

My Dear Young Friend

Book Collectors Correspond with Edward Stratemeyer

by James D. Keeline

When asked by a reporter from the *Newark Sunday Call* if he had any strange adventures or letters of late, Edward Stratemeyer replied:

I hardly know how to reply to this. No, I have had no strange adventures lately, I am thankful to say. About letters, I occasionally get rather odd ones. [ES to Rowland B. Salter, Newark, NJ, 02 Apr 1906]

He goes on to mention some of the unusual requests made by his readers which may be best summarized by the title of the resulting article:

Edward Stratemeyer, of This City, Receives Hundreds of Amusing Missives: Aged Quaker Physician's Request, Some Assert They Have Met Fictitious Characters, Scolds Author Because Boys Read His Books Going to Sunday School [*Newark Sunday Call*, 8 Apr 1906, part III]

When young readers wrote to Stratemeyer, they often wanted to know something about the characters' next adventure, when the next book would come out, or the addresses for the Rover Boys or the address of Putnam Hall. If this last sounds somewhat odd, it must be remembered that Edward, writing as "Arthur M. Winfield," more or less invited this sort of letter when he wrote the introduction for *The Rover Boys at School*:

My Dear Boys:

"The Rover Boys at School" has been written that those of you who have never put in a term or more at an American military academy for boys may gain some insight into the workings of such an institution.

While Putnam Hall is not the real name of the particular place of learning I had in mind while penning this tale for your amusement and instruction, there is really such a school, and dear Captain Putnam is a living person, as are also the lively, wide-awake, fun-loving Rover brothers, Dick, Tom, and Sam, and their schoolfellows, Larry, Fred, and Frank. The same can be said, to a certain degree, of the bully Dan Baxter, and his toady, the sneak, commonly known as "Mumps."

[introduction to *The Rover Boys at School* (Mershon, 1899)]

This attempt at making the boys and locale seem real to the readers was almost too effective. In his replies he repeatedly had to reveal that neither Putnam Hall, Colby Hall, nor the two generations of Rovers were real places or people. He often added that the "characters depicted in the books are taken more or less from life." [ES to Nelson Martin, Buffalo, NY, 12 Jun 1916]

To fans who pointed out the phrase in the introduction he wrote:

I am sorry you misunderstood a statement in the introduction.... The school is only a real one in so far as it is patterned after several others in this country and also patterned after West Point. And what is true of Putnam Hall is also true of Colby Hall.

[ES to Thomas Nichol, Jr., Glen Jean, WV, 12 Nov 1921]

Edward received a fair number of letters from girls who read his books. Although some of his interviews state that they wanted to know when the main characters would marry, the extant replies on the microfilmed correspondence from NYPL indicate that they were interested in the same topics as the boys, along with at least one request for the "addresses of Dora Stanhope and the other girls" in the books [ES to Miss Mayme Cora Russell, Alexandria, LA, 23 Oct 1925].

Some of the girl readers must have considered their position unique based on one reply:

Of course, most of the letters I receive about my books are from boys, but there is a fair sprinkling from the girls, who seem to be as much interested as anybody in what the "Rover boys" and their friends are doing. [ES to Miss Lenora Stevens, Hopkins, MN, 25 Jun 1924]

Adults also wrote to Stratemeyer for a variety of reasons. Some were teachers who had read his books or the books or his Literary Syndicate to their classes. [ES to Miss Margaret L. Pennell, Westboro, MA, 7 Oct 1921; ES to Miss Elizabeth G. Norton and the Boys and Girls of the Orland Grammar School, Orland, IL, 15 Nov 1921]

Others were seeking his advice for what young people should read. To this

query, he replied a variation on the following theme:

When you start in to read do not read story books exclusively. Every time you read a work of fiction follow it up by reading some good biography, or history, or work of travels, or a nature book. To read nothing but fiction is a good deal like making a dinner of pies, puddings and candies. You want some solid roast beef and good bread and butter, and that is why you want something else besides mere story books for a mental diet. Some biographies of famous men are very entertaining, and who wouldn't want to read about travels to the heart of South America, or Africa, or up near the mysterious North Pole? [ES to W.A. Fox, Superintendent of the Newark Boys' Club, Newark, NJ, 16 Oct 1907]

One has to wonder if Edward had in mind that some of his own books might fill his prescribed needs for at this point he had two biographies of Presidents for young people, five volumes in the Pan-American series about South and Central America, and one fictional volume of polar adventures. We do know that he was an avid reader of nonfiction accounts to supply material for his books. He could have referred to those, of course.

A member of the Board of Education in Trenton, NJ, wanted a message to be given to students attending the senior high school:

I do not know of anything more important to say than to bring to their attention the important fact that they are undoubtedly living in the greatest commercial age this old world of ours has ever witnessed. We have had more important inventions in the last fifty years than were ever dreamed of for many centuries.

[ES to S.D. Green, Board of Education, Trenton, NJ, 15 Mar 1922]

Some correspondents, young and old, wanted advice for writing or breaking in to the publishing world. Juvenile series book author, Leslie W. Quirk (1882-1960) was also the head of a trade publication known as *The Editor* and he asked several questions connected with what writers of the day should be concerned about. [ES to Leslie W. Quirk, *The Editor*, 23 Feb 1907] However, in the interest of time, I shall not read the full reply now.

To one young aspiring writer, Edward replied:

Frankly speaking, I do not advise young folks go into authorship for the

reason that with every success there are at least a score of failures. Authorship is something that cannot be learned, or taught, and it must be "in a person" or it can never come out. Nobody can tell another how to write a book. He can teach spelling, grammar, construction and the like, but not the writing of a story that would be worth the reading.

[ES to Robert V. Kinkead, Jersey City, NJ, 6 Jan 1910]

Several readers were less interested in the Second Rover Boys Series which began with volume 21 in 1917. Occasionally he chastises prospective writers who have taken less care than they should in writing to him. To one boy who had complained of the newer stories, Edward replied:

I am sorry you do not like the second series quite so well as the first, and perhaps some of your criticism is correct and there may be too many brothers and sisters; but you would not like to have me kill some of them off, would you?

Now perhaps you will allow me to do a little criticising. For a boy who is going to become a sophomore in the high school, your letter shows quite a number of errors in grammar and capitalization.

The letter also reveals a biographical anecdote:

... You ask when I wanted to become an author. I think I must have been about six years old when I attempted to write my first story.

[ES to Richard H. Bird, Arlington, MA, 15 Sep 1919]

Another young reader wanted to know how Edward came to choose the locale for his Rover Boys books:

I don't know exactly how I came to locate the first books of the series on Cayuga Lake. Cedarville is, of course, fictitious. I remember reading, as a boy, some "Oliver Optic" books, I think the "Lake Shore Series," with scenes on that lake and perhaps that had something to do with it. I know the lake and also Ithaca fairly well.

[ES to Harold Jansen, Catskill, NY, 13 Jul 1918]

Some readers wanted more information about or photographs of their favorite author [Charles H. Hall, New York, NY, 30 Jan 1918; Herbert Liebman, Memphis, TN, 29 Sep 1922; Albert Oliver Gilbert, Dublin, GA;

7 Jun 1928]. To this, Edward sometimes replied with a copy of a recent newspaper interview. In the 1920s, several wrote to seek his autograph. A few, who had found his birth date, sent him remembrances. [Lloyd Jackson, East Orange, NJ, 6 Oct 1917; Wallace Palmer, Independence, MO, 9 Oct 1929]

Most fans wrote to Edward once or perhaps twice. A few, however, wrote to him several times.

The first notable example of this is John William Starr, Jr. (13 Jun 1888-?), of Millersburg, PA. His first letter to Stratemeyer was written on 19 Dec 1909 where he asks: "Did you use to write the stories for the *Golden Days* under the name of 'Dr. Willard McKenzie' or 'Franklin Calkins.'" A few days later, Edward replied:

Answering yours of the 19th inst. would say that I certainly did not write the stories written by Mr. Franklin Calkins for *Golden Days*, nor did I write the Dr. Willard McKenzie stories.

It seems to me this a queer question to ask an author, and I would like to know why you do it, in fact, I must insist upon it, as you would certainly not ask such a question unless there was something behind it.

[ES to John W. Starr, Jr., Millersburg, PA, 23 Dec 1909]

There was "something" behind it. *Golden Days* was the Philadelphia weekly which carried Stratemeyer's first professional story of 18,000 words called "Victor Horton's Idea" in 1889. This is the story which was initially written on "brown wrapping paper" before it was *recopied* onto good paper to be sent in for consideration. He was paid \$75 for the story and, following his father's advice, he wrote more stories for this and other publications.

Some of these *Golden Days* stories were issued under a house pen name of "Ralph Hamilton" when the editor, James Elverson, felt that they were of lower quality. On one later story, "Paul Raymond's Rovings" (1895), the first installment was published as by Hamilton while the remainder was issued under Stratemeyer's name.

To further complicate matters, the "Ralph Hamilton" stories were reprinted under the names "Franklin Calkins" (a real person's name), "Dr. Willard McKenzie" (another house name), and "Edward Stratemeyer."

Starr had a "complete file" of *Golden Days*, which published its last issue on May 11, 1907, and noted the reprint discrepancies. Being a particular fan of Stratemeyer's stories, he hoped to find more of them among the pages of *Golden Days*. He surmised that if Ralph Hamilton was Stratemeyer then perhaps Calkins and McKenzie were also Stratemeyer.

After a couple of exchanges, Edward revealed to Starr the list of *Golden Days* publications which we attribute to Stratemeyer today.

A similar exchange occurred over some of the *Good News* stories where Edward wrote some stories under house names for various reasons which were reprinted in book form under his own name or acknowledged pen names of "Arthur M. Winfield" and "Captain Ralph Bonehill." Hence, Edward did not write all of the "Havey Hicks" or "Manager Henry Abbot" stories, including two "Tom Truxton" stories which have long had a dubious ascription to Stratemeyer. He denied writing these to Starr.

An exhaustive search of the first two decades of *Dime Novel Round-Up* issues and its list of the "Happy Hours Brotherhood" suggests that Starr never subscribed. This is unfortunate, for if he had, some of the specious listings in the Steinhauer listing for *Golden Days* and Captain Mayo's listing for *Good News* could have been corrected earlier. As it stands, Starr was asking questions which collectors would still be uncertain about seventy years later.

Years later, Starr wrote to Stratemeyer again upon reading an article about Edward by Corey Ford in *New Age* magazine (Mar 1928). Starr had presumed that Stratemeyer had died some years before, a thought shared by more than one correspondent over the years. Starr also sent along a circular for his book, *Lincoln and the Railroads* (Dodd, Mead, 1927). Starr became an avid fan of Lincoln and his life was described by a fellow Lincoln researcher, Robert L. Kinkaid (1893-1960). ["John W. Starr, Jr.: Lincoln Collector and Author of Millersburg, PA, *Lincoln Herald*, Dec 1944 (46:4)]

Some luminaries in the Dime Novel collecting and research world also contacted either Edward or his daughters after his death. This list includes Albert Johansen (1871-1962), who sought Edward's autograph in 1923, and later corresponded with Harriet Adams in 1941 and 1942 about Edward, his pen names, and to request a more recent photograph. He had supplied a

copy of one photo to which Harriet replied "I cannot remember when my father looked like that!" [HSA to Albert Johansen, Chicago, IL, 8 Oct 1942] This was perhaps referring to the photo of Edward in *The Holiday* of 1891, before Harriet was born, when he had a beard and moustache. Unfortunately, although Johansen was asking the right questions, Harriet provided him with incomplete and misleading answers which made his entries in *The House of Beadle and Adams* incomplete. He had asked about "Roy Rockwood," "Ralph Hamilton," "Ed Strayer," and "Ned St. Meyer." Of these, only "Roy Rockwood" was confirmed because of its Syndicate series volume use.

Dime novel and series book collector, George H. Hess, Jr. (1873-22 Mar 1954) who founded the remarkable collection now held by the University of Minnesota, wrote to Harriet in 1945 to ask about Stratemeyer and Syndicate pseudonyms which received a vague reply.

Jacob Blanck (1906-1974), eminent bibliographer and author of, *Peter Parley to Penrod* and *The Bibliography of American Literature* in several volumes, wrote to Harriet in 1943 about a project to focus on "The American Juvenile Authors of the 19th Century." To my knowledge, this was not published.

Another Stratemeyer correspondent who will be familiar to readers of the *Round-Up* is Roy B. Van Devier (13 May 1900-Mar 1980) of Akron, OH, who wrote to Stratemeyer several times in 1917, 1920, 1921 twice, 1925, 1929 twice, and 1930. Each time he praised Stratemeyer's books and quoted favorite passages from certain volumes. However, Edward's replies were generic enough that he was not immediately aware that Van Devier had written him several times. Many of the letters to Van Devier and other fans included a generic well-wishing phrase like this one from November 1929:

Your very interesting letter duly to hand, and I am certainly glad to learn that you have derived so much pleasure from reading my "Dave Porter" books and also my "Rover Boys" books, and I hope that the perusal of so many of these works has done you some good.

[ES to Roy B. Van Devier, Akron, OH, 18 Nov 1929]

Roy subscribed to the *Dime Novel Round-Up* from 1950 to 1973. One of his articles, from 1958, featured Stratemeyer and his collection, including mention of a copy of the rare A.S. Barnes volume, *The Island Camp*, with a

dust jacket. It is not known what became of this copy. Since he was not subscribing at the time of his death, a timely notice was not included.

Another subscriber to both the *Round-Up* and a member of the Horatio Alger Society was Wallace E. Palmer (10 Aug 1910-6 Mar 2000) of Independence, MO. He first wrote to Stratemeyer in August 1925 and twice again in 1926, and once in 1929 for Edward's birthday. However, even more remarkable than this, he visited Edward in the summers of 1926 and 1927.

Wally, as his friends knew him, was often reticent to provide much detail about his visits to Stratemeyer's New York City offices. In preparing this paper, I am indebted to Dr. Deidre Johnson for supplying me with some excerpts from her letters from Wally.

Anyone who has received one of his letters won't soon forget it. As former *Newsboy* editor, Gilbert Westgard II wrote in the March-April 2000 obituary issue of that publication:

His letters, almost his sole means of communication, were always as entertaining and enlightening, as they were especially eccentric, both in style and content. Because he usually had so much to say, they ran for many pages, the margins were always narrow, and the type ran from the top to the bottom in a nearly uninterrupted flow, much as if it was a mighty Niagara that was conveying concepts and ideas in precious nuggets for our particular enjoyment....

[Gilbert K. Westgard II, *Newsboy*, Mar-Apr 2000, p. 2]

Among those "nuggets" passed to Dr. Johnson were all-too-brief references to his meetings with Stratemeyer such as:

[Stratemeyer] accorded to me ... several audiences in the years 1926 and 1927, at the temple of the Syndicate in New York.

[Palmer to Johnson, 16 Nov 1983]

... that epochal June morning in 1926 when I first went to "meet my pilot face-to-face" ... and though I was in the holy-of-holies chamber* as many as 15 times in the years 1926 and 1927....

[Palmer to Johnson, 18 Aug 1989; * This refers to Edward Stratemeyer's office with many shelves filled with his books.]

Wally wrote to Harriet S. Adams and Edna Stratemeyer on 11 May 1930, the day after Edward died, to express his sympathies. Edward's assistant, Harriet Otis Smith (1869-??), asked him if he had ever written any stories for boys in case his writing might fit the needs of the Syndicate in the future. to which she added:

If you are interested in buying the Syndicate, you might apply to his daughters and executrices.... It is a rather large business and will require considerable capital to run it....

[HOS to Wallace Palmer, Independence, MO, 20 May 1930]

He did express his interest and inquired about the precise nature of Edward's business. However, in a letter from Miss Smith to the sisters:

... I will write to Wallace Palmer, though there is little I can tell him. In fact, I think he is just a foolish boy and does not know what he is talking about and doubt if he could raise two thousand dollars. I have seen both him and his mother when they made pilgrimages to see your father.

[HOS to ECS, 21 Jun 1930]

Such was the asking price for the Stratemeyer Syndicate in the midst of the Great Depression. Other potential buyers included the Garis family and the Duffield family, both of who had been ghostwriting Syndicate volumes for many years. Ultimately, the sisters decided to continue the Syndicate themselves.

A few years later in April 1933, "Robert Emmett O'Dell" write a letter to the Syndicate to describe an article he had written for *The Bookman* and a long excerpt* from another he hoped to write for overseas publication about Stratemeyer. This first article, "Tom, Dick, and the Fun-Loving Sam" was published under the "Elsa Byrnhof" name in March 1933. O'Dell hastened to add that the title was chosen by the editor; his choice was "Juvenilia's Most High" and he would not have made the mistake to mischaracterize which Rover was the prankster. According to O'Dell, the name "Elsa Byrnhoff" was that of a friend who had consented to let him use the name for his writing. [Robert E. O'Dell to Syndicate, Columbia, MO, 17 Apr 1933; * I can supply copies of the Byrnhoff article and the excerpt if interested]

O'Dell offered to write a biography of Stratemeyer over several letters in 1933, 1934, 1938, and 1939. Each time, one of the sisters would thank him

for his interest and say that *they* wished to do any biography of their father. O'Dell tried to persuade them that two biographies, much like the two for Mark Twain would be appropriate:

Albert Bigelow Paine has done a wonderful job of telling the life story of Mark Twain, but so has his daughter done an even better one, has Clara Clemens. Oh, couldn't we both tell this magnificent story to which you and your mother* are the key, the only key?

[Robert E. O'Dell to Syndicate, Kansas City, MO, 10 May 1933; *Edward's widow, Magdalene Baker Van Camp Stratemeyer, died in May 1935.]

Early replies from the Syndicate lament that O'Dell was not able to meet their father. However, in his last available letter to the Syndicate in 1939, he states that he "interviewed him on two occasions." He also said that he had made \$200 in writing articles about Stratemeyer with his limited information; he even financed a vacation with his earnings.

Searches of the 1930 Federal Census for Missouri show a Robert O'Dell, aged 22, in Blue, Jackson County, MO. [T626-1192, ED 258, p. 20A]. In researching other correspondents, I noticed that Wallace Palmer, aged 20, was also listed in Blue, Jackson County, MO [T626-1192, ED 244, p. 10A].

My first question was: did they know each other? Then I received the correspondence excerpts from Dr. Johnson:

As to that brief article on Mr. Stratemeyer by Elsa Byrnhof appearing in *The Bookman* magazine, Yes, I was its author, and in those long ago days (1933) I also used the alter-identity of Robert Emmett O'Dell, under which I wrote to Mrs. Harriet Stratemeyer Adams requesting that she (perhaps in collaboration with her sister Edna) write the long-needed life of her illustrious father.... [Palmer to Johnson, 26 May 1999]

Who would imagine that such an innocent paper topic would reveal so much?