

Oct. 13

Dear Pa,

I thoroughly enjoyed your description of the plans for the opening of the Fandal Davy Center. The cynicism and pretense which seems so often to surround -- or underlie -- this kind of thing these days seems to have become a kind of epidemic.

It's no longer adequate, apparently, to honor or commemorate with a modest and dignified ceremony the necessary costs of which are borne, like those of a funeral or a wedding, by the sponsors of the event. Everyone wants to be entertained and nearly everyone, apparently, is willing to pay heavily for the privilege. And that being the case, I guess it's inevitable that people seize upon these occasions as a means to raise money and even ~~ex~~ invent them for that purpose. I expect any day now to hear that someone is selling tickets to a funeral. I wonder what the ex cuse will be; perhaps to raise money for research on the disease that killed the decedent. And we wonder why the Russians think us odd!

The sum being asked for a facsimile of Audubon's elephant folio certainly seems a bit steep. One hundred and fifty would be reasonable; \$1,500 would be understandable, but \$15,000? I wonder who would buy one. Libraries at academic institutions founded by nouveau riches Texans, I suppose.

You didn't by any chance misplace the decimal point? It's an error I sometimes make and because the editors here are so mathematically illiterate, and so thrown into confusion by great numbers (billions, trillions) it's a mistake that often gets into print.

The whole matter of numerical magnitude presents some interesting pedagogical and journalistic problems. Newspapers, including this one, like to throw numbers around without giving their readers much of an idea of what they signify. We talk about the national debt being a trillion dollars, but who knows what a trillion really means? The number of grains of sand on Cape Cod? The Sahara? What? We glibly told the readers that the EPA had determined that the concentration of dioxin in the soil at Times Beach, Missouri, was one part per billion and on that occasion, at least, I was able to insert a sentence explaining that it was roughly equivalent to a jigger of vermouth in a thousand tank cars of gin. ~~That~~ Though the New York Times delightedly picked it up I was never quite happy with it. Who among us has ever seen a thousand tank cars?

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You didn't tell me how your neck is recovering from which I infer, perhaps with excess optimism, that it is much better. I certainly hope so.

I saw E.F. & Alex last week and both are doing fine. Alexander who has had a difficult time growing up, is now happily employed as a carpenter with a contracting firm that specializes in restoring antique buildings. He showed me around a ~~old~~ tavern in Strawberry Banke (note the 18th c. spelling) in Portsmouth that he's working on and it was very interesting. They are trimming beams and rafters with an adze and scarfing the clapboards instead of butting them as we do today. They use ~~cut~~ cut nails and treenails for fastening -- wrought nails, I mean. It's obviously a lot of work, but it looks like fun and Alex is very enthusiastic about it, but modest. He says he really hasn't mastered the use of an adze yet and spends most of his time astride a shaving horse, tapering the ends of the clapboards with a draw knife. Steve and Pat would find it interesting, I imagine.

Give my love to Aline.

Love,

B

PS -- Enclosing an interesting thing that was in the business section of the Times yesterday, in case you didn't see it. I took a course from Samuelson once when he was one loan from MIT and I've written to him now and then since. He often asks after you, Pa. Says he knew you at MIT during the war.

b

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