

Is That So?

By EUGENE BURNS
Ranger-Naturalist

To be sure, all higher animals have elaborate means of communication — getting positive meanings across. Many with language, of course, can express more than just feelings—but also thoughts.

However, did you notice that in our language almost all words



beginning with "sn" have an unpleasant association. Such as: snaggletooth, snail, snappish, snarl, sneer, snide, snigger, snitch, snoop, snob, snort, snub, snuffle.

There's a reason—just like a dog's unpleasant snarl. As you say these words look in the mirror. Now say "sn" several times over. You will find you cannot do it without raising your upper lip and your nose wrinkles—a sneering expression. It is just possible that this may be the reason for these unpleasant words.

An odd word group includes those words which mean "group." Goats, sheep or birds may go in flocks but certain ones have special "group" words. A "gaggle" of geese is a flock of wild geese on the water; but take these same birds in the air and they are a "skein" of geese.

A group of birds or fowl hatched at one time and cared for together is a "brood," explain Helene and Charlton Laird in their entertaining *The Tree of Language* (World, N.Y.), but a brood of little chicks is a "clutch" and so are the eggs before they are hatched.

Quail and partridges in a group are a "covey." Another word for covey is "heavy" but you can also have a boy of pretty misses.

Large animals, particularly cattle, go in herds; a herd of lions in South Africa is called a pride; whales congregate in a pod or gam.

In hunting, three dogs are a leash; and two pheasants a brace.

Spooonerisms

And then there are the words which grow out of mix-ups, called spoonerisms—for the Rev. W. A. Spooner of Oxford University. Once, intending to ask the dean's secretary, "Is the Dean busy?" he asked, "Is the bean dizzy?"

A member of his congregation, catching the habit from him, supposedly complained to him about a person occupying her pew, saying: "Someone is occupying my pie," to which Rev. Spooner replied: "I am very sorry, Madam. I'll sew you to another sheet."

But many other names, such as spoonerisms, grew out of names. Such as: Saxophone from its inventor, A. J. Sax; begonia, boysenberry, bloomers, camel-lia, Diesel engine, Fahrenheit, Ferris wheel, macadam, gardenia, guillotine, mackintosh, magnolia, macel, Melba toast, nicotine, pasteurize, quising (from the last world war), sandwich, sequoia, silhouette, volt, watt and zeppelin. All, people's names.

Palindromes

It would not be right to end without discussing palindromes—a sentence which reads exactly the same backwards as forward.

Among the best known are the remark Napoleon was supposed to have made when he was banished to the island of Elba: "Able was I ere I saw Elba."

Then, there's Adams answer to Eve when she asked his name: "Madam, I'm Adam."

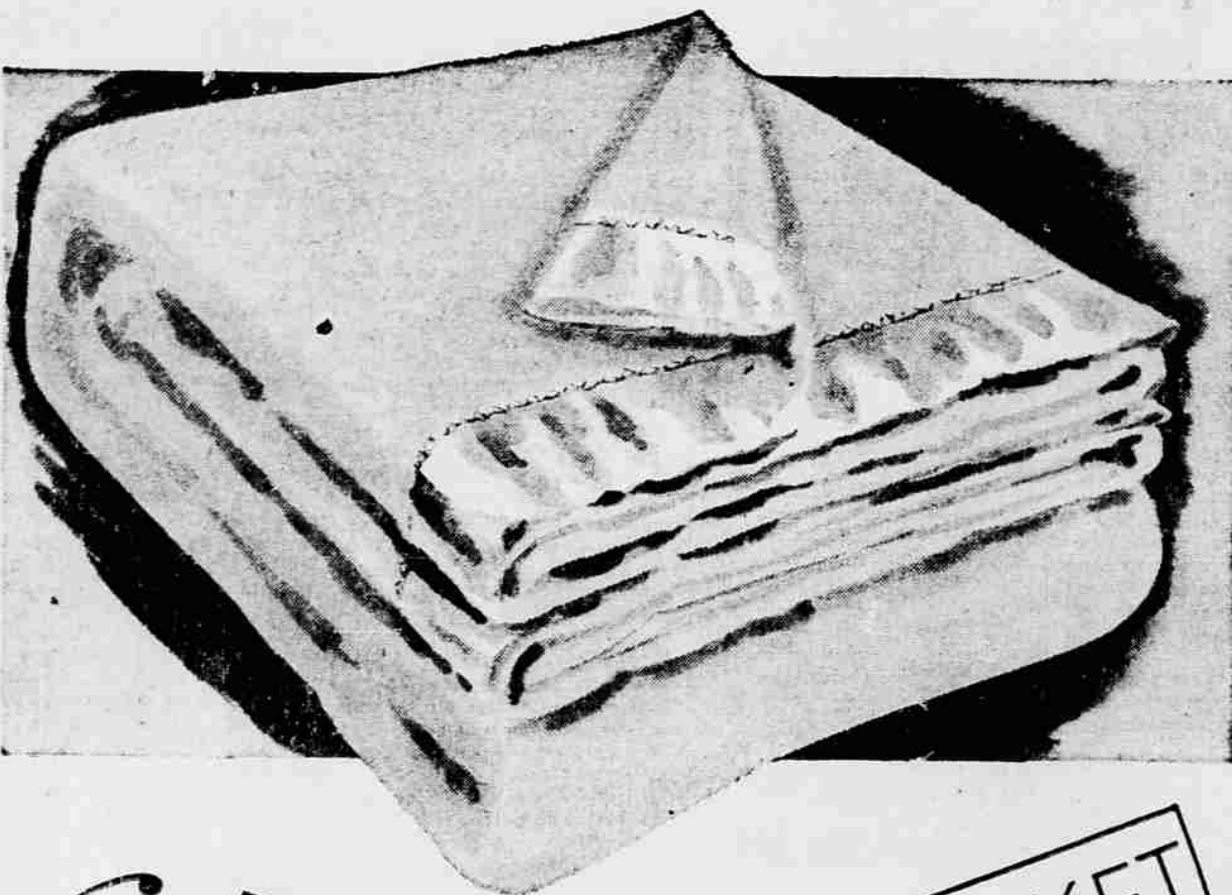
"A man, a plan, canal—Panama!"

Or, to finish off in the realm of animals: "Was it a cat I saw? No, miss, it's Simon."

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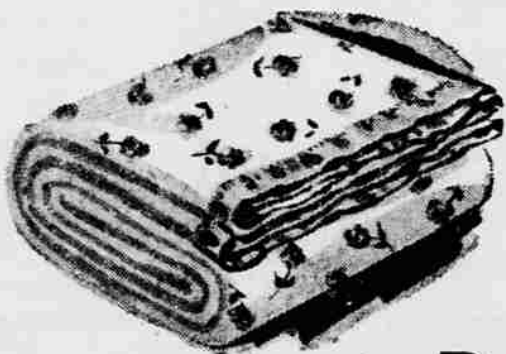
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