

Naming Errors

by Robert Rennick

With the advent of computers, ushering in an era of impersonality, we have come on numerous instances of errors in identity. In addition to the more obvious cases of deliberate “trading on one’s name,” as when Mr. Smith assumes the name, address, and Social Security, credit card, or telephone number of Mr. Jones and proceeds to run up bills against the latter’s accounts, we have the following misadventures:

When I was a professor of sociology at several colleges, customarily I would inform textbook company representatives that I was a Soc. teacher (and pronounced that “sosh”). Sure enough, several companies sent me examination copies of new textbooks, addressing them to Prof. Sosh, with accompanying letters: “Dear Prof. Sosh: I trust you will find this book suitable for your classes”

Friends of mine who identify themselves with their corporations not infrequently receive mailings from strangers addressed (in one instance) to General Office Supplies, Inc. with the salutation: “Dear Mr. Inc.”

In an effort to personalize correspondence, companies trying to sell us something, will, every few sentences or so, include our names in their otherwise obviously impersonal form letters. This can be ludicrous when, for example, the Inc family is informed that they are recipients of a valuable prize if they become the first in their town to return the enclosed card. “Think of the honor,” they are told, “of being the first Inc in town to win this prize.” Or, to paraphrase an old *Reader’s Digest* yarn; “Dear Mr. Inc: You may not be aware that the Inc family is an honored one in this country, dating back to colonial times, and having produced many illustrious members. As a current generation Inc, you are entitled to a copy of your family’s coat of arms and the official account of the Inc family’s glorious history printed on parchment paper and suitable for framing. All you have to do to receive this is”

In the early 1960s, a slender San Diego lawyer, William F. Harkins, was curious about a letter he’d just received addressed to William Fatty Harkins. He later learned that the sender had copied his name out of the local telephone book which included this: “Harkins, Wm. F atty.”¹ Also from San Diego came the account of Robert Van Bergen who had complained to a company that they had misspelled his name Vanbergen. He pointed out that there is a space between Van and Bergen. Naturally enough, his next letter from them was addressed to Robert Vanspace Bergen.²

But errors of this sort go back to a time long before computers. Sometime before the Second World War, a student at the Smith Hall dormitory on a certain college campus ordered something from a company catalogue, and when he received it he

was astonished to find it addressed to Mr. Smith Hall. He was even more nonplused a week later to receive a letter: "Dear Mr. Hall" asking how he liked the product.

Perhaps the prototype of these error stories is the one about the rich traveler who hires a none too bright local to sign him in on a hotel register. The local says, "I can't pronounce your name but I copied it from your suitcase." Since the traveler knows his name isn't on his suitcase, he checks the register and finds he'd just been signed in as "Mr. Genuine Leather."

Also traced back to the early twenties was the widely told tale of "E. Pluribus Unum." A man goes into a stationery store to buy a fountain pen. The clerk shows him one and he tries it out, repeatedly writing "E. Pluribus Unum." After a while the clerk brings him another pen, saying, "You may like the point on this one better, Mr. Unum."³

Here are some more error stories.

An elderly lady and her granddaughter hurry to a ticket window of a train station. She seems most impatient as she asks the agent for a ticket for Magnolia. The man checks the time tables and says, "I'm sorry but I can't find any Magnolia on our line. Where is it?" "There she is," the lady points to her granddaughter, "That's Magnolia."⁴

The emergency room physician tells the nurse to ask the newly admitted patient his name so they can identify his family. The nurse is unable to get this information. "I tried but he wouldn't give me his name. He says his family already knows it."

It's a rare occasion when George Smith has a letter waiting for him at the downtown post office. He walks up to the window, demanding his letter. "What's your name?" he is asked. "Why should I tell you my name?" he says, indignantly, "It'll be on the letter." On another occasion, George asks the window clerk if he has any mail. Again, the clerk asks, "What's your name?" "That's really none of your business," George replies. "All I want is my mail. You have no need to know my name." "I'm sorry," the clerk responds, "I can't give you your mail unless I know who you are." Finally, the clerk gets through to George, and he agrees to give her a name. He says it's Horatio Stupnagle. She goes over the day's mail very carefully and says, "I'm sorry but I can't find any mail for a Horatio Stupnagle." "Thanks anyway," George says and goes home. He tells his wife, proudly, that he really fooled that impertinent post office clerk. He'd given her a phony name.

Quiz show contestants were once given a list of companies whose products are designed to make women attractive and for so many points each contestant was asked what the companies specialized in. Helena Rubinstein? Cosmetics. You're right. Ponds? Cold cream. You're right. Avon? Beauty products. You're right. Matchabelli? Girdles.

A woman who'd been married for some time files for a divorce. The judge asks for an explanation. She says it all started in the hospital where her husband was taken after an accident. She asked to see him but was told by the attending physician that she couldn't right then because he was under the influence of Ann Aesthetics. The woman said she just couldn't deal with the thought that he'd been seeing another woman.

At a reception, a tailor is introduced to a distinguished gentleman who seems vaguely uneasy. "I seem to remember your face," the gentleman says, "but I can't for the life of me recall your name." "Oh," says the tailor, "I made your breeches." "That's it," says the gentleman, "I remember you now. Major Bridges. I'm so glad to see you again."

What do you do when you can't remember someone's name? Among the many mnemonic devices that have been suggested are those involving association and rhyme. You know, associating the name with something you're familiar with that rhymes

with the name. Suppose you want to remember a name like Racks. Racks rhymes with sacks, so you picture a sack of potatoes and you should have no difficulty coming up with Racks. I tried that once. I met Mr. Racks on one occasion; then I saw him about a month later and greeted him with “How are you, Mr. Baggs, it’s so good to see you again.”

I should have learned my lesson. I later met a Greenup County, Kentucky girl named Womack. I didn’t think I’d have any difficulty here. I’d just think of stomach—that almost rhymes with Womack. But when I chanced to see her again, I blew it with “Hi, Mrs. Kelly.”

Columnist Norton Mockridge once recalled Judge Joseph Ciano’s problems with his name. After an especially trying time with one man’s efforts, he said to the fellow, “Look, my name rhymes with piano. Got it?” So, of course, the next time they met, the fellow addressed him as Steinway.⁵

In preparing for a final exam on nineteenth century British poets, I needed some way to remember the name of the famed Scottish poet, Bobby Burns. I was told to think of a London policeman, called a bobby, and imagine that someone had just set him on fire. So, Bobby Burns. But on the final, I wrote about Robert Browning instead.

The guy who told me the following story, who, like so many other informants, prefers to remain anonymous, swore that he once met a girl named Elizabeth Breasted with whom he wished to become better acquainted. But he was afraid he’d forget her name. A mutual friend assured him he wouldn’t if he followed this simple procedure. Just think of her body, especially her most distinguishing characteristic. He did, and the next time they met, he greeted her with “Hi, there, Miss Buttocks.” Needless to say, nothing came of their relationship.

A London woman received the similar advice when she learned that she’d have to introduce a Mrs. Western to her social circle. She was told to think of a cowboy with a ten gallon hat. Sure enough, when the time came, she remembered the mnemonic device—“Ladies, this is Mrs. Stetson.”

Another way to embarrass yourself trying to remember another’s name is simply to pretend you recall that person and change the subject to some member of her family. You can generally pull this off, I was told. But I really failed when I tried it a few years ago. I met a lady at a Washington cocktail party and simply could not recall her name. I thought she had given me the perfect out when she said she was going to meet her father for lunch. “Hey, yes,” I said, “So, tell me what your father’s been up to these days?” “My father,” she said with contempt, “is still the president of the United States.”

Here is another embarrassing moment: Try as I might, I couldn’t recognize my partner at a dance mixer one night. After a few turns around the room, I chanced to meet an old friend whom I did recognize. We greeted each other warmly, and I asked “How’s that gorgeous wife of yours?” To which he icily replied, “Why don’t you ask her? You’re dancing with her.”

You could try to write yourself crib notes. Or better yet, write the person’s name you are trying to remember down on the lining of your dinner jacket. This is what the banquet Master of Ceremonies did to prepare for his introduction of three distinguished guests that shared the speakers table with him. “I’d like to introduce my esteemed colleagues”—and he looked inside his jacket—“Hart, Schaffner, and Marx.”⁶

Or you can pretend to remember a woman’s name but seemingly forget how it is spelled. I once asked a certain young lady if she spelled her name with an “e” or an “i”? It was much later when I learned her name was Hill.

If you can’t think of any clever way to remember names, you might do what Henry

Clay is said to have done. During one of his campaign visits to Kentucky, a young lady reproached him for not remembering her from a previous encounter. He admitted that he couldn't recall her name and that, in fact, he had made no effort to, for, he said, "when we last met I was sure your beauty and accomplishments would soon compel you to change it."

Or else, you could, as Runa Ware once suggested, simply admit you don't remember the name and put yourself at the mercy of the court. "Ladies and gentlemen, our speaker tonight needs no introduction, and I'm glad because, for the life of me, I can't remember his name."⁷

People would ask a young girl who she was and she'd always say she was Senator Smith's girl. Her mother told her not to do this any more because people would think she was a snob. She was told to say she was Mary Smith instead. When later she was asked if she was Senator Smith's girl, she said she'd always thought she was but her mother told her different.

The Undersecretary of the Treasury in Nixon's administration would get upset when people wouldn't spell his name right. It was Charls Walker, he'd say; you spell it without an "e," get it? They finally got it. One day, according to the *Wall Street Journal*, his name appeared on a banquet program as Charles Walkr.

Another classic name error story is about the PR man whose wife has just had a baby. He's under quite a lot of pressure at this time for he's been asked to come up with names for a new chewing gum and his baby boy at the same time. His always reliable and imaginative secretary quickly finds appropriate names for both of them. She writes them down on slips of paper which she places in his coat pocket as he heads out the door to his meeting with the gum people. There he presents to his client the name of their new product: Reinhold Sinclair. Later that day, at his child's baptism, his wife gets the surprise of her life when she learns that her baby boy has just been christened A-Number One Juicy Good Smith.

Another source of embarrassment is a name that's not sex specific. Parents hoping for a son but getting a daughter don't want to give up the perfectly good name they'd planned to give the child. Or else they hoped the name source, usually a rich male relative, would remember the family in his will. As a college undergraduate I sometimes dated a girl named Douglas. She told me of the hard time she had her first year convincing the administration that she didn't belong in the Freshman men's dorm and the even harder time getting out of required ROTC. An even harder thing to live with is the birth certificate that mistakenly identifies the person as of the other sex. We couldn't always blame this on the computer either. A story made the rounds during the early days of the Second World War about the girls, listed as males on their birth certificates, who'd be threatened with draft law violation if they didn't show up for military training. The only out they had, they were told, was to produce an affidavit from the attending physician. But if he were deceased, it would be just too bad.

Only less embarrassing is learning that the name you always thought was yours isn't. Or, as in the case of a Massachusetts informant, that the man you married forty years ago wasn't who he said he was. And he didn't know it either. "I always thought his name was Jim," she told me. "His parents called him Jim, and that's the name on his school records. That was his name when we dated and it's what's on our marriage certificate. But when we applied for our passports and had to produce birth certificates, he learned that the name on his certificate was George. Unfortunately, his parents were both deceased and as far as we knew he had no other living relatives with whom we could check. But the passport could only be issued in his official birth name, so George he became. But after all these years I couldn't quite get used

to George or give up Jim. This came to a head one night when I received a telephone call for George and told the caller there was no one there by that name. It turned out he did have a living relative after all.”

There are other tales of mistaken identity. I recently heard about the man who’d bought a faulty appliance but couldn’t convince the dealer to have someone come and fix it. Finally, the dealer agreed to at least look at the appliance but only if the man would bring it into the store. The man, whose car was in the shop, said he’d get his neighbor to drive him over with the dishwasher. But before his neighbor could get his truck out of the driveway the dealer himself showed up all set to repair the appliance himself. The man thanked him and said, “Heck, my neighbor could have driven it over.” “Neighbor?” said the dealer, “I thought you said Nader.”⁸

Then there is the story Enrico Caruso, the great tenor, often told about how he was once entertained by a farmer who didn’t know who he was. When the farmer asked his name he said, proudly, “Caruso.” “Oh my,” said the farmer, “what an honor to at last meet that famous world traveler I’ve heard about for so many years, Robinson Caruso.” That was enough to deflate any ego.

Finally, there is the popular tale (with almost as many variants as there are names) of the difficulty a man has in making a collect telephone call to his own home. This was before 1-800-COLLECT, back in the days when you had to go through an operator for any collect call. Rick Creamer wanted to make a collect call to his wife Phyllis. The operator asked his name. “Rick Creamer,” he said. “Is that Kramer?” she asked. “No, no” said Rick, “It’s Creamer.” “Thank you,” replied the operator. “Let’s see if I have this right. Your name is Dick Creamer—.” “No, no,” said Rick. “It’s Rick, that’s short for Richard.” “Okay,” responds the operator. “I think I’ve got it now.” She called his home number and Phyllis answered. “Hello,” stated the operator, “I have a collect call from a Mr. Richard Short. Will you accept the charges?”

Endnotes

1. Neil Morgan in the *San Diego Tribune*, as reproduced in *The Reader’s Digest*, Feb. 1964, 81.

2. UPI release, ca. 1976.

3. Samuel Peterson, Sioux City, Iowa, personal communication, Mar. 11, 1969.

4. This is attributed to famed dancer Bill Robinson.

5. Norton Mockridge’s syndicated column, Feb. 6, 1970.

6. *Ibid.*, Sept. 1, 1966.

7. Runa Ware. *All Those in Favor, Say Something*, Los Gatos, CA, 1968, 74.

8. I was recently told that the *Reader’s Digest* once had a version of this story. Sure enough, on checking, I found it in their April 1974 issue. And I thought I had something original here.