**Unwise Decisions**

**Archimedes, the Greek mathematician of 250 B.C., was kind of a Universal Man of his day. As a hobby he invented all kinds of things, but he didn’t take them seriously. One of his more frightening inventions was a “burning mirror” that reflected and amplified the sun’s rays. Greek admirals were supposed to turn this thing on Roman warships and set them afire. *(Bernie Smith, in The Joy of Trivia, p. 47)***

**Bermuda grass, scourge of homeowners in the Southwest who try to maintain a nice lawn, was imported from Bermuda to anchor the sand banks of the Los Angeles aqueduct system. Tiny seeds of the cantankerous weed get into the water, into the system, and out through sprinklers and hoses, thus spreading everywhere. *(Bernie Smith, in The Joy of Trivia, p. 235)***

**Another nasty fungal disease of trees is chestnut blight, which came to the United States on imported wood around 1900. By 1940, there were no more mature American chestnut trees left alive. *(Don Voorhees, in The Perfectly Useless Book of Useless Information, p. 162)***

**As settlers came to Los Angeles, they found it hot and dry. They brought in water and planted groves of orange trees across the L.A. Basin. “That cooled the climate by several degrees,” says Art Rosenfeld, a physics professor at the University of California at Berkeley. In recent decades the orange groves have been cleared for buildings and blacktop, and the climate is now six degrees hotter. Says Rosenfeld: “Residents each year use up to two gigawatts of electricity to compensate for the extra heat, at an added cost of $2 billion.” *(Lowell Ponte, in Reader’s Digest)***

**April 14, 1935, dawned clear, but by afternoon the worst dust storm of the “dirty Thirties” struck across the Great Plains. “It rolled, it didn’t just dust,” Arthur Leonard of Dodge City, Kansas, later remembered. “It was coal black and it was terrible.” The result of prolonged drought and the removal of erosion-stopping sod from the prairies by over-plowing, “Black Sunday” removed an estimated 300,000 tons of topsoil from the area afterward known as the Dust Bowl. By 1940, dust storm devastation forced hundreds of thousands of people to relocate. *(Alison McLean, in Smithsonian magazine)***

**Dutch elm disease is a fungus introduced to the United States on imported logs from Holland in 1928. It has since decimated the native elm population*. (Don Voorhees, in The Perfectly Useless Book of Useless Information, p. 161)***

**There are certain truths that are true no matter how much we may deny them. In the economic realm, for instance, you cannot legislate the poor into independence by legislating the wealthy out of it. You cannot multiply wealth by dividing it. Government cannot give to people what it does not first take away from people. And that which one man receives without working for, another man must work for without receiving. *(Kenneth W. Sollitt)***

**Good week for: Paying whatever the gas station charges, after a house in Van Buren County, Michigan, was totally destroyed when two barrels of gasoline stored in the basement caught fire and exploded. The owner said she was stockpiling the gas because of rising prices. *(The Week magazine, April 1, 2011)***

**The gypsy moth was brought to America in 1868 by French scientist Leopold Trouvelot, to hybridize with native silk-spinning caterpillars. He left a jar of the little critters on the windowsill of his Medford, Massachusetts, laboratory and they escaped. The moths now are the worst hardwood forest pest in the East – defoliating up to 13 million acres a year. During heavy infestations, the noise of their chewing leaves and falling excrement sounds like rain in the forest. *(Don Voorhees, in The Perfectly Useless Book of Useless Information, p. 161)***

**The Mayans cut down all their trees. That's what killed off their civilization in Central America. Or so concluded archaeologists after four separate studies in Guatemala. Deforestation, they say, let soil erode into lakes and streams, leaving the people without food. *(L. M. Boyd)***

**In the early 1960’s, the pesticide DDT almost finished the bald eagle in most of America. As a result of ingesting DDT through their prey, these eagles laid eggs that were too thin-shelled to survive. By the early 1970’s, there were perhaps fewer than 3000 eagles left in the lower 48 states. *(Mark Walters, in Reader’s Digest)***

**Cities in California’s Bay Area, which have banned the use of plastic shopping bags, now want to ban paper bags. San Jose City Councilman Sam Liccardo says that “the plastic bag ordinance pushes consumers to use paper,” and paper “is as bad or worse than plastic,” and is made by “consuming trees.” *(The Week magazine, June 4, 2010)***

**In 1859, Thomas Austin thought he’d let some English rabbits loose on his Australian ranch to give him something to hunt. Unfortunately, he didn’t take into account the quick rate at which rabbits multiply. In only a few years, millions of the creatures spread across the continent, consuming much of the grass intended for grazing sheep. In an effort to get rid of the rabbits, sheep-raisers tried everything from building special fences to introducing predatory creatures (like snakes and hawks). Finally, they found success by spreading a virus called myxomatosis that eliminated most of the rabbits – at least until they built up a natural resistance. *(Tidbits)***

**In 1741, sailors discovered Steller's cow, a 30-foot-lomg sea critter. The meat tasted good, so after them they went. Twenty-seven years later, the species was extinct. *(L. M. Boyd)***

**Far from any airport, on a tiny island in the tiny town of Beaufort, N.C., there is a tiny outpost of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA). Although I lack high-level security clearances, I’m fairly certain this little laboratory – which studies fish and coastal ecology – is not on any terrorist group’s list of targets. Yet when the NOAA coastal scientists wanted to renovate and add some space a few years back, they were forced by the Department of Homeland Security to install enormous Walmart-style parking lot lights on their facility as a required security measure. This was ironic, since the scientists working at the lab know full well that nighttime light pollution is a major threat to the same coastal marine environments that they are paid by taxpayers to study. (Rafe Sagarin, in Learning From the Octopus, as it appeared in The Week magazine, March 23, 2012)**

**A group of one hundred starlings from Europe were released in Central Park by the American Acclimatization Society in1890 and 1891. The society’s goal was to release in American all the birds mentioned in Shakespeare’s plays, to make European immigrants feel more at home. Those one hundred starlings mentioned in (Henry IV, Part 1) went on to spread across the country and become a major pest, displacing countless native birds. The U.S. Department of Agriculture currently has a program to eradicate nuisance flocks of starlings. Like the starlings, all of the house sparrows in the United States today descended from a few of these European birds released in Central Park in 1850. *(Don Voorhees, in The Perfectly Useless Book of Useless Information, p. 161)***

**Toxic and radioactive waste, washed onto Somalia’s coastline by the December 26 Indian Ocean tsunami, has caused an outbreak of illness in the chaotic African nation. The U.N. Environment Program announced that containers of the hazardous materials had been dumped off the Somali coastline in the past, and were ruptured by the massive ocean wave. It said villagers began reporting a wide range of medical problems – such as acute respiratory infections, dry coughing, mouth bleeds, hemorrhages, unusual skin disorders and breathing difficulties – after the waste washed ashore. Observers say the country’s warlords were paid large amounts of cash to allow the waste to be dumped. *(Steve Newman, in Boulder’s Daily Camera, March 11, 2005)***

**Of all tyrannies, a tyranny sincerely exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive. Those who torment us for our own good will torment us without end for they do so with the approval of their own conscience. *(C. S. Lewis)***

**Wildfires: Why the Hotshots died: Almost 40 percent of new houses in the West are built in the middle of fire country, amid the chaparral and pinon pine of the plateaus or pine forests of higher elevations. You can’t blame people for wanting to live in these gorgeous, remote places. But it’s simply wrong to send men like the Hotshots to die to save wealthy people’s “summer homes and year-round retreats.” Insurance companies should stop paying to rebuild such homes, and the government should stop sending men like the Hotshots to defend them, said Crystal A. Kolden in The Washington Post. Those who disagree will have to explain to the loved ones of fallen firefighters “why we thought our houses were more important than their lives.” *(The Week magazine, July 19, 2013)***

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