

The Chapel Hill Weekly

Chapel Hill, North Carolina
125 E. Broadway Telephone 9-1271 or 8461
Published Every Tuesday and Friday
By The Chapel Hill Publishing Company, Inc.
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Registered as second-class matter February 28, 1952, at the postoffice at Chapel Hill, North Carolina, under the act of March 3, 1979.

SUBSCRIPTION RATES
In Orange County, Year \$4.00
(6 months \$2.25; 3 months, \$1.50)
Outside of Orange County by the Year: 4.50
State of N. C., Va., and S. C. 5.00
Other States and Dist. of Columbia 7.00
Canada, Mexico, South America 7.50
Europe 7.50

ADVERTISING RATES
National, for agencies, 84c col. inch . . . Local transient, 75c; open, 65c; regular, 60c; consistent (50 inches or more average per week), 54c
Classified, payable in advance, minimum, 60c for 12 words, every additional word 4c; All classified ads running four or more times carry a 25% discount . . . Legal and tabular, 1 time 80c per inch; 2 times 75c; 3 times, 70c; 4 or more times, 65c . . . "Readers," separate from reading matter and clearly marked "adv.," 75c . . . Political (in advance), 75c.

"Are You a Bromide?"

(By Louis Graves in the Baltimore Sun)

Bromide, in the sense of a flat, commonplace statement—such as, for example, "New York is a fine place to visit, but I wouldn't like to live there," or, when acquaintances meet at a place where they are astonished to see one another and one remarks, "Well, well, well, the world is a small place after all"—is a word that has been in common use for many years. Its establishment in the language is attested by its inclusion in the dictionaries. Will it be there always? Of course nobody knows. Some words are dropped from dictionaries or are marked obsolete. But thus far there is no sign of bromide's losing ground.

I dare say that among the millions of people who have uttered the word not one in ten thousand—and my guess would be that the proportion is even less than that—is aware that bromide, in the sense mentioned, is a perversion. The Oxford English Dictionary defines perversion as "a turning aside from the truth or right," and Webster's New International defines it as "a perverted or corrupted form of something." Both of these definitions are correct as applying to bromide.

The article by Gelett Burgess entitled "The Sulphitic Theory" appeared in the *Smart Set* in April, 1906. (That was before H. L. Mencken joined the staff of the magazine which he and George Jean Nathan as co-editors were to make famous.) I was a reporter in New York then and I remember how joyfully the article was acclaimed by the intellectuals (which term I am now stretching to embrace not only scholars, novelists, essayists, poets, dramatists, and editors, but also writers of all ranks). The intellectuals talked and wrote so much about the article that they made its subject familiar to almost everybody who was able to read.

The article, with revisions and additions, was put into book form the year after it appeared in the magazine. It attained a tremendous popularity and went through many editions. With the subtitle the article had been named "The Sulphitic Theory, or Are You a Bromide?" But in book form the title was simply "Are You a Bromide?"

Some of us who were disposed to be cocksure in the confidence that we were not platitudinous were humiliated to find that we had uttered several of the commonplace remarks listed as specimens by Burgess. You know, like "It isn't so much the heat as the humidity," and "The Salvation Army reaches a class of people that churches never do."

(A digression: As time passes, the authorship of epigrams, jokes, and rhymes that have become fixed in the popular mind is often forgotten. For the benefit of younger people to whom Gelett Burgess is no more than a name and maybe not even that, I had better set down here the fact that he was the author of the famous quatrains:

"I never saw a purple cow,
I never hope to see one,
But I can tell you anyhow,
I'd rather see than be'one,
and the sequel, headed, "Five Years Later":

"Ah, yes, I wrote the Purple Cow,
I'm sorry, now, I wrote it,
But I can tell you anyhow,
I'll kill you if you quote it."

Burgess died in California in 1951 at the age of 85.)

Now for the perversion. The perversion is that in Burgess' book the word, bromide, was never used to mean a remark, the sense in which it is universally used now. It was only a person, as it is in the title, "Are You a Bromide?" The commonplace remark was a bromidium, a word that today is never heard and never seen in print, and is not in the dictionaries. Burgess said that the late Frank O'Malley, celebrated writer for the old *New York Sun* and later for various magazines, suggested to him the word, bromidium.

Both the Oxford and Webster's dictionaries bow to history by giving one definition of bromide as a person along with the definition as a remark. Established practice would justify attaching the notation, "obs", to the former. In every single citation in the Oxford the word means what is said, not the person who said it. Of course, the word is not in the regular B volume, which was published long before Burgess' article appeared, but in the Supplement (Vol. 13), which contains many words coined in America, such as bunnyhug, Charleston (the dance), turkey-trot (another dance), realtor, beautician, and mortician. Among the citations under bromide are:

Robert Hichens: "For once Mrs. Baratrie gave way to a bromide." *Contemporary Review* (British): "... in spite of this oft-quoted bromide." . . . *Publisher's Weekly*: "The old bromide that poetry never sells is once again proved to be wrong." . . . *Evening News* (the London newspaper): "This is one of those self-evident propositions which are now referred to as bromides."

"Are You a Bromide?" is hard to lay your hands on now. I asked around and wrote for it a long time before I could get a copy. Finally I managed to borrow one. So many old favorites are being reprinted in these days that maybe I'm wrong in declaring this one rare. I shouldn't be surprised if somebody would correct me, saying that one of the reprint publishers has recently brought out the Burgess masterpiece. Well, if none has, one ought to. If ~~this is done~~, it's a safe bet the new issue will not have the pretty illuminated borders and tailpieces in the copy here beside me.

It's amusing to renew your acquaintance with Burgess' original list of bromidioms (pages 24 to 32 in the book). Here are some of them:

"I don't know much about art, but I know what I like." . . . "It isn't the money—it's the principle of the thing." . . . "I'm afraid I'm not educated up to Japanese prints." . . . "It's a mistake for a woman to marry a man younger than herself; women age so much faster than men." . . . "I'd rather have a good horse than all the automobiles made." (Automobiles were still new when Burgess wrote his piece. The commonest form of joke in that era was about the mishaps of motorists, usually on lonely roads—punctures, failing engines, curtains torn to pieces in fierce wind—and rainstorms, and such like. Often drivers of horses were shown, comfortably smug, in the pictures accompanying the automobile jokes.) "If you would only write stories the way you tell them you'd make your fortune as an author." . . . "The most ignorant Italian laborer seems to be able to appreciate art." . . . "Of course, if you happen to want a policeman there's never one within miles of you."

The following passages in the book are a fair summing-up of Burgess' Sulphitic Theory:

"Sulphites are agreed upon most of the basic facts of life, and this common understanding makes it possible for them to eliminate the obvious from their conversation. They have found, for instance, that green is restful to the eyes, and the fact goes without saying. They are aware that heat is more disagreeable when accompanied by a high degree of humidity, and do not put forth this axiom as a sensational discovery. Above all, the Sulphite recognizes as a principle that, if a story is really funny, it is probably untrue, and he does not seek to give an adjunct relish to it by dilating with verisimilitude upon the authenticity of the facts in the case.

"To the bromide all matters of facts and fancy are perpetually picturesque, and, a discoverer, he leaps up and shouts

Bits of Chapel Hill

We have talked to several people on the street recently about the status of the Chapel Hill-Carrboro Merchants Association. They want to know why we can't keep an Executive Secretary, why a better job is not being done, etc.

While it is not true all of the time, in most cases the person doing the complaining does not even have enough interest in the association to attend the opening meetings. The average merchant will probably never realize how valuable the Merchants Association really is until he is forced to do without it a few months.

President Crowell Little and the Board of Directors have spent many, many hours this year working for all the merchants. The recent appointment of Mrs. Jane Whitefield as the new Executive Secretary is a step in the right direction. She is well acquainted with the inner workings of the organization. She knows the merchants and their problems.

While on the subject of the Merchants Association, it is worthy to note that the Board of Directors last week appointed a nominating committee to enthusiastically that two and two are four, and defends his statement with eloquent logic. Each scene, each incident, has its magic spell—like the little woolly toy lamb he presses the fact, and "ba-ba" the appropriate sentiment comes worth. Bromides seldom listen to one another; they are content with talk for talk's sake, and so escape all chance of education. It is this fact, most likely, which has endowed the bromidium with immortality. Never heard, it seems always new, appropriate, clever.

pose the slate of officers who will take over January 1st. It consists of President Little and the three immediate past presidents, Herb Wentworth, Miss Elizabeth Branson, and R. B. Todd.

Suggestions are welcomed. There are openings on the Board of Directors plus the regular officers.

The Merchants Association is also invaluable to the people who live here. It strives at all times to see that the merchandise sold in Chapel Hill-Carrboro is of the highest quality and reasonably priced. The association urges all merchants to stand behind the goods and services they sell. Complaints against any merchant should be reported to the office on North Columbia Street. You can be certain they will be investigated.

We were discussing high taxes with Bill Basnight when he showed us a clipping about taxes in Great Britain. We felt a little better after reading same, and thought perhaps you would. Here it is:

"In America, paying income taxes is a duty—in Britain, it is a disaster!"
"So says an American who knows both countries well.

"On top of a straight income tax, high even after the recent reduction, the British pay a surtax on all income over \$5,600. This rises swiftly: at the \$42,000 level, for instance, it takes \$2.66 out of every \$2.80 of income.

"As a result, in the fiscal year 1952-53, there were only thirty-five people in all Great Britain whose incomes, after taxes, were more than \$16,800. To have that amount left, a single person has to have, before taxes, an income of something over \$140,000 a year!"

Doesn't Like to Sit . . .

Man Who Helped High School and University to Football Championships Is Veteran Member of the Police Force

By J. A. C. Dunn

A little after 11 o'clock one night this week we dropped into the police station to see Sergeant J. H. Merritt. The Sergeant was sitting at the desk behind the little iron bars with his feet propped up, combing a newspaper for time-killing reading matter. We asked him about himself.

"Well, I was born and raised in the country about two or three miles out on the Pittsboro Road," he said. "I came into town when I was about five or six, and my father ran a livery stable right behind where the Carolina Coffee Shop is now."

"How about football? We had heard a good deal about the Sergeant's pigskin exploits." "Well, yeah, I played football at the Chapel Hill high school for four years. We won the eastern state championship for four years, and the state championship two years. One year we won the state championship for football, basketball, and track, all three. That was—let's see—I believe it was in 1921. Then I played a couple of years for the University, too. In 1922 we didn't lose but one game—I think it was Yale we lost to. I played in 1922 and 1924, but I had a lot of trouble with my studies, and I dropped out in 1923."

At this point the radio put in a remark.

"Car one."
The Sergeant leaned over, pushed the transmitting button and replied, "Go ahead one."
"10-8," said Car One tersely.
"10-4, one; KIA 736, 11:20."

As I was saying, I didn't play in 1923. And I didn't finish school. I left to get married and went to work. I worked first with Jack Lipman in the clothing store he used to have right where Robbins is now. Then I worked for Mr. Bennett (J. S.) at the electric and water company. Then I worked at the coal yard as a foreman. The University used to sell coal to people all over town, but then a couple of coal dealers got mad because the University got all the business, so they went to Raleigh and got it fixed so the University couldn't sell coal. Then I came down here in 1939 and I've been here ever since. I'm the second oldest man to the Chief."

The Sergeant leaned over and pressed the transmitting button again. "Testing, 11:30, KIA 736," he said, giving his half-hourly time call.

"One," said Car One.
"10-4, one."

How about the war years? We had been told the police had a busy time during the war.

"Yeah," mused the Sergeant, "we had quite a time with that Pre-Flight School. They were



—Photo by Lavergne
JACK MERRITT

pretty tough, but we made it all right. I like police work OK. I don't like to punish people, but I like to get outside in the fresh air. I don't get out much now. Just about the only way I can get out of the office

is to call the boys in and make one of them handle the desk while I ride. I'd rather be out riding than here on the desk."

We supposed the Sergeant went to all the football games. "I wouldn't miss a game. I'm crazy about athletics—football, basketball, baseball. All young men ought to go out for some sport, for the exercise and the fun of it, and the physical training. You never can tell what kind of trouble you're going to get into sometime if you can't protect yourself."

The telephone rang, and the Sergeant talked for a couple of minutes to a woman on the other end, then hung up and leaned on the radio button once more.

"Station to Car One."

"One."

"Go by the patrol barracks, contact Jack Reynolds, have him call 4-6395 Raleigh, advise him emergency."

"10-4."

"KIA 736, 11:42. I really do believe in physical education," said the Sergeant dreamily.

Chapel Hill Chaff

(Continued from page 1)

the only lintype operator I'm not scared of, can usually pick the winner of the Preakness, and this year married Ed Hodges of the *Durham Herald*.

Betty became a lintype operator when she was in high school in her home town of Waynesboro, Va. It was during the second World War when men operators were scarce. The superintendent of a Waynesboro printing plant came to the high school and made an appeal for girls to learn the trade. Of the ten or twelve who tried it, Betty was one of the few who stuck and became a lintype operator. Now she is one of the world's best.

The following letter from our Contributing Editor was written Sunday, August 8, in Nice, France:
Dear Joe:

After an eleven-hour ride on a de luxe train called "The Mistral," which left Paris at 1 p.m., we are at Nice, on the Mediterranean. Yesterday we were taken on a bus to Monte Carlo over the spectacular road that winds

through the Maritime Alps and gives the passengers one glamorous view after another of land and sea.

The people in our troupe (Brownell Tour No. 107) are amiable and jolly. No croakers or whiners. What good luck! Twenty-one in all, including a competent, smooth-tempered and handsome young matron from Tennessee named Mrs. Nora Surface.

Yesterday we went into the famous Casino at Monte Carlo and roamed through the palatial rooms with hundreds of other tourists. We stood behind the players at the roulette tables and observed that the bank, at every table, was the heavy winner.

The only person in our troupe who won was a sweet 76-year-old lady from Richmond, Virginia, Mrs. Ruth N. Gordon. This morning she has gone to the Protestant Episcopal church in Nice, either to give thanks for her luck or to pray for forgiveness for the sin of gambling.

One of the players, pointed out by Casino attendants and recognized by many of the tourists, was

I Like Chapel Hill

By Billy Arthur

It always seems to happen. When I think things are running smoothly, up comes one of the daggondest days! For instance, we were working away in the office, each in his individual sphere, when suddenly Joe Jones hopped from the chair and walked into the other office, looked at O. T. Watkins and returned, saying, "I was wondering whom he was arguing with, and you know he was talking to himself."

I laughed aloud. And O. T. stuck his head in the door, pointed his finger at me and declared, "If you put that in your stinking column, I'll kill you."

That was incident number one. The second came during the coffee consumption when I happened to think of something and pulled out my paper and pencil to make a note.

Hap Perry, who was even looking in the other direction, snapped his head around to me, and he too declared, "Now don't you go putting that in the paper." I told him I wasn't but that wasn't satisfying. "You gotta be careful what you say around Billy," he continued, "or it'll turn up in that paper."

So wha' hoppin'? From then on nobody said anything worth quoting.

Then, in came Crowell Little and Dick Young. "Listen, you little . . ." Crowell started.

"I know, I know—you're in dutch about what I quoted you as saying about your trading for pigs."

"It isn't that I object," he said, "but the folks who read that I say I have often traded with pigs and jerks might get offended. You got to get me off the hook. And fast."

"How many folks objected?" I asked.

"I hadn't seen it until my wife showed it to me at breakfast and said it had been called to her attention," he replied.

"Do you reckon as many as several hundred persons might have read it and will say something to you about it? If they do, it'll show you that the Weekly is read from cover to cover and is a good place to put your advertising."

"No kidding," Crowell went on. "You got to get me off the hook. I don't want my customers to think that I regard them as pigs and jerks. That's bad business. My customers are the finest people in the world."

"You mean to say that some of the folks you've panned off used cars on are not jerks for buying 'em?"

"No, never. I only handle good used cars. I wouldn't sell a lemon."

"You mean to say that the way some folks have beaten you down in a trade that you don't regard them as pigs?"

"Nope, just better traders and businessmen than I."

"You mean to say that some folks who have let you have a used car in on a trade don't regard you as a jerk for taking it?"

"Could be, but I don't want 'em to tell me about it."

"And you mean to say that some of them don't call you a pig because you wouldn't give them as much on a trade in as they'd like?"

"They probably do. But that doesn't straighten out what you printed that I said," Crowell insisted.

"Well, all I could print now would be the truth, that we put the words in your mouth."

"That's OK. That's what I want," he interrupted.

"And all I could say would be that you said you had once traded a car for some pigs, and that actually it was Orville-Campbell who added that you probably have traded with pigs and even jerks. And you laughed agreeably. And that when I put it on paper, just for the heckavit I left out Orville and gave you credit for the whole shebang."

"Lemme tell you something, just for the heckavit you get that corrected. And quick! I'm telling you!"
He told me.

The British Navy has discovered that paddle wheel tugs are more effective than those with propellers for pushing aircraft carriers in dockyards, says the National Geographic Society.

Rainfall reaches as much as 140 inches a year on mountain slopes of the Olympic peninsula in Washington, says the National Geographic Society.

European death rates are lower than ever before in spite of hardships of World War II which could have lowered the vitality of some residents.

Fifteen per cent of U.S. families with both parents working have children under 6.

Greta Garbo. The opportunity to see her, and rub elbows with her as she wandered from table to table, gave thrills to the Americans who had worshipped her in movie theatres. She laughed when she lost at roulette.

About that train, "The Mistral": A passenger who seemed to be well informed about railroads and claimed to be an expert speed-gauger said it was the fastest train he had ever been on. Myself, I couldn't compare it with our American trains as to miles per hour, but it seems to me to go through France with amazing speed.

Well, there's not as much time for writing as I expected I would have. Now I am leaving the hotel in Nice for a little wandering about.
As ever,
L. G.

Miss Joyce Nelson, pharmacist in Eubanks' Drugstore, says one dollar is the answer to the riddle propounded above: The 50 cents he took from the counter (which already belonged to the merchant), 35 cents for the purchase, and 15 cents for the change he was given.