

## FOREWORD

ONE OF MY strange passions is studying the American phenomenon of secret society initiation equipment. Three brothers named DeMoulin created the Rolls-Royce versions of the exploding cigar, the whoopee cushion, and the joy buzzer. The DeMoulin brothers are what would have happened if the Three Stooges had gone into the furniture business.

They were subversive, the brothers, in the way artists are subversive. They satirized sobriety and high seriousness; they tossed pomp on its ass and made dignity pee its pants. They were Lords of Misrule and their marvelous devices were tools available to anyone who wanted to have fun at someone else's expense, one of the finest forms of fun there is.

Of course, as this book explains, their products were created for fraternal secret societies that were big in those days. Houdini was a member. So was Mozart. So was Walt Disney. Back in the day, the membership of the secret

societies was like a Who's Who of Whodom. And the furnishings depicted and described in these pages were an integral part of what many initiates went through before being admitted to the Mysteries, along with the grips and signs and secret words.

The sensibility that informs these devices bespeaks a more gleefully sadistic outlook on life; it hearkens back to a time before lawyers ruled and when people could laugh at themselves. My own lawyer suggested I have guests in my museum sign waivers before the tour. That way, if anyone slipped a disk or had a heart attack or soiled their duds from the DeMoulin experience, I would be insulated from the ambulance chasers. But that's the point. Like the old saying goes, "Screw 'em if they can't take a joke." Every oversized ego is in need of deflation. Every overly solemn occasion in need of someone willing to fart. The DeMoulin brothers took anarchy, subversion, and contrariness and turned them into enormously lovely things whose stately exteriors conceal the

jester within. This stuff is more than just fancy pranks. It's Americana. Never has nonsense been taken so seriously. I'm proud to contribute this foreword. This book is a fascinating, appetite-whetting glimpse for the, if you'll pardon the expression, uninitiated.

If only, when you opened it, it set off

a .38 caliber blank and squirted water in your face.

—David Copperfield,  
Musha Cay Island,  
January 2011



Members of secret societies, who sometimes may be put to much trouble to secure a sufficiently irascible goat for the purpose of initiating new members to their respective lodges, will be glad to learn that the inventive genius of America has come to their assistance. The device is a mechanical goat, which can be put in the closet when not needed; that requires no feeding, and practically no care. Also it may be handled by its keeper without fear of consequences. This mechanical goat is mounted on a tripod which runs on three wheels, the front one being loosely pivoted. A handle in the rear is for the purpose of pushing it.

The candidate, blindfolded, is led to the side of the animal, and on it he takes his seat, placing his feet in stirrups on either side. As the goat is pushed about the lodge room, a series of wheels and rods, geared to the wheels on which it runs, causes the animal to buck and rear in a fearful manner, keeping the candidate in continual danger of being shaken off.

—*The New York Times*,  
May 15, 1910

## INTRODUCTION

(Item D7775) Human Centipede or Night Mare.

“The mere thought of having to mount and hold fast to this uncanny beast is enough to make anybody want to stick to the tow path.”

—from DeMoulin Catalog No. 439

ONCE OR TWICE a year, the most peculiar mail-order catalog ever published was stuffed into canvas bags and thrown off mail trains across the United States. Between its covers were the nuttiest, most bizarre inventions and prank devices ever offered for sale.

Had you been a high-ranking clerk of a fraternal lodge at the turn of the twentieth century, you would have retrieved from the post office every now and then one of these little catalogs. Published by DeMoulin Bros. & Co. of Greenville, Illinois, in limited numbers to a very specific readership from 1896 to 1930, these catalogs of fraternal initiation devices and regalia were inaccessible to the public—practically unknown. If the catalogs were as scarce as hen’s teeth then, they are as scarce as goat feathers now.

“Men need fun and entertainment. They are going to get it somewhere,” boldly asserted one of the DeMoulin catalogs. In regard to fraternal brethren, that was often the case. If men couldn’t

find fun at their local lodge, they would join another lodge, or find another form of entertainment—perhaps less wholesome. In short, a lodge without interesting entertainment wasn’t worth “a hill of beans”; it was in danger of being called “sleepy” or “puny” and then “dead.”

As population centers and wayward burghs popped up on the prairie, ridge, and shore, so did lodges of fraternal orders like the Odd Fellows, Masons, Knights of Pythias, and Woodmen. These lodges were central to the economic and social well-being of their communities. But their success depended on membership: a packed hall with new members wanting in. Thus, it made sense for lodges to offer something to keep members looking forward to the meetings.

In 1892, when fraternal membership began to surge, competition among lodges to attract and keep members intensified. It didn’t take long for Ed DeMoulin to realize this. A witty, grown-up whiz kid and inventor, he set

to work to “amp up the action” at his local lodge in Greenville. In a matter of weeks, Ed’s “Moulten Lead Test” made a successful debut with the brethren of the Modern Woodmen of America.

Thus, at the intersection of two historic eras—the Age of Invention and the Golden Age of Fraternity—the DeMoulin Brothers Company was born.

Within a couple of years, members of Ed’s lodge were in the habit of gleefully witnessing new candidates initiated with Ed’s peculiar inventions—the “Roller Coaster Goat,” the “Saw Mill,” or the dreaded “Branding Iron.” In 1894, the *Greenville Advocate* wrote, “Ed DeMoulin is sure enough an inventive genius. . . . Go in, Ed, there’s millions in it.” So he did.

The success of DeMoulin mail-order catalogs, touted by the company as their “silent salesmen,” was overwhelming. With little competition, DeMoulin Bros. & Co. became the premier manufacturer of stunt and side-degree lodge paraphernalia in the United States—and stayed that way for the next thirty years.

What is it that makes the DeMoulin catalogs so precious and outrageous? I suppose it is our temporal distance from them, our general unfamiliarity with the subject matter. Their pages serve as a sort of a spyglass to gaze on middle-class America at the turn of the century—and a secret segment of it to boot.

You will find pop culture references generously scattered throughout the catalog

pages reproduced in this book: Darius Green, the Yellow Kid, the Charleston Girls, the Columbian Exposition, “Big Bertha,” “Kissing the Blarney Stone,” “My Gal’s Got Trilby Feet.” How many do you recognize?

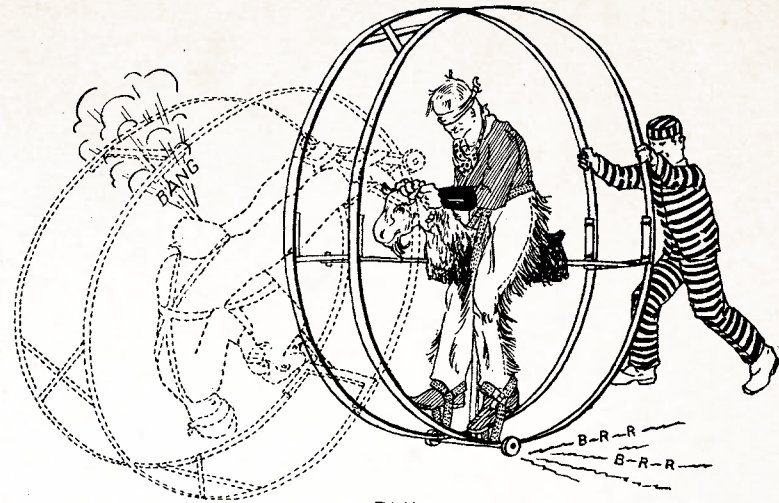
The descriptions accompanying the illustrations are loaded with etymological treasure. Keep your eyes peeled for unusual words like “Billiken,” “larraping,” and “kazabo,” and turns of phrase and unintended humor that might “jar your slats,” but hopefully not “blow you to atoms.”

If you are in a certain frame of mind, you may discover more examples of political incorrectness and sexual innuendo than you thought you ever would in a catalog of this sort. Customer testimonials, sprinkled throughout the text, were taken from the catalogs and provide firsthand proof that the DeMoulin pranks increased membership and saved lodges from inanition or failure.

This book is not a history of fraternal orders or an exposé of what really goes on behind the “secret handshake,” though it might tempt you to read further on the subject of fraternal orders and maybe join a lodge yourself. Nor is this book a history of the DeMoulin brothers, their catalogs, and their company. It’s not really about the language or the inventions themselves.

It is a lens, or if you prefer, a kind of time machine. Its wiring may zap you; its eccentric wheels may cause you to catch your bearings—but get in. You’ll enjoy the ride.

FERRIS WHEEL COASTER GOAT



D762

This is the Ferris Wheel Goat with several new features added which make it a much more exciting stunt. See the two small wheels. These enable the attendant to coast the ferris wheel on the floor with the candidate right-side-up. About the time the candidate has relaxed and has kidded himself into believing that he is to enjoy a smooth ride—over he goes right on his head. The firing of a blank cartridge adds to the consternation. A ba-a-a attachment also makes this goat more goaty.

Every Member Looks Forward to Meetings

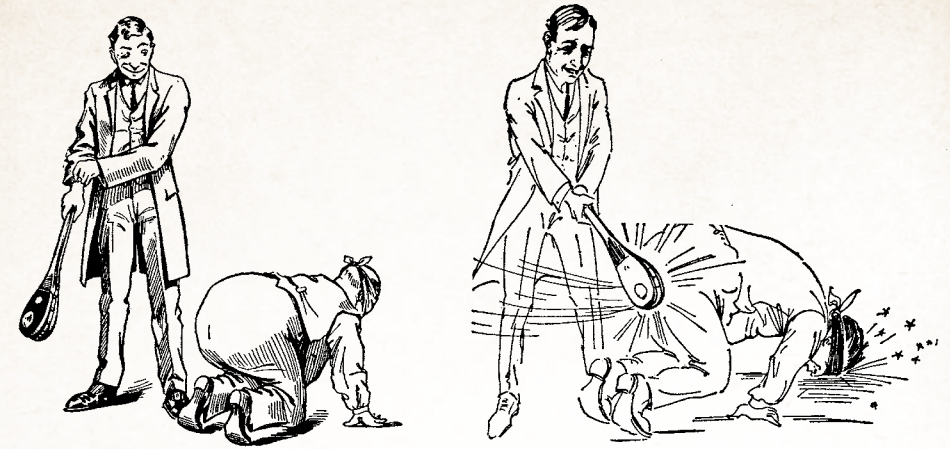
"Our Legion one year ago had only forty-six members and owed plenty of money. I was elected Master of Burlesque. Received one of your catalogs and got busy with an order; consequently, today we have over 400 members all paid up and money in the treasury. Every member looks forward to something new at each one of our meetings. Everything we ever bought from you has more than made good, and I can recommend your house in the highest degree."—George E. Garland, Paul Revere Legion, No. 28, M. L. of the W., 24 Warren St., Roxbury, Mass.

"Enclosed you will find a check for \$79.10 for bill of recent date. We are well satisfied with the goods and wish to thank you for the prompt and courteous treatment your company has given us."—Harold L. Kremser, Phi Epsilon Frat., Emaus, Pa.

The Odd Fellows entertainment fairly brought down the house. The goat riding and pole climbing of Fred Bassett and the rest of the boys, demonstrated matchless hilarity.

—Sentinel Democrat, Mt. Sterling, Kentucky, April 30, 1880

SPANKER



When it is desired to add a "personal touch" to the initiation, a few of these spankers will do the work in a manner which will greatly "impress" the candidate. If in proper position, he may receive an inspiration which will lead him to "jump" at conclusions as to what caused the loud report.

This spanker is the lightest weight made. The discharge is certain, no matter which part of spanker is struck. It is rarranged with an automatic firing device so that when candidate is spanked, a 32-calibre blank cartridge is discharged, the concussion and fire of which is completely muffled by our new muffling attachment, thus avoiding any possibility whatever of accident. We include an attachment with which the empty cartridge shell is easily removed.

See suggestions for introducing, page XXVI in back of catalog.

"Gentlemen: Enclosed find N.Y. draft for \$29.45 payment of balance of invoice inclosed. Can say everything is satisfactory. I was the first victim for the 'Spanker,' and can testify to its 'jarring' qualities!"

—Yours truly, J. W. Reilly, St. Joseph, Mo.

Rods and paddles were commonly found hanging on the walls of homes and schools. A teacher's general duties were often described as "swinging the birch," (whipping with a paddle made out of birch wood.) Other synonymous terms of the time included, "wielding the rod," "walloping," "birching," "larruping," or "larraping," as it appears in the DeMoulin catalog.

In the DeMoulin catalog, several references are made to the gluteal point of contact as, "where your mother used to apply the sole of her slipper." Thus, "slippering," was yet another fairly common term for spanking.

SAY IT WITH FLOWERS



The bouquet of flowers cleverly conceals a device which at the proper time acts much like a young geyser.

When the candidates are drinking their beer and favoring the audience by singing "How Dry I Am" there is an explosion—the flowers, including a large quantity of water, blow up, and, like the rain referred to in the Scriptures, falls upon the just and unjust alike. Is automatically discharged by candidate or attendant pushing call button on table, or can be discharged by attendant at a distance.

In 1910, Florists' Telegraph Delivery group (FTD)—currently known as the Florists' Transworld Delivery group—was established. In 1918, FTD put out the extremely popular slogan "Say It with Flowers" for its Mother's Day campaign. Other familiar slogans of the day:

"When it rains, it pours."  
—Morton Salt, 1911

"The pause that refreshes."  
—Coca Cola, D'Arcy Co., 1929

"Shot from guns."—Quaker Puffed Wheat,  
Lord & Thomas, 1920s

"I'd walk a mile for a camel."  
—Camel (cigarettes), Liggett Co., 1921

"The champagne of bottled beer."  
—Miller, 1906

"Good to the last drop."  
—Maxwell House, 1926 (Teddy Roosevelt  
coined it)

"Burma-Shave, roadside signs in verso."  
—Allen Odell, 1925

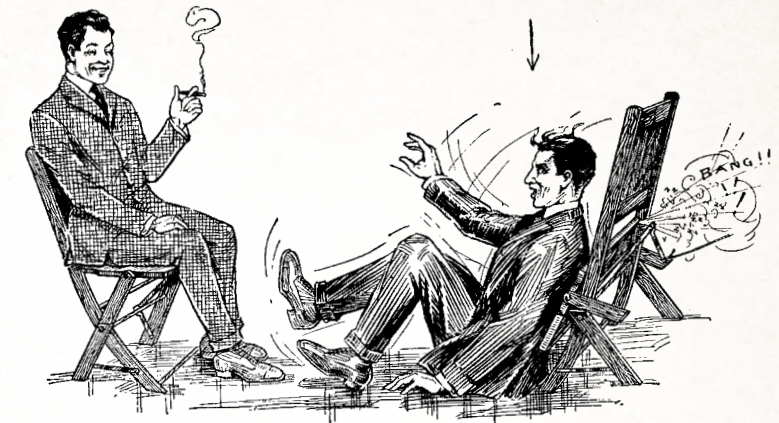
"The skin you love to touch."  
—Woodbury Soap, J. Walter Thompson  
Co., 1911

"Always a bridesmaid, but never a bride."  
—Listerine, Lambert & Feasley, 1923

"The instrument of the immortals."  
—Steinway & Sons, N.W. Ayer & Sons,  
1919

"Fun in the Lodge Room."  
—DeMoulin Brothers, 1912

TRICK BOTTOM CHAIR



Even the floor will rise up to greet the candidate; at least that is the impression he gets when the bottom of this chair suddenly drops from under him. And if, as we understand it, an impression means a dent in a soft place, we are inclined to believe that the impression will be well defined.

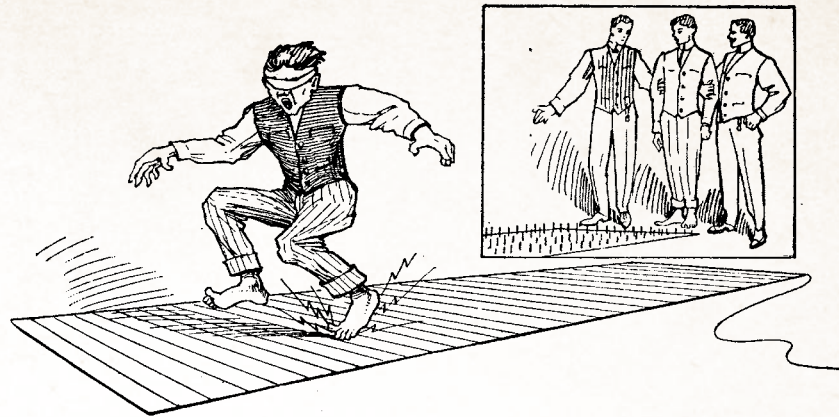
The Candidate always welcomes an opportunity to sit down and rest. This chair will look mighty good to him, especially after he has become fatigued from other tests. He sees himself, comfortably seated here and watching the other candidates get what's coming to them. But, alas, he suddenly starts on a quick descent to the lower abyss of chaos, until the floor offers resistance to his impetuous precipitation.

This chair is similar to the regular folding chair used in lodge rooms. At the will of attendant, the bottom drops and a blank cartridge is exploded. It is a sure catch, not for candidates but for members who don't get around to the meetings very often.

*"We had ten new members initiated into the Lodge last Wednesday night and we expect a bigger group next week. We gave the boys the 'hot seat' in the Trick Chair. Not all of them enjoyed it but every one agreed it was a mighty good time."*

—J. E. Parsley, Camp No. 57, Columbus, Oh.

ELECTRIC CARPETS



The mother of Achilles dipped him in the River Styx in order to render his body invulnerable. But she overlooked the heel by which she held him, and that was thereafter his one and only vulnerable spot. The candidate might well have longed for an opportunity to dip his pedestrian extremities in the Styx before being compelled to travel this road. He experiences all the woes of the hot desert sands, aggravated by corns, bunions and ingrowing toe nails.

See suggestions for introducing, page XV, in back of catalog.

The improved Electric Carpet is very substantial, made of insulated waterproof material, color of sand. Our manner of construction does away with all wires, buttons, etc., hence short-circuiting is impossible; nothing to get out of order by broken connections or by buttons coming off. Candidates receive full "benefit" whether he stands on one foot or both. Occupies but little space; three-yard length can be rolled up in roll four inches in diameter. Usually ordered in lengths of three to five yards.

- D292—Electric Carpet, 25 inches wide, for magneto; running yard .....\$ 3.25
- D293—Electric Carpet, 50 inches wide, for magneto; running yard ..... 6.25

*"Paraphernalia received and was used for the first time last evening and proved very satisfactory. Your electric mat surely has some pep!"*

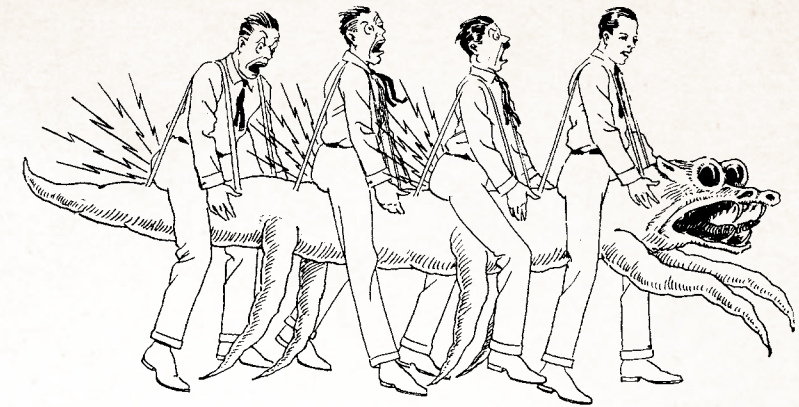
—Russell K. Patterson, Mahatma Sanctorum No. 242, A.M.O.S., Harrisburg, Pa.

The DeMoulin Brothers manufactured the last electric carpet for a lodge that put in a special order in 1989. There happened to be enough canvas and copper tubing left over from the "old days" to fabricate it. Employee Tom Qualls gave it a shoeless test run. The long narrow runner carpet was

placed in a tight hallway, as suggested in the catalog, so there was no room to jump off to the side. The shocks "nearly knocked me to my knees," said Qualls. "Each jolt was as painful as a shock from a spark plug wire."



THE HUMAN CENTIPEDE OR NIGHT MARE



Did you ever have a night mare? Well, if you did, you can sympathize with the candidates who are compelled to ride this animal. A "night mare," or any old "day horse," for that matter, is not one-two-three compared with this wild and woolly centipede. The mere thought of having to mount and hold fast to this uncanny beast is enough to make anybody want to stick to the tow path.

This mare is controlled by the man in front. At any desired time he can shoot the "animal heat" into the candidates and make the mare go in a way that will terrify them.

"It Is the Only Thing"

"We are well pleased with the paraphernalia we are using, and it is the only thing to keep up the attendance. We have a fairly good assortment of paraphernalia and we have probably put on the work in more neighboring towns than any other Camp in Northeastern Iowa. Perhaps some may ask why. Well, simply because the interest is kept up the year 'round and they always know there is a good time in Edgewood when we have a meeting, and when some other Camp gets some members, they say, 'Let's get Edgewood to come down and bring their stuff and put them through'."—C. S. Todd, Edgewood, Iowa.

TWO POPULAR PHRASES FROM THE HUMAN CENTIPEDE OR NIGHT MARE

"wild and woolly" Author Adrian Welcker popularized this expression in his 1891 publication, *Tales of the Wild and Woolly West*. The publisher explained the term in a note to the readers: "Woolly . . . seems to refer to the uncivilized—untamed appearance of their attire, made of woolly-side-out leather worn by the Western Pioneers" (1891, Oxford English Dictionary).

Soon, people began using the colorful expression "wild and woolly" to describe virtually anything as lacking in culture, or restraint.

"stick to the towpath" A towpath is a well-worn route along a river's edge, trod by oxen, mules, or horses as they pulled barges. In this case, to "stick to the towpath" is to maintain a slow predictable pace on a predetermined route.