

People We'll Never Know

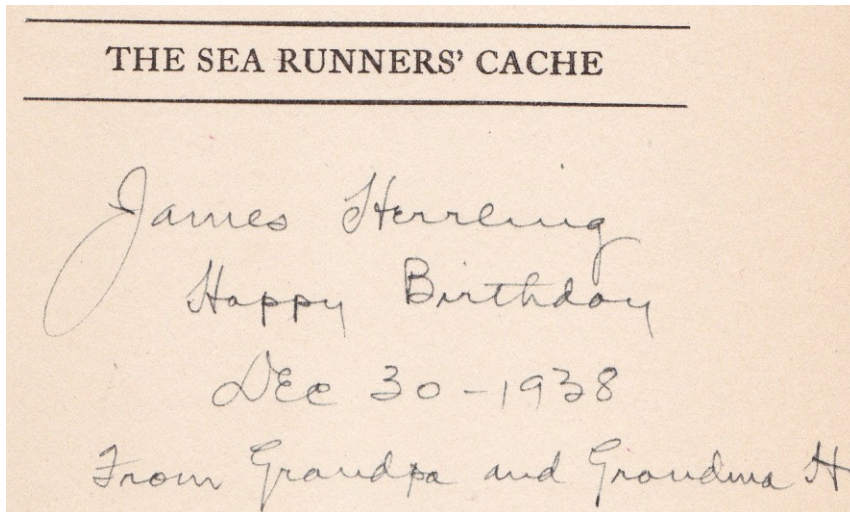
by David Baumann

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1,023 words

They lived two or three or even four or five generations ago. They lived in a world without computers; many of them never knew television. Maybe a few of them even traveled by horse and buggy. Some of them probably talked to their friends on telephones with party lines. Some of them, maybe, put wood into their stoves to cook. They didn't know air conditioning. They thought that a dollar was a lot of money; maybe they shook their heads when the price of gas went up to 28 cents a gallon. Maybe they sat on front porches when the evening came.

We can know next to nothing about them. Sometimes we can know their birthdays, and we might know what they called their grandparents. Sometimes we are told the name of the church they went to or the school they graduated from. Occasionally we can learn which bus line they traveled on, what they bought at the grocery store, or the name of a movie they went to see.



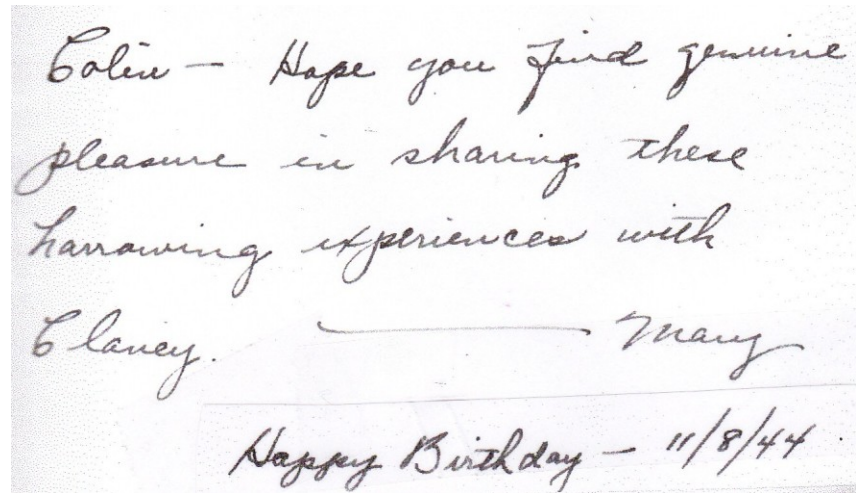
One thing we can pretty much depend on: they liked the books that we like. Their names are written on the endpapers or flyleaves of the books we now own; sometimes it'll just be a first name, but often a last name is provided too.

Sometimes there will be an address or a phone number, or both. Like as not, the address will have only a number and street name, the city or town being taken for granted; and their phone number will often have letters in it; there will be no area code. Sometimes the inscription in the front will show that the book was a gift from grandparents, parents, a brother or sister, a friend, or a teacher.

Caught between pages may be a movie ticket from 1939, a shopping list written by someone using a fountain pen, or a bus pass. Sometimes there will be the card that accompanied the birthday gift, preserved by the birthday boy. It stayed in the book

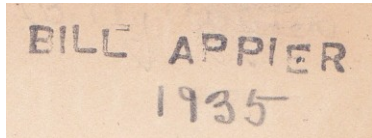
as years and then decades passed. The boy who received the book when he turned, maybe, fourteen, kept it until his heirs found it when he had died at, maybe, the age of 84. We can only guess. The heirs, having no desire to keep the old-fashioned book for themselves, thankfully donated or sold it to a used bookstore or a thrift shop instead of throwing it out or heaving it into a recycling bin to be shredded and turned into a shopping bag. The bookstore's proprietor then put it out for sale. And one of us bought it, delighted to have a seventy-year old book in excellent condition, dust jacket and all with a name in the inscription and a smidgeon of information.

Look at this sample. Did Colin stay in contact with Mary after she gave him a copy of *Gleaming Rails* for his birthday on November 8, 1944? Was she his sister, cousin, friend, neighbor—maybe even future wife? Did John treasure what is now my copy of *The*



Colin - Hope you find genuine
pleasure in sharing these
harrowing experiences with
Claney. ————— Mary
Happy Birthday - 11/8/44

Rocket's Shadow when he was a lad in 1956? Did Emily read what is now my copy of *The Haunted Attic* on that night in 1936, thereby taking her mind for a moment off the hunger rumblings she experienced so often in the Depression? Did Elmer lose track of time when he opened the pages of his new copy of *The Mystery of the Flying Express* back in the fall of 1944, and maybe for a moment forget his anxiety over his older brother who was in uniform somewhere in France? Did Charlotte dream of working in a department store like Connie Blair when she read *The Clue in Blue* when she was eight years old? Did Colville keep attending church after he got the perfect attendance award from Miss Ewing, his Sunday School teacher in 1922, a new copy of *Tom Slade at Black Lake* being his reward? Did George go on to college after he got a copy of *Tom Swift and His Flying Lab* from his mother for getting a good report card in high school back in 1962? Did Bill Appier, who apparently used a child's rubber printing set to impress his name in 1935 on his copy of *The Mercer Boys on a Treasure Hunt*, follow a career in printing?



BILL APPIER
1935

We will never know the answers to these wonderings. But if we collect used books, we must remember that at one time for someone these books were new. If we are their second or third or even sixth owner, someone owned them and cared for them before we did. As I glanced through my collection prior to writing this

article, I noted that about a third of my books have inscriptions. Each book, inscribed or not, has a history. I can never know what that history is, but history it surely has.

And if these books have lasted decades, especially in a dust jacket, then they were once received with a cry of delight and eagerly and gladly read and enjoyed, and then treasured and preserved. Whoever had taken out a fountain pen and written the gift inscription or inscribed a name as the owner could never have foreseen that decades later, when their lives had fallen far into the past and the world had become far different from anything they could have imagined, someone (namely one of us) would read what had been written across time, and share, albeit infinitesimally, the moment of the book's first pleasure for its first owner.

Many of the books I own are older than I am. If it were not for hundreds of strangers about whom I can know next-to-nothing except that they once owned and loved the books I now own and love, then the joy I have in these books now would never have come to me. Strangers they may be, but they were fellow book collectors and therefore not completely disconnected from me. Without them, my shelves would be pretty sparse and my life the poorer. I am more grateful to them and for them than I can properly express.

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