but not when it's boiling." *Naval Yarns 1616-1831* is a collection of anecdotes about pirates on the high seas.

Schmulowitz even self-published on occasion. His 1943 pamphlet *The Nazi Joke Courts* detailed Hitler's contempt for jokes told about the regime. (One example: German farmers were actually forbidden from calling any livestock animal by the name "Adolf.")

But the most frequently requested book in the collection,

according to Grimes, is a sinister-sounding tome from 1910 called *Flagellation & the Flagellants: A History of the Rod in all Countries*, by the Rev. Wm. M. Cooper, B.A. (aka James Glass Bertram). The frontispiece illustration depicts "the beautiful Madame LaPuchin," with exposed back, receiving a whipping in the streets of Russia. Scanning the names of chapters like "Flogging in the Navy," "The Flogging of Slaves," "On the Whipping of Young Ladies," "The Flagellation of Quakers and Political Persons," and "Anecdotes of Domestic Birch at Home," you can't help but wonder at this book's popularity. Or why Schmulowitz had it in the first place.

"I think that it didn't matter what subject it was," Grimes explains. "No subject was too difficult for him. The principles of liberty. That's really what it's about."

She opens up a file folder of archival photos, and we see the various faces of Nat Schmulowitz, always smiling for the camera. Travel shots with his sister Kay indicate the two probably scoured bookstores together, sharing their peculiar curiosity of the world. A small object covered in purple foil falls out of the folder, and Grimes holds it up.

"This is one of her famous wrapped chicken wishbones that she would give to friends. You know, I can kind of see it. Wishbones are for good luck."

Far from a bizarre footnote to bibliophiles, the SCOWAH continues to expand. The Rev. Warren Debenham of Berkeley is in the process of donating his collection of humorous sound recordings, some 45,000 vinyl records and CDs. Both Grimes and Taylor remain busy updating the computer catalog with the existing SCOWAH materials, so that decades from now someone can enter the San Francisco Public Library, request a book about the history of flagellation, sit back in a chair, and daydream about Quakers lying on the floor of a room, receiving whippings from men in three-cornered hats. **SF**