

Miscellaneous Neat Things

For reasons that are amusing or fascinating to me and enigmatic or stupid to everyone else, I have collected stuff beginning in 1956, the year my wife and I were married. I call these collections: Miscellaneous Neat Things, or “MNT”s.” They are demonstrably miscellaneous things. “Neat” would be in the mind of the beholder.

The original rationale for this astonishing collection was more or less accidental. I was a young electrical engineer when I helped design a peculiar amplifier for some space project. The technical document I wrote, somehow inexplicably classified “secret” by our government, contained a bibliography.

As an inside joke, in the bibliography which noted obscure technical references to prior inventions, I included the reference “How I made big money in electro-gravitic, magneto-hydrodynamics,” by Otis C. Carr, a local UFO wacko. To this day, it is probably stored in some secret government place much like the Ark of the Covenant in the Indiana Jones movie, where it rests in peace, still classified “TOP SECRET”...and, of course, in my Miscellaneous Neat Thing file.

For an international example, I traveled to Dhahran, Saudi Arabia visiting ARAMCO, the Saudi’s oil processing facility. After a few days, I casually asked my French colleague how they survived without decent booze. He looked around as if to see if he was being spied upon, and took me to his bathroom. It had an amazing assortment of beakers, furnaces, jugs and glass tubing. Spreading his hands in pride he showed me his still. It seems that a number of foreign oil geniuses died because of their bad home made alcohol. One Dutchman had fixed what he called “witch’s brew,” rubbing alcohol, milk and sugar mixed and left in the sun for several days. To protect their technical investment, some Saudi prepared a user’s guide to making a world class still in the bathroom. My MNT file proudly contains this document.

When I lived in Japan, a colleague gave me a loose leaf folder...one with a metal device inside for holding papers. The label on the front plastic cover had an inventory label, but for the life of me I was unable to figure out what it meant. It said, “Lion Cramp Fire.” Finally one day I realized a Japanese clerk wrote the phonetic equivalent of his pronunciation of an “Iron Clamp File.” Japanese have a difficult time with “l”s and “r”s, which don’t exist in their language. High level MNT material, indeed.

Then there is the article by the famous mathematician, John Von Neumann, in my MNT. He is credited with inventing the organization of the modern digital computer around 1948. He was asked how many of the Univac computers, huge machines taking up an entire room, using vacuum tubes before transistors were invented. How many would the entire world require for their computing needs, he was asked? He said “seven or eight.” My laptop is more powerful than all the computers on the entire planet taken together at that time. Even geniuses make mistakes.

Talk about a collector’s treasure: an original Endicott IBM Song Book circa 1935. I worked for IBM for over thirty years and have collected many Neat Things during that time, but nothing tops the Song Book. In olden times they were sung in branch offices to start the day, one of the ways IBM management used to build teamwork. Most are old favorites: patriotic songs like “The Caissons Go Rolling Along,” and barbershop stuff like “My Wild Irish Rose.” But occasionally they took some liberties with lyrics to brown nose the founder, T. J. Watson. So one song goes like this: “Pack up your troubles, Mr. Watson’s here...” and so on.

Right up there with my favorite IBM MNT’s is an official notification posted on every bulletin board in their international domain in 1965. I knew the guy, married with five children and he had just received a big raise and appointed manager of a large department. His first name was Jim, but the perpetrator of the notice chose to use only the last name in the 20 point font size headline: “FAGG PROMOTED.” I’ve always wondered who got fired in the Armonk headquarters over that one.

I love good cartoons too, so I have an assortment of comics and cartoons that would be the envy of anyone liking nonsense. Shel Silverstein’s “Twenty Commandments” is one of my favorites. Moses, according to Shel, thought that two stone tablets were a bit much to carry. So looking around surreptitiously to see if God was watching, he chiseled them apart and went down with only the tablet we know about. “Honor thy children” and “Mind thine own business” are two of the poor, lost Commandments left on the mountain.

Finally, there is my pay stub when I lived in Italy. With around 1,500 lire to the dollar, I was a millionaire. Of course everything cost millions, our rent, the kid’s school tuition, so my pay wasn’t quite as impressive as it seemed.

So there is a small sample of my Miscellaneous Neat Thing file. Someday I presume it will be in the Library of Congress for all to peruse. In the meantime, I would exercise caution in speaking to me or “lending” me interesting stuff. You, too, could be an MNT.