

# Exit Laughing

BY ED ZERN

A couple of months ago I somehow got on the Larry King late-night radio talk show, and wasn't quite sure how I got there or what Mr. King would expect me to contribute to the program. Humor, perhaps, I thought, and tried to think of something funny having some tangible connection with Washington, D.C., where the program originates live and unrehearsed, or with Larry King, whom I had never met. Then I remembered the time I was to meet a guide named Joseph King at a sporting-goods store in Halifax, Nova Scotia. I had never met Mr. King, but on the telephone he had called me Ed and himself Joe, and so when I walked into the store and saw an elderly and rather dignified man peering into a case of salmon flies I walked up to him and said, "Are you Joe King?" The old man straightened up, looked me in the eye and said, "No sir. I'm serious."

Mr. King never did show up, and I drove over to St. Mary's River and fished it without a guide (and also, as it turned out, without any salmon), but I've always wondered if there ever really was a guide named Joe King or if the whole thing was a set-up for a rather lame joke. I meant to tell Larry about this, but the hour-and-a-half program went so quickly I forgot.

Meanwhile Mr. Carl Barnes of Pontiac, Michigan, reports that local veterinarians are feeding large doses of contraceptive pills to stray dogs and cats as part of an aggressive anti-litter campaign. Mr. Barnes is an executive of the Clinton Valley Council of the Boy Scouts of America, but that's no excuse.

A note from Mr. Patrick J. Connelly Battle Creek, Michigan, suggests that a topless bar in Killarney might be a case of Erin Go Braless. Hoo boy.

Mr. Joe Threadgill of Albuquerque, New Mexico, writes to say he had come across a piece of mine called "The Hooker Hooked," explaining my addiction to fly-fishing, in an anthology called *Fishing Moments of Truth* published some years ago, and to advise me that although there have been female camp followers as long as there have been wars, General "Fighting Joe" Hooker's army during the American Civil War seemed to attract an unusual number of these ladies, giving rise to the generic term "hookers." Joe (Threadgill, not Hooker) writes that personally he prefers to think of them as *hors de combat*.

Dr. David Stuart, an anthropologist

of Albuquerque (and no kin to Threadgill, so far as I know) writes to report that when he was a student doing field research in Mexico he was served a fried axolotl for his supper, and found it less than toothsome. And an old friend, Page Brown, with whom I fished the Brodheads in Pennsylvania a long time ago, has sent me some faded snapshots taken outside Charley's Hotel Rapids in the middle 1930's. After studying them carefully I had a good cry and hid them in the back of a drawer I seldom use.

And while still in a nostalgic mood I pawed through some old New York State *Conservationists*, and in the February-March issue of 1957 found a piece of bird-doggerel first published in the Philadelphia *Public Ledger* in 1909, before hunter-safety courses and blaze-orange garb were *de rigeur*. Here it is:

## SOME HUNTERS I'VE KNOWN

*A hunter popped a partridge on a hill;  
It made a great to-do, and then was still.  
It seems (when later on his bag he spied)  
It was the guide.*



## HOW TO COOK AN AXOLOTL!

*One shot a squirrel in a nearby wood—  
A pretty shot, offhand, from where he stood.*

*It wore, they said, a shooting coat of brown,  
And lived in town.*

*And one dispatched a rabbit for his haul  
That later proved to measure six feet tall;  
And lest you think I'm handing you a myth,  
Its name was Smith.*

*Another Nimrod slew the sly old fox.  
He glimpsed it skulking in among the rocks.  
One hasty shot! It never even moved,  
The inquest proved.*

*A cautious man espied a gleam of brown;  
Was it a deer, or Jones, his friend  
from town?  
And while he pondered on the river's brim,  
Jones potted him.*

*Next month: How to make sourdough  
pancakes, using the Solunar Tables. ☞*

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**N**ow that Wilber Duykenfoos has defected to *Partisan Review* or *The National Enquirer* or wherever it was he went to—more on this next month—I've had to rely increasingly on the mail for assistance in keeping this department ticking along, and fortunately readers have been more reliable than the Duykenfoos kid ever was. Just this morning there came a nice note from David McCord, a Bostonian and erstwhile contributor of delightfully light verse to *The New Yorker*, the original *Vanity Fair*, and other publications. Mr. McCord wrote:

"Your good piece in the February FIELD & STREAM delights me, particularly because of discovering the existence of, and origin of, the Axolotl Society. Long ago... I wrote a verse about the axolotl. Can't remember where it first appeared, but I put it into my own *Bay Window Ballads* (Scribner's, 1935; copyright by me). Perhaps you would like to print it in your column. That would please me.

"I grew up by the great Rogue River in Oregon, so I've been a fly fisherman (mostly dry now) since I was twelve. It makes me sad to think of the early days' fishing for big steelhead with a 4-ounce rod. Sincerely, David McCord."

I'm overjoyed to reprint the verse here, partly because I've been accused of inventing the axolotl out of the whole cloth, so that I welcome moral support, and partly because it will serve to add some much-needed luster to the department, which has not had a good classing-up since the original anti-poverty contest which involved translating the motto of the Madison Avenue Rod, Gun, Bloody Mary & Labrador Retriever Benevolent Association ("Keep Your Powder, Your Trout Flies, and Your Martinis Dry") into Latin—a competition that attracted large numbers of defrocked priests, seminarians, classical-language teachers, pharmacists, and language-droppers, and was won by a distinguished professor and theologian, then at Yale, Dr. Jan Pelikan, who has since gone on to even dizzier heights of intellectualism. Here it is:

## THE AXOLOTL

*"The axolotl  
Looks a littl  
Like the oxelotl.  
It!*

*"Drink a great!  
More than whatt  
Fill the fat!  
Whiskey bottl.*

*"The food it eats!  
Be no morsl;  
Only meats!  
Drive its dorsl.*



*"Such an awfl  
Fish to kettl!"  
"You said a mawfl,  
Pop'epetl!"*


I have written to the Supreme Lizard of the Society proposing Mr. McCord for an Honorary Life Membership, but hasten to urge readers, if any, of this column to recognize that this is an exceptional event and to refrain from sending sonnets, triolets, couplets, cantos, rondelets, or any other verse forms to this department unless they are accompanied by one well-tied Silver Wilkinson or Thunder & Lightning on a No. 6 black-enameled double hook for each stanza and a self-addressed stamped return envelope. Do not affix the stamp too tightly.

I also have a letter from Mr. Dwight Conner of Parkersburg, West Virginia, reminding me that when he had written to me some time ago asking about the proper pronunciation of the word "Rapala," I had written back saying it was pronounced Ra-PAH-la. Since then, Mr. Conner wrote, he had come across an article by Don Causey (in another publication) who had visited the Rapala family in Finland; he had therefore written to Don asking about the pronunciation, and Don had written back to say it was pronounced RAP-luh. Mr. Conner wants to know what goes

on, and why the discrepancy.

What goes on, of course, is that Causey provided the Finnish pronunciation, which is all very well if you're in Helsinki but not worth an umlaut if you're in Parkersburg, West Virginia. If Conner, who is obviously a troublemaker, had written to me asking how to pronounce "Vienna," I would have told him it's pronounced Vee-ENNA, even if Causey had come back from Vienna and sworn on a stack of travel folders it's pronounced Veen, which is how Austrians pronounce Wien, which is how Vienna is spelled in Austria. (I believe this is called "Discrepancy Deutsch?") Let's hope Causey never gets lost in Iowa and tries to ask directions to Day Mwahn. If he's lucky, somebody will finally say, "Hey, I think this dude's looking for Duh-MOYN!"

And let's hope he doesn't breeze into a tackle shop and ask for a RAP-luh lure, when what he means is a Ra-PAH-la. (Actually, Don's not likely to be shopping for fishing tackle these days, as he's currently putting out a nifty and helpful bulletin on big-game hunting around the world for well-heeled sportsmen, with the latest poop on hunting conditions, outfitters and safari operators, the comings and goings of professional hunters, political trouble spots, and other esoteric information.)

Next month: How to track a bongo, using the Solunar Tables. 

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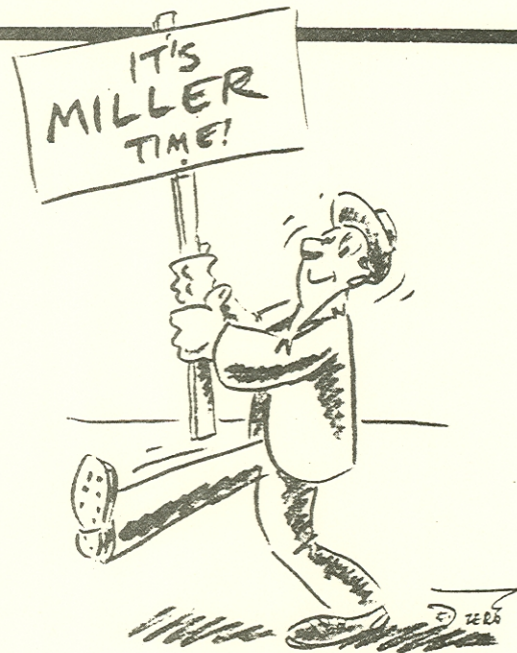
**B**ecause I've had several queries from readers about the precise nature of the Axolotl Society, to which I've made occasional reference on this page and of which I have the temerity to be a member, let me tell what little I know about this organization, whose origins are somewhat obscure, which is perhaps just as well. Some of my data may be merely rumor, but some of it may be true. (Next month we will take up the question *What is Truth?*, relying to a large extent on the Solunar Tables®. Don't miss it.)

The Society was founded by Mr. Bill Miller of Calaboose Park, California. It is my understanding, or lack of it, that Miller, a gastronome and fly fisherman, got the idea of forming the Society at a dinner and jug-wine tasting attended by several of his fly-fishing friends, none of whom, as it turned out, was skilled in orthography. The main course that evening (sometime in the mid-1970's) was braised oxtail, and so delicious was it that it was decided to formalize the group, more or less, and name it after the entree. Unfortunately none of those present was able to spell "oxtail"; the closest anyone got was "axolotl," although it's conceivable they'd have done better if the wine-tasting hadn't required a number of overtime periods to select the winning vintages.

Later, when a curious member tried to look up this word in the dictionary, he found that "axolotl" is a Nahuatl Indian name for a freshwater salamander or newt that never achieves sexual maturity yet manages to propagate itself in lakes and ponds of the American southwest and northern Mexico; as the proceedings of the oxtail-dinner meeting were indistinct in the memories of those attending, this became the name of the Society, as such nobler species as elk, moose, and lion had already been taken.

The Axolotl Society is ruled by ukases issued by the Founder at irregular intervals, setting the dates and location of each annual meeting, always held at some famous Western trout fishery, and other matters. These fiats are frequently petulant in tone and arbitrary in their pronouncements. For example, a recent directive from the Lizard Tapered Leader, as Miller is sometimes referred to in Society bulletins, declares that the 50th Anniversary of the Society will be celebrated at the 1984 meeting, as there seemed to be some doubt that the membership would be in peak physical condition to celebrate it properly if they waited another forty-odd years.

Also, there has been some talk by one faction of the membership of a possible affiliation with the Flat Earth Society. While looking under "F" in my files, to see if my membership in the F.E.S. had



expired, I came across a copy of *The Flyfisher* (Volume IV, Number 2/1971), the official journal of the Federation of Fly Fishermen, with a note on the cover saying "See p. 5!" I remembered then that my friend Joe Pisarro, then editor of the publication, had sent me a copy and that I had put it away intending to look at page 5 but had never done so. I turned to page 5 and found a scholarly article titled "Moedler's Long Lost Fly," with a subhead "Old diaries may hold the clue to the origin of one of today's most famous flies," and a byline "By David Coln-Pickering," with a footnote explaining that Coln-Pickering is, or was, a well-known British angler-writer and the author of several books on fly fishing, including *Refraction and the Dry Fly*.

It didn't surprise me that Coln-Pickering's prose style was a bit on the stuffy side; what did surprise me was the story he told—of a Bavarian river-keeper named Ludwig Moedler and his son Klaus, both of whom were skilled minnow-fishermen for trout and one of whom (Klaus) was an accomplished fly-tyer. Both men migrated to America and settled in what's now the Yorkville section of Manhattan Island during the 1880's; both of them fished for native brook trout in streams on Long Island and in Westchester County. But minnows were hard to come by in that already bustling town, and soon young Moedler began experimenting with such strictly American fly-tying materials as turkey feathers and deer hair in an effort to produce an artificial that would represent a minnow well enough to bamboozle the local brookies.

And before long, according to his diary, he had succeeded; entry after entry describes his success in extracting bigger-than-average trout from nearby brooks and rivers. Before long his artificial minnow with turkey-feather wings had become widely known and he began selling his creations at 5 cents apiece, especially to those headed for the American West, where fishing was said to be fabulous. Moedler's minnows, wrote Coln-Pickering, were widely known as proven fish-getters, and it is the author's suggestion that this was indeed the true origin of what we now know as the Muddler Minnow—Moedler, in the German pronunciation, sounding much like "Muddler" to the untrained ear.

I found this account fascinating, as there has recently been some controversy among fly-tyers as to the origin of the Muddler, and also because I was unable to find any reference whatsoever to a David Coln-Pickering in any of my British publications or reference books. Curious, I telephoned Pisarro at his home in California and told him I had finally read the piece and had found it of real interest.

"I thought you'd like it," Joe said. "Quite a few scholars have included it in histories of fly fishing and fly patterns."

"I'm not surprised," I said. "By the way, there's no date of issue on that copy you sent—just the number and year. Do you remember the date, so I can file it properly?"

"I sure do," Joe said.

"What was it?" I said.

"It was April 1st," Joe said, and I said thank you.