

## ILLITERACY

Josh Billings

*Editor: Josh finally retired from his active medical life a year ago, and lost no time finding other useful things to do. In spite of undergoing a hip replacement, and the interminable therapy that he, a former polio victim, must continue to do, he is teaching reading as part of the Nashville Adult Illiteracy Council's program.*

It is perfectly astonishing how blind and totally unknowing a person who can't read can be! I had known nothing of such a state of affairs until recently. I happened to see a notice that tutors were needed to teach the illiterate. I called the Nashville Illiteracy Council. I was told there would be a fourteen hour workshop to bring me up to capability. There were twelve other adults in my class. We read readers and guide books. We practiced teaching each other. It was good fun and an absolutely necessary course for a teacher of the illiterate. A great deal of emphasis is placed on phonetics, and on this basis, the dissection of words. Our teacher told us that our student should improve by one grade reading level for each four months of teaching. Someone asked, "Suppose my student doesn't advance so fast." "Then," said the teacher, "you flunk."

I was to meet my student during the week following our classes. I was to call him to make an appointment. I must say I was a little nervous, though I have been teaching most of my life.

My student arrived at the Cohn Adult Literacy Center, where all our meetings took place, on time. He later told me that he also was very nervous.

Tommy Brown is a slender 36 year old black man, married to a wife with a two year community college education. They have a ten year old son whose effort to get third grade reading help from his Father (who couldn't give it) motivated Tommy to get help. Tommy has had intermittent employment. He spent three years in the army, one and a half of which was in Germany. He went twelve years to a Nashville high school for which he received a certificate. He emerged unable to read more than half way through a third grade reading level. He was tested before we met each other. He was ashamed not to be able to help his son. We discussed his reading problem. He said he just "goofed off". He was in a very large class, divided into small groups. His small group seemed never to be called on. Surprisingly, his hand writing is very good though immature and he can do elementary fractions. His vocabulary is limited. His knowledge of geography is almost zero. He doesn't know where the states are or where he was stationed in

Germany or for that matter where Germany is. So learning to read is tough.

We started with a paperback learning book called Challenger Three, full of little stories about Jerome and Steven and Ginger—twenty lessons with word lists and phonetic pronunciation tips. His reading capability is stumbling and slow. His analysis of words is faulty. As we progress from lesson to lesson it is wonderful to see slow improvement. Of course, some of the words he has never heard of and doesn't know what they mean. We discuss these words. I see him for two hours twice a week. The time flies by. We are reading a series of third and fourth grade-level books called "Goose Bumps"—mystery stories which his son is also reading. He has never read a newspaper! "I was afraid of it!" Now we read clippings he brings me. We were learning about silent "g's". We encountered the word "gnat". He had a hard time with it. Finally, he pronounced it. I said, "Do you know what that means?" He didn't. I said, "It goes buzz and flies around." "Oh," he said, "I never knew what that word looked like before."

We've been studying maps, a world map—Germany, world war areas, the continents, reading their names, spelling them, oceans—it's exciting to see his excitement.

The other day we were studying units, i.e. a day is a unit of a week, a week is a unit of a month, etc. I called his attention to the fact that a state is a unit of the United States. So: e pluribus unum—translation—this brought on a study of a nickel. A nickel is loaded with reading material: United States of America; In God We Trust; Liberty; Five Cents; the year minted; Monticello (printed under the picture of Jefferson's home) and of course the man is Jefferson not Washington. He said, "Oh, Mr. Billings, I must show this to TJ (Tommy Junior). He doesn't know about this." He's proud to teach his son!

We study Wild Life Magazine and Sports Illustrated (both require a good deal of struggle to read and plenty of excitement when he runs across Michael Jordan and Tiger Woods).

He and his son seem to have a warm and friendly relationship. As part of his homework, he writes me short stories about picnics, fishing and camping trips and ball games they go to together. His vocabulary is enlarging. They work on his old truck together which he is able to repair and maintain.

A week ago he said, "Oh, Mr. Billings, I'm so glad we are working together. We's like peas in a pod." The best compliment I've gotten in a long time.

In May, after four months of lessons, I tested him. There is a standard test. I was pleased but not too

surprised that he had progressed from a level of 3.3 to 4.6 grade in his reading. He was excited. So were TJ and his wife. He and I will hang together until he reaches the 6th grade reading level. Most daily newspapers are said to be printed for 6th grade readers.

---

## WE SKIRT DISASTER IN THE BAHAMAS

Paul Campbell

*Editor: Paul is truly a remarkable fellow. He left college with the rest of us in 1933, but, then, he never really left.*

*Over the years he has been back to audit course after course: Anthropology; Paul Volker's courses in "International Economic Policy"; Linguistics; and there may be others. Every week during the school year, he and Julie drive to Princeton from their home on the eastern shore of Maryland to spend one or two nights in Princeton and attend classes. And with it all he has written thoughtful essays and critiques on these and other subjects. He has written two books: "De Tales and Other Stories" about his naval experiences in World War II; and "Blue Water Blue Julie", about his life and cruises on the sailing yacht he had built in England in 1972.*

*Several years ago he published a collection of his "works", thoughts and experiences, entitled "The Possible Dream", with chapters entitled: 1. General and Philosophical; 2. The Human Condition; 3. Linguistics and the Use of Languages; 4. Economics; 5. Paul A. Volker; 6. Sailing; 7. U.S. Navy in World War II. The following story is from Chapter 6 on Sailing.*

We spent the early part of 1986 cruising in the Abacos in "Julie". In our opinion, this is the best area of the Bahamas for several reasons; the sailing is almost entirely in protected waters behind the outlying islands and reefs; the local people are helpful and very friendly; the harbors and beautiful beaches are plentiful; the water is crystal clear; and we are away from the "drug run" as these islands are the northernmost of the Bahamas, well north of Miami.

**Whale Cay.** There are only two places where one might get a bad dusting; crossing the Gulf Stream from

Florida, and transiting the passage around Whale Cay. This is a story of Whale Cay.

"Julie" is a 51 foot yawl, extremely seaworthy, with two diesel engines and two propellers which feather to reduce resistance when we are under sail.

We left Palm Beach the night of February 4th to arrive around daylight at West End in the Abacos to clear customs and immigration. We had a reasonably rough passage but had no problems. We always cross to the Bahamas at night so as to arrive in daylight, as there are no lighthouses or buoys to help getting into harbor during darkness.

We then worked our way around the northern part of the Abacos to the eastern side, stopping at various harbors en route, ending up at Marsh Harbor. We had various children, grandchildren and friends join us at different times and had a great cruise.

**Heading Back.** On April 15th time was ticking away so we reluctantly headed back for the states. We spent two nights in the harbor of Man'O'War Cay, April 18 and 19, where we kept a careful check on the weather before proceeding about ten miles north to make the passage outside of Whale Cay. It is necessary to go outside of Whale Cay because the water inside is too shallow. We had been watching the weather carefully and kept a regular check on the powerful weather broadcasts from the U.S. Coast Guard at Portsmouth, Virginia.

**Storm Off Hatteras.** On the evening of the 19th, winds were predicted to be light to moderate from the northeast, which they had been all day, and which

---

*A young European girl talking to a friend said she was worried that she might be pregnant. The friend asked, "Have you had a check-up?" "Well, no," she said, "I think he was a Hungarian."*