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Oregon Trails-Make Mine Ham-on-Rye!

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“Solomon,” they named him “Sol,” after the sun, from Spanish. The first house he remembers, in fact, ran on solar power, and had no radio, no television, no bathroom, no running water.

But there was a kiln and always plenty of clay around, since his parents were skilled potters. Sol began to experiment. One year his father brought Sol to the Oregon Country Fair, a long-running crafts event and site of a legendary 1972 Grateful Dead concert, in Veneta, a small city near Eugene. Sol brought a supply of incense holders, and by the second day of the event, working from their small booth, he’d sold out. A distributor left his card and asked Sol if he wanted to put his incense holders into retail stores.

Sol said no, he didn’t need the help. He tried calling on stores himself, but “selling is hard,” he found. Not many storekeepers would pay attention to a peddling teenager. He went back to the distributor and made a deal. Sol would produce holders by the gross. The distributor took all he could make. Sol hired friends to help make more. He sold to the distributor at $2-$4, the distributor sold to stores at $5-$7, and in the end, enough store customers had brought home an incense holder, at $10-$20, that at age 17, Sol was able to buy a Mazda MX-3, brand new off the lot. “I could have grown so much bigger,” he reflects today.

Instead he left incense behind and went off to college to study computers. As a boy, Sol had had his hands not just on clay, but on a keyboard too, since his grandfather, a Cal Poly physics professor, had taught him to program at a young age. His first job in the computer industry was to test video games for a Silicon Valley company. A couple of quick promotions later and Sol was a software engineer for the company.

Then the .com bubble burst. The business was sold and Sol found himself working in Pennsylvania as a senior engineer for a company making a video-voice chat system. While they had deals with companies like Verizon and Comcast, the product didn’t take off. Sol did take off, however, to a company making audio-books. Ingram acquired that company in 2008, and today Sol has moved on from audio-books to eBooks. He’s now head of a development team responsible for the MyiLibrary eBook platform, meaning he is responsible for well over 400,000 eBooks used by over 100,000 readers from over 50 countries around the world.

Developing software, it turns out, is something like working in clay after all. You start with an idea. Then through trial and error you get the bugs out and bring your creation to market. In his ceramic days, Sol began by gluing a real seashell to the crest of his incense holders. But the shells would fall off, so he molded the clay to look like a shell. The glaze caused bugs too, since at 2400 degrees Fahrenheit, if you weren’t careful — if the glaze ran down the incense hole, for instance — you didn’t end up with a holder, but with “a piece of stone.”

Today, then, when students from the UAE to the USA to the Ukraine open an eBook and get what they need, that may be due to lessons learned years ago in clay and incense. For Sol, it’s been a long strange trip from that old Grateful Dead site. Seashells and glaze aren’t the puzzle today, but in working on pricing models, or archiving, or new methods for file ingestion or for accepting orders, or a user interface, just some of the projects Sol’s team has had their hands on, there’s always plenty of work, before the glaze finally holds.

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Oregon Trails — Make Mine Ham-on-Rye!

Column Editor: Thomas W. Leonhardt (Retired, Eugene, OR 97404) <oskibear70@gmail.com>

“Hay-on-Wye lies on the Welsh side of the Welsh/English Border in the County of Powys, Wales. Although as far as the Royal Mail is concerned, it is better, apparently, to use the County of HEREFORDSHIRE, not to be confused with the county of HERTFORDSHIRE: a very popular mistake! You will notice, after browsing our Hay site, that the majority of the postal addresses are either ‘via Hereford’ or ‘Herefordshire.’ It is purely for postal reasons!”

— Hay-on-Wye Website: http://www.hay-on-wye.co.uk/info/hay-on-wye.htm
At ten a.m. (a little after, actually), the “Closed” sign was still evident, but I could see someone in the kitchen in the rear of the shop. A hunch, unemot man was clearing his breakfast dishes but refused to look towards the door and make eye contact with me. He then disappeared and so did I, walking across Briggate to Waterside, retracing my path back to Rascals, a café situated between the River Nidd and (below) the Knaresborough Castle.

I had been deprived of another “browse” so I sat outside and treated myself to a racel (fruit filled scone) and a very large coffee that came with a pot of heated milk. There is more to life besides books and it was hard to stay disappointed in such a setting on such a beautiful, sunny morning.

A few days later, while in York, I wandered off by myself to Fossgate, in the heart of the city, where there are three second-hand bookshops, two of them sharing a wall and the third a stone’s throw across the street.

The Barbican specializes in theology, railway, aviation, and Yorkshire. Take away theology and you have the specialties of many another bookshop, new and used, that I have peeked into over the years. But not being interested in any of those subjects and wanting to buy at least one book, I poked around in the most promising section, theology, looking for something that I might enjoy reading. I own a few small volumes suitable for packing in one’s carry-on luggage and am especially fond of Oxford University Press’ series, The World’s Classics. Not only are they small (6” x 3 ½”), they are hardbound, attractively printed on good paper, and come with a bound-in bookmark. So for £3 I acquired a copy, in a faded blue buckram binding, a nice, tight copy of The Diary of a Country Parson: 1758-1802, by James Woodforde and formerly owned by John Paul Burbridge, New College, Oxford. Having fulfilled my obligation to support, in my own small way, second-hand bookshops, I wandered next door to Lucius Books.

Lucius Books was most promising and carried modern first editions and an array of rare books. But when I entered the shop, the shelves were almost empty. My eye caught a couple of titles that interested me, Shoe Water and Gale Warning, by Dornford Yates but at £60 and £90 respectively and, although in dust jackets and in very good condition, were beyond my threshold. I enjoyed reading Dornford Yates (Cecil William Mercer and cousin to H.H. Munro, aka, Saki) and own several of his Chandos novels, but I didn’t pay £60 for the lot of them. The Chandos novels are thrillers, much like John Buchan’s (1st Lord Tweedsmuir and former governor general of Canada) Richard Hannay tales (The Thirty-Nine Steps).

The young woman at the desk greeted me in a French accent and apologized for the empty shelves. She pointed to a number of large, aluminum packing cases and explained that most of the stock was in them and ready to be shipped to London for its antiquarian book fair. I accepted a business card, thanked her, and walked out without a purchase, breaking my own rule but rationalizing that had the shelves been fully stocked, I would have found something in my price range. I’ll be back one day to test my hypothesis.

Across the street was Fossgate Books, the most interesting of the three that day, but I could find nothing in my areas of collecting. Still, were I not having to worry about the weight of my luggage, had I been a local, I would have left the shop with an armful of good reading. It was a joy to see all of those Penguin paperbacks arrayed like a prism, if shelved together, reflecting Allen Lane’s color scheme:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Color</th>
<th>Category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Orange</td>
<td>Fiction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>Crime novels</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cerise</td>
<td>Travel and adventure</td>
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<tr>
<td>Blue</td>
<td>Biography</td>
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<td>Red</td>
<td>Drama</td>
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<tr>
<td>Purple</td>
<td>Essays</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow</td>
<td>Miscellaneous (none of the above)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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As it turned out, the only book I bought was The Thirty-Nine Steps, by C.S. Forester, at the door and make eye contact with me. He
I subtract the four bookshops that I visited from the 25 shops in Hay-on-Wye that I did not visit and come up with a deficit of 21. So should I arrive in Hay-on-Wye some sunny day in the future, and should I only make the rounds of 21 of the 25 shops, I will call it even. In fact, I will call it a bonus. But I won’t promise to buy a book in each of the shops.

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Derek Law — our special Scottish Tartan friend who debated Rick last year — will not be with us in Charleston this year! He says he is doing well, keeping busy interfering in other people’s work by doing reviews of various kinds. He says he has booked a big holiday in Cambodia and Vietnam starting on 5th November. Oh well. I am sure he won’t have as much fun as we will!

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Rumors

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Loves books! He talks about Hay-on-Wye in this issue. (We had an article in ATG about it a while ago but I can’t find it right now!) I do keep meaning to ask Tom if he has read the novel, Mr. Penumbra’s 24-hour Bookstore by Robin Sloan. (Farrar. Straus and Giroux, 2012). It’s about an eccentric bookstore owner and his few clients who don’t buy anything. Quite a literary adventure!

Reminds me. Have you seen the reviews (saw one in the Wall Street Journal and another in The New Yorker) of Hothouse: The Art of Survival and the Survival of Art in America’s Most Celebrated Publishing House, Farrar Straus by Boris Kachka. I can’t wait to dive into it!

As we go to press, just learned via the Atlantic that American Medical News, the in-house newspaper of the American Medical Association “will cease publication next month because of continued advertising declines and changing readership habits in the digital age.” The first incarnation of the newspaper — AMA News — was launched on September 22, 1958.