At least one San Francisco lawyer had a sense of humor

By Jack Boulware

he phone call to the rare book and special collections department of the San Francisco Public Library two weeks ago was about chickens.

The caller, claiming to be associated with Kentucky Fried Chicken, said she was tracing the origins of a recent well-traveled Internet rumor about the name of the company because its chickens aren’t actually chickens, but rather chemical creations of chickens. She asked librarians Andrea Grimes for help locating a particular source—the May 1996 issue of the San Francisco Chronicle, a publicational of which she happened to be the editor for a long, and financially questionable, six years.

Grimes tracked down a 1996 Weekly seeking help with her problem. The library has issues 1 through 26 of The Nose, said, but not May/June 1995 edition. She asked if there was another source the library had not received, one that may have mentioned the KFC debate?

There was no Issue 27, told her. The magazine folded aggressively, and with much drama—a May 1996. But I had to know—why does San Francisco’s library even have all 26 issues of The Nose, bound in volumes in its special collections department?

They are, it turns out, part of the Schmulowitz Collection of Wit and Humor (SCOWAH), the world’s second largest collection of humor and folklore, edited only by the Boston Public and Sotheby collections, in Bulgaria, the collection, which resides on the sixth floor of the main branch, was begun in 1947. It now numbers more than 20,000 volumes, spanning four centuries, representing over 25 different languages. The collection has grown each year.

Among the rarities included there are the works of early cartoonists, magazines, humorous essays, academic studies, and unusual historical folklore about topics like Greek pirates, umbrellas, and railroads.

Scholars and comedians occasionally make their way to the collection to conduct research, and little boys often drop by to read the Tin Tin comics. But most San Franciscans have never heard of this archive, unless they wander into the main branch around April Fools’ Day, when the library puts a portion of the SCOWAH on public display for two months.

For this odd assemblage of knowledge, the city may thank a local attorney named Nat Schmulowitz.

According to the library, Schmulowitz was a graduate of UC Berkeley and Hastings Law School, and practiced as an attorney in the San Francisco area in the 1930s, when he was a famous cryptoanalytics and the IGI trial of Roscoe “Fatty” Arbuckle, the silent film comedian accused of murdering a young woman at the St. Francis Hotel. After two heavily publicized trials, Arbuckle and Schmulowitz succumbed in achieving not a guilty verdict for Arbuckle.

Schmulowitz wasn’t just a well-regarded barrister who belonged to civic groups like the Commonwealth Club and the Libraries’ Commission. He possessed a belief in humor that had an impact on the cosmic. In a 1947 speech before the Judicial Conference of the 9th Circuit, Schmulowitz indicated that laughter was essential to a healthy life: “A man, a frightened man, a bigoted man, or an angry man, cannot laugh at himself or be laughed at; but the man who can laugh at himself or be laughed at has taken another step towards the perfect sanity which brings peace to earth and good will to men.”

Throughout his life, Schmulowitz scoured all parts of the globe in a voracious search for humor. Its tastes ran far, from obscure jokes and bizarre anecdotes to witty plays and comic memorabilia. But entertaining friends and família with his collection continued. On April 1, 1947, he donated 85 volumes to the San Francisco Library, allowing the public to share his humor and his sorrow. Three years later he opened a special room to house the SCOWAH. Throughout the years, Schmulowitz continued donating books to the collection, up to 100 items a month. Over the years, approximately 14,000 volumes, was scoured by Schmulowitz himself. After his death in 1966, his sister Kay continued to append to the collection, donating funds and more humor materials, until she passed away in 1984. Neither had children, but cousins who live in the Bay Area are quite generous in their support of the collection.

“She’s so much history there—the fun thing is to remember looking at the contents of four joke notebooks bound in volumes in its special collections department,” says Taylor. “That comes through when you pick up some stupid pamphlet by some salesman. He really was very eclectic in his collecting, but it did happen with the human interest, whether it comes from laughing about something, or a deeper psychological understanding about people, and what makes them human. The complexity of human beings. When you say ‘wit and humor collection,’ a lot of people think simply of the jokes, but this includes another strata of literary wit and wisdom.”

Andrea Grimes wheels out a rack filled with 100 volumes; 20 or so books, all highlights she pulled for me from the SCOWAH shelves. Several of the volumes are by contemporary humorists like Woody Allen, Penn and Teller, Cynthia Heimel, and San Francisco’s own Josh Koshaba. But the older selections are genuinely odd.

“There’s so much history there—the wonderful grandma’s humorous anecdotes, academic studies, and unusual historical folklore about topics like Greek pirates, umbrellas, and railroads.”

Schmulowitz Collection of Wit and Humor. The last Nat Schmulowitz.

“Far from a bizarre footnote to bibliophiles, the SCOWAH continues to expand. The Rev. Warren Debenham of Berkeley is in the process of donating his collection of humorous sound recordings, some 45,000 vinyl records and CDs. Both Grimes and Taylor remain busy updating the computer catalog with the existing SCOWAH material. The next step is to enter the San Francisco Public Library and request a book about the history of flagellations, which resides on the sixth floor of the main branch. It was actually forbidden from calling any livestock animal by the name of a woman. But the most frequently requested book in the collection, according to the collection of anecdotes department? The Nose. The Nose is a satirical publication of which I happened to be an editor, and it was actually forbidden from calling any livestock animal by the name of a woman. But the most frequently requested book in the collection, according to the collection of anecdotes department? The Nose. The Nose is a satirical publication of which I happened to be an editor, and it was actually forbidden from calling any livestock animal by the name of a woman.