

Sunday, December 14, 2003

This day in history: On December 14, 1799, doctors repeatedly drained blood from George Washington in the belief that doing so would help relieve symptoms of strep throat. It didn't. Instead, at about 10 pm, the former president whispered last instructions to his secretary, felt for his own pulse, and died.

Column for Monday, December 15, 2003

RANDOM KINDS OF FACTNESS: Milton's Pair of Eyes Lost

by Erin Barrett & Jack Mingo

This day in history: On December 15, 1944, bandleader Glenn Miller disappeared in a plane over the English Channel on his way to a performance in Paris with the Glenn Miller Army Air Force Band. Evidence has surfaced that his plane may have been hit by Allied bombers dumping munitions into the Channel after an aborted air raid.

The prominent stars can have many names. Betelgeuse—the bright red star in the Orion constellation—is also known as Alpha Orionus, PPM149643, SAO113271, and HD39801.

The front bird in a V formation has to do the most work—the others have the wind-resistance partially blocked by the bird in front of them. When the leader bird gets tired, it drops back and another takes its place.

In Maine, log cabins are exempt from property taxes.

It may be a big animal, but an alligator's brain is only about as big as your thumb. What's pitiful is that, small as an alligator's brain is, the alligator has one of the largest reptilian brains in proportion to its size.

Ronald Reagan was the first and only president to have been divorced.

Although Alaska has plenty of spruce and pine, most of the fresh-cut Christmas trees sold there are flown in from Minnesota, Washington, and Oregon.

If you hear thunder on the ninth hole, head back to the lodge, because 12% of all lightning fatalities in America take place on a golf course.

When flamingo babies hatch, they're colored white with gray streaks. It takes a year or two for them to get "in the pink."

In a typical year, more people are killed by pigs than sharks.

Former president Ulysses Grant was broke when he died, and there was no such thing as a presidential pension. Mark Twain arranged to publish Grant's memoirs, earning his widow quite a bit of money.

By the time poet John Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* he was 45 years old, and completely blind. Perhaps he should've called it *Pair of Eyes Lost*.

Erin Barrett's and Jack Mingo's latest book is *W. C. Privy's Original Bathroom Companion* (St. Martin's Press). You can reach them at www.bathroomcompanion.com

Column for Tuesday, December 16, 2003

RANDOM KINDS OF FACTNESS: Rings Around Uranus

by Erin Barrett & Jack Mingo

This day in history: It was a good day for genius. December 16 is the birthday of Ludwig van Beethoven (1770), Noel Coward (1899), and Arthur C. Clarke (1917).

Saturn's rings may hog all the glory, but Uranus has rings, too. At least count, it has eleven.

"Money is a kind of poetry," said Wallace Stevens. He was a rare combination: an acclaimed poet who was also a vice president of an insurance company.

Scooby Doo, the cartoon dog, got his name from Frank Sinatra's rendition of *Strangers in the Night*, in which he scat-sings "scooby dooby doo..." as the song fades out.

Reader Harold Caplan alerts us to the fact that Josiah Wedgwood in the 1700s made his name developing the fine pottery that still carries his name. However his grandson became even more famous: Charles Darwin.

Darwin, by the way, married his first cousin, Emma Wedgwood. Both inherited Wedgwood money, so he could afford to travel, study, and write books without either worrying about going hungry.

Because of opium's widespread use as a painkiller, more than 100,000 soldiers came out of the Civil War addicted to it.

When Martha Jefferson, Thomas Jefferson's daughter, was attending a French convent school, she announced she wanted to become a nun. He promptly removed her from school and whisked her home. She later married and had 12 children.

If you're tired of your current job, perhaps you'd consider work as a flasher. No, not the kind with the long over coat (and not much else), but a specialized worker in the glass industry.

It's been said that during George Washington's inauguration, he was so anxious that people attending could barely hear what he was saying.

Eleanor and Franklin D. Roosevelt's children--all five of them--had marriages that didn't last.

Courts have ruled consistently that drunk driving laws apply to people riding horses, too. Both rider and horse must be sober.

Erin Barrett and Jack Mingo are the authors of *It Takes a Certain Type to Be a Writer* (Conari Press). You can reach them at www.bathroomcompanion.com

Column for Wednesday, December 17, 2003

RANDOM KINDS OF FACTNESS: Blowing Horns & Glass

by Erin Barrett & Jack Mingo

This day in history: On December 17, 1973, a little-known British group, Elvis Costello and the Attractions, made their US debut as a last-minute substitute for the Sex Pistols on *Saturday Night Live*. The geeky, bespectacled lead singer charmed viewers, and the rest is history.

Poet Ezra Pound was arrested for treason during World War II. He was judged insane and was sent to a mental institution for twelve years.

A Center for Disease Control study recently concluded that 8 percent of women of childbearing age have unsafe levels of mercury in their blood.

If you straightened out a French horn, the instrument would reach 22 feet...and probably sound pretty funny.

In the business of glass blowing, the guy who put the blow iron into the liquid glass and readied it for the blower was called a gatherer. The assistant who shielded the gatherer's face from the hot ovens was called the gatherer's boy.

Apes seem to see the same colors that we do. However, the New World monkeys don't see red very well, giving their world a spectrum of blues, greens, and yellows.

Former president Gerald Ford ate and wrote with his left hand but was a right-handed sportsman.

If kept safe from foxes, frying pans and Colonel Sanders, chickens can live about eight years.

Rockets aren't a 20th century invention. Chinese soldiers used them against Mongol invaders in 1232. Their "arrows of flying fire"—sharp sticks with a gunpowder propellant—were not particularly accurate, but were easy and cheap to make. Thousands could be launched into armies from a long distance. The hissing, flaming arrows killed some of the Mongols, and sent the rest fleeing in terror.

The only president born in California was Richard Nixon.

Monaco, Nauru, and Singapore are countries that have no farms within their borders.

The oldest letter in our current alphabet is the letter "o." The Egyptians first used it some 5000 years ago.

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Column for Thursday, December 18, 2003

RANDOM KINDS OF FACTNESS: The Ents Go Marching

by Erin Barrett & Jack Mingo

This day in history: On December 18, 1958, the United States launched a satellite that broadcast the first human voice from space. A tape recorder inside broadcast a short, prerecorded Christmas message from President Dwight Eisenhower wishing the world's citizens "peace on earth, good will toward men."

Which came first, the chicken or the egg? We're not sure, but we do know that people in Thailand first domesticated the chicken about 8,000 years ago.

Fantasy authors C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien shared more than just their fondness for initials. They were fast friends, supportive rivals, and philosophical sparring partners. Lewis used Tolkien as the model for John Ransom, the word-loving hero of his Space Trilogy; Tolkien returned the favor by using Lewis as the model for Treebeard, leader of the tree-like Ents.

John Breckinridge at age 36 was the youngest vice president. Richard Nixon was second at 39.

Consider "the rockets red glare, the bombs bursting in air" from the National Anthem. British soldiers had been bombarded with a hail of primitive, exploding rockets when they invaded India in 1790. The devastating effects caught the interest of a British Army artillery expert, who copied the design. Francis Scott Key likely saw thousands of these rockets launched against Fort McHenry. He got so worried that he wrote a song about it.

Baby alligators signal to their mothers with a loud back when they're ready to emerge from their eggs. It can be heard from 50 feet away. She stays within that range, because she has to dig the eggs out of the mud before they can hatch.

As recently as 5,000 years ago, giant elephant-sized sloths slowly roamed this earth.

Techno-musician Moby got his pseudonym honestly—his real name is Richard Melville Hall, and he's the great-great-grandnephew of Herman Melville, author of *Moby Dick* (although the musician admits he never got through the book).

Cowslips are called that because they're especially adept at growing in the meadow muffins that cows leave behind.

With the holiday season upon us, you may be doing a lot of praying for sanity. Keep in mind that Eugene de Mazenod is the patron saint of dysfunctional families, and Maximillian Kobe, the patron saint of substance abusers.

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Column for Saturday, December 20, 2003

RANDOM KINDS OF FACTNESS: Green Hornet's Great Uncle

by Erin Barrett & Jack Mingo

This day in history: There's a broken heart for every light on Broadway, they say. All those broken hearts were made possible on December 20, 1880, when electric lights went on for the first time throughout Broadway's theater district.

Need an easy Bible verse to memorize for Sunday School? Try this one, the shortest verse in the whole book: "Jesus wept." (John 11:35)

In 1863, John Davy of Scotland pumped air into underwater eggshells. Watching tiny bubbles form on the surface of the eggs, he proved his theory that baby birds can breathe inside the shell because of thousands of microscopic air holes.

"Crocodile" comes from the Greek *krokodilos*, which means "worm of the pebbles."

Maybe you remember the superhero from radio and TV, the Green Hornet. Did you know that he was the Lone Ranger's grand nephew? Here's the story: Dan Reid was killed by outlaws, so his brother John donned a mask and began fighting evil as the Lone Ranger. Dan's son, Dan, Jr., kept a portrait of the masked Ranger in his house; when *his* son, Britt Reid, learned the truth about his granddad and great uncle, he decided to carry the Lone Ranger's fight into a new century.

Historians tell us that Aesop, the guy with all those fables, probably didn't really exist. First century Greek writer Valerius Babrius compiled folk tales from Greece and India and invented the smart slave Aesop to act as storyteller.

The earliest known clock, similar to a sundial, dates from about 3500 BC.

Despite the "space foods" of the past, astronauts don't really have to suck foods from tubes. It turns out that most foods stay attached to plates and utensils if they're moist or have a sauce or gravy. Liquids act like thick ketchup, sticking safely to itself and the cup.

The only U.S. president to graduate from the U.S. Naval Academy was Jimmy Carter.

Philosopher and educator Socrates believed that knowledge wasn't implanted into the brain, but existed there from birth. A good and trained teacher was able to bring that pre-existing knowledge to consciousness. But perhaps you already knew that.

Despite being "Father of His Country," George Washington had no children.

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