

Algy

by John Buck

There was no doubt that Algernon Leathers was a character but so were several other members of the Collecting Crew of the Supply Department at the Marine Biological Laboratory. Take the long-bearded "Colonel," for example, who liked to sit in the sun on the front lawn of the Crane Laboratory, picturesquely mending fishing nets. Or taciturn Sam Gray, one of the collectors who went out daily in boats to dredge or net starfish, sea urchins and other creatures from the sea bottom or dig them from the mud flats and beaches. His love was obscure marine worms. In fact even the logo of the Supply Department, the living-fossil horseshoe crab, was a bit off-beat.

Algy had two functions on the Crew. First, he was the chief shipping clerk, spending much of his time packing specimens into jars or barrels of formalin to go to inland colleges and universities all over the country for their classes in zoology. Second, he was the one who injected starfish and dogfish with red, yellow and blue starch to delineate their vascular systems. Algy also stood out because he was afflicted with a terrible stammer. He could converse with children who were watching him do his injections, or with friends, one at a time, but in a group or with strangers he was lost.

When I first knew him Algy lived in a 12 x 20, two story tarpapered house on the downhill end of a steeply sloping lot next to the house where I came to live. In front of his house, at a higher level, was a cleared flat place with some masonry laid up around one corner. This, I was told, was the site of Algy's real house, the one he planned to build for the bride

who was in prospect when he first came to the village as a Cornell graduate. Over the years he had been filling in and leveling the space by diverting sand that washed down from the unpaved road above. But somehow the wedding never came off, and now, in his fifties Algy lived alone in his tempo, perforce a semi-recluse because of his stammer. He did, however, sing in the Methodist choir, and he belonged to the volunteer fire department. Whenever "The Cow," the village fire alarm, brayed in the night we would hear him roar off in his model A, successor to a T.

One winter during WWII Algy had a fatal heart attack and his heir, an elderly minister, was happy to sell us the shack for our overflow population. We gave it a transfusion of electricity from our house and some bunk beds to make it usable while we dealt with Algy's furnishings, an arresting mix of deluxe and primitive. There was copper plumbing throughout. There were a new modern (1920s) bath tub and toilet at one end of the second-floor bedroom, a stainless steel hot water heater in the damp and dark cement-block basement and some finely crafted bookshelves in the living room and cabinetry upstairs. These items, along with the fiber-boarded inside walls of the shack, represented, I understand, Algy's using up of materials first assembled for the splendid house-to-be. Neither the hot water tank nor the tub had been connected.

The shelves beside the basement tool bench were loaded with dozens of White Owl cigar boxes. Some held neatly sorted nuts-and-bolts and some were full of cigar ashes. Several were crammed with defunct

dollar watches in various stages of disassembly and others had a mix of small brass valves, tubes and ambiguous fittings. Outside the basement were many wine jugs lying on a platform of ashes from the bucket-a-day coal stove in the living room.

Besides the parlor stove the living room had a sink, table, platform rocker and bookshelves. Since Algy took his meals in the Laboratory's mess hall in the summer, and at a boarding house in the winter, there was no true kitchen. A coffee pot and frying pan suggested the limits of his cooking.

Algy's tastes in reading were catholic, including as they did a leather-bound Fifth Edition Encyclopedia Britannica, a variety of coffee-table types such as "History of the Civil War," "Manners and Customs of Mankind," and "Wonders of the World," college textbooks, a complete set of International Correspondence School manuals, novels, specialty items such as "Ten thousand Useful Phrases," "Wise Cracks" and "Sight Without Glasses," and innumerable 'how to' books of the sort advertised in the back of "Popular Mechanics," Algy's magazine of choice. The novels included a few with titles suggesting naughty goings-on or torrid romance under exotic stars. Un-

fortunately these volumes could have provided little solace for a lonely man, being uniformly and innocently innocuous, at least in comparison with the ordinary fare of today.

Algy was certainly into self-improvement. He was also into recycling. Everyone knows that ashes have valuable plant nutrients - hence those boxes of cigar droppings preserved for a potential garden. And those dozens of veteran shoes under the bed upstairs. Who knew when one would need a leather washer or hinge? As one packrat to another I understood Algy. You never know when something will turn out to be useful.

Though Algy lacked some amenities we know he spent many a pleasant and settled Woods Hole evening in his rocker in front of the cosy stove and kerosene lamp, engrossed in reading, sipping wine and smoking his White Owls. The proof of his progress from ambition to comfortable reality was the six inch mountain of cigar ashes that had built up on the floor to the right of the chair arm.

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Sketchmap of Woods Hole, 1925, courtesy Marjorie Moore and Woods Hole Historical Collection.