

# CONTEST-CRAZY

BY EDITH M. STERN

COMMERCIALY sponsored prize contests, in their present gargantuan form, are a logical outgrowth of the depression. John Brown, a manufacturer, finds that, despite the allurements and cajolings of his high-pressure salesmen, the tons of ink he spreads over the pages of publications, and the Happyland Boys who regale audiences during the John Brown hour on a national hook-up, the public stubbornly refuses to buy his canned milk. He appeals to the astrologers of the advertising agencies. "Higher pressure," they advise. "Stunts. Shots in the arm, Mr. Brown." So Mr. Brown sponsors a contest.

Jim Smith is unemployed. He hasn't very much to do with his time. Furthermore, he still believes that there is gold in the streets of America if you only know where to scratch for it, and that by your own efforts you can jump overnight from worrying about the fifty dollars for last month's rent to enjoying permanent economic security. Mr. Smith enters the contest.

Not that contests are new. P. T. Barnum, that Old Master of ballyhoo, when he was doing advance publicity for the Swedish Nightingale offered a two hundred dollar prize for an American song. Seven hundred and fifty poems were turned in, but what is that compared to the estimated four million entries in the recent Pepsodent Contest? Many, too, the American Legionnaires who, when they were boys, entered popularity or largest-

number-of-subscriptions contests to win a Shetland pony. But the contest on a large scale, with its technique carefully elaborated, with prizes running into thousands of dollars in cash or merchandise, with special clerical staffs to handle its mail and Ph.D.'s to act as judges, with its organization as a heavy industry and all its corollary rackets, is a triumph of contemporary civilization.

Ten years ago contests in their present form were almost unheard of: if they were held, the sponsor deemed himself an innovator and a gambler. Five years ago they began to spring up. By 1931 they were replacing offers and premiums, and during 1932 the country went contest mad. Though their numbers were slightly reduced after December of that year, there were more in 1934 than in 1933, and twice as many during January, 1935, as in the same month a year before.

Contest requirements fall into certain broad classifications. Either you make, draw, write or solve something. (Guessing the number of beans in a pot is not a contest—it is a lottery.) Procter and Gamble have sponsored contests for the best piece of soap sculpture. In a neat and mutually beneficial combination a company manufacturing films and another making toothpaste offered prizes for photographs of The Brightest Smile in America. Here the number of entrants is naturally limited since not everyone sculps or photographs. Solving puzzles or finding the number of

faces concealed in a picture involve different complications. A number of correct answers being probable, a supplementary letter to form a secondary basis for judging is required. Writing contests, consequently, predominate as the most all-around and satisfactory.

Sometimes what must be written seems unrelated to the product. The "Most Fascinating Fact" has no evident connection with Delco Appliances, while the "Best Nickname for the Baby" bears on Wheatena only indirectly. More often, however, the subject matter is directly concerned with the article advertised. Name a new product. Complete a four-line limerick which "carries the message". Answer questions, in twenty-five words or less; "Why is Barbasol America's Fastest-Selling Shaving Cream?" or "Why Is Dated Coffee Better?" Occasionally these questions are not leading, but give play to the creative imagination: "What would you say if you were a ten year old boy taking your first ride in a Plymouth?" and "What is the Chef on the Cream of Wheat Package saying?" have both come over the air. (A current contest will doubtless be restricted to the printed page: a drugstore salesman displaying a roll of toilet paper is depicted, and you are asked to tell what he is saying. The visual element might be circumvented by oral description, but on the theory that reading is done alone while listening often takes place in mixed company, the radio is very careful about certain unmentionables.)

Compose an advertising slogan. Or, write an essay. Pour out your heart. Write a true life experience, "How Bisquick Saved the Day". Describe your family's reactions when you served caramel dumpings made with Gold Medal Flour. Children's contests are beautiful in their simplicity. One consists of writing "I

Like H-O Oats", the prize going to the neatest and best-penned statement. And, finally, there are word contests, once the most popular but now, having been done to death and aroused the ire of librarians when dictionaries were monopolized, past their heyday. These require lists of words utilizing only the letters contained in the product's name or advertising slogan.

Now, what does the sponsor really expect to get out of the resultant verbiage? A brilliant name for his product? "Dreskin", prize-winner in the Campana Contest for a name for a new skin invigorator, is an indication of the calibre of these bursts of inspiration. Usable advertising slogans? Suggestions in a gasoline contest were "Peppy-fast-economical", "The Pinnacle of Potency," and "Smooth as the June night, swift as the eagle". Even prize-winning slogans are almost never used afterward. Ideas for new uses for the product, or the development of new sales angles? Occasionally the simple, sincere report of a housewife will bring out some feature overlooked by the bright boys in the promotion department, but on the whole it is unlikely that their high-priced brains will not have unearthed all valid, and some invalid, uses for the article. A mailing list? There are simpler means of building one: besides, there is no guarantee of contestants' purchasing power. Does the sponsor think that after contemplating the product a due length of time contestants, by a kind of self-hypnosis, will sell it to themselves? The chances are that the reaction, particularly among the majority who lose, will be just the opposite. The weary and befuddled aspirant for the Grand Prize may hope fervently that he never hears that particular combination of letters again! In the radio field, to get people to listen to the program? It is more likely to work the other way round since

the contest announcement is, after all, only a parasite on the entertainment feature. It does not require the ratiocination of a Sherlock Holmes to conclude that what the sponsor wants is sales.

And sales he gets by compelling entrants, through more or less subtle methods, to buy his product. True, this is a bit difficult to accomplish when the article is an automobile, but with the lower-priced consumers' goods it is comparatively easy. You cannot insist that answers be sent in on automobile tires, but you can demand cigar bands, empty tooth-paste cartons, or soap labels. All you need do to get by the Post Office regulations which bar from the mails, as lotteries, any contests requiring a consideration for entrance, is to add "or its facsimile" to your demand. Not many facsimiles will be submitted. Not only does it require time and skill to make one that is satisfactory, but there is the dislike of being considered a cheapskate and the fear that if the contestant doesn't show evidence of having bought the article, he will have small chance of winning. The essay type of contest makes a purchase doubly sure. Mrs. Smith will have to experiment with Venida Soapless Oil Shampoo before she can report, in a limited number of words, what it has done for her hair. Finally, you enlist the dealers. You may say that entrance blanks are obtainable at "your dealer's" or you may give the dealer a prize too if the prize winner has purchased your product at his shop.

And that sales are made is indisputable. The Camay Soap Contest brought in about one million soap wrappers; Cremo Cigars ran for seven months, at the rate of eight thousand entries a day, twenty cigar bands per entry. Dutch Masters Cigars Contest sold 1,530,000 cigars to 153,000 contestants. But the permanence of such sales-increases is another story. Companies

are coy about giving out definite figures. In a confidential statement prepared by the National Broadcasting Company, over half the companies reporting failed to state the number of contest responses. Even if a direct check were possible, they would be still more loathe to specify ultimate results. Admission of success might result in the sincerest flattery by competitors: admission of failure is not the practice of the average business man. It is noteworthy, however, that the holding of contests sometimes becomes as insidious as peanut eating. The A. W. Fitch Company has run a continuous contest since September, 1933, while General Mills follows one contest with another. Shots in the arm, however effective, frequently necessitate further shots.

## II

The cost of running a contest is terrific. The lavish prize money is the least of it. A contest with prizes totaling five thousand dollars cost thirty-five thousand to run. In another, more than fifteen thousand dollars was spent in sorting, reading and filing the 2,300,000 entries. The Jones Metal Stamping Company had to rent a loft, employ thirty-eight extra clerks, and borrow an executive and three assistants from its factory merely to handle the mail. It took another executive from the factory and eight additional stenographers to answer it. Not all mail consisted of contest entries: for in every contest, no matter how clearly stated the rules, there will be a mass of imbecilic inquiries ranging from "Must the answers really be posted by midnight next Saturday?" to "Is the contest a fake?" One broadcasting company, the day after a big contest opened, received fifty-four thousand inquiries by mail and twenty-seven hundred by telephone.

To judge their contest, The Jones Company employed five judges at a cost of three thousand dollars. At the end of the first month the sales increase was one hundred and thirty-two per cent, but the costs were out of all proportion to the rewards. Efficiency experts have not let such experiences go unnoted. The Pabstette Company boasts of having brought its cost down from ten dollars per entry at the beginning of a contest to fifteen cents at its conclusion; but this is still a high figure.

There are now specialists to meet the problems of contest sponsors and to save office staffs extra work. At least one firm is thoroughly equipped to handle contests from inception to conclusion, and many of the advertising agencies have special departments for the handling of contest mail. At its most efficient, however, the process of acknowledgment and handling still comes to six cents an entry.

Cost is not the only fly in the ointment. There is the potential creation of ill will which is almost incalculable. So few receive prizes: so many don't. Some of the many are disgruntled, and express their indignation. One early contest brought in its wake letters of complaint for a period of ten years. Deciding whether or not to give out the prize-winning answers is choosing between Scylla and Charybdis. If they are not reported, suspicion is aroused that the whole thing is a fake: if they are, someone is sure to say, "Now, wasn't mine better than that? Something's phoney." The name "dirty crook" is the mildest of the epithets hurled at the sponsor. One manufacturer received a letter from a father whose daughter, an honor student at college specializing in advertising, failed to win. The father announced that he was purchasing, in retaliation, the product of a competitor. Another irate loser not only declared that he would never buy another

one of the company's products, but swore he would not even deal in stores which carried them.

Worse than indignant letters are the lawsuits. These cases almost never get to court, usually being settled first, not because there is no defense but because they are nuisances. The only reason that there are not more suits—since they would seem to constitute a highly profitable racket—is that the type of person who goes in for contests usually not only has the ignorant's fear of going to law but lacks the cash to commence litigation. The indignation is there, none the less, though it may not be overt; it is doubtful whether sales even in the hundred thousands atone for the ill will contests can engender. How easy it is to fall into the "It wasn't fair" frame of mind is evidenced by the highly intelligent young man who, having won some kind of prize in a hundred and ten out of a hundred and twenty contests, caught himself thinking "There's something crooked about this," the few times he lost.

Some skeptics maintain that the advertising contest is an out-and-out racket, that prize-winning entries are pulled out of a hat. This, however, does not happen to be the case. Indeed, it is almost pitiful how honestly and meticulously contests are run. Not only would a dishonest contest subject itself to indefensible lawsuits, but even in contests murder will out. The magazine *Radio Art* exposed a contest for the most popular artist in which hundreds of ballots were given out to press agents on a preferred list. The contest was immediately stopped. The broadcasting companies, the Federal Radio Commission and the Post Office maintain stern surveillance over anything that might be a lottery. Advertising agencies and their clients must, in so widely publicized a scheme, keep themselves beyond reproach. Usually every entry is

acknowledged. Often the names are cut out of letters before they go to the judges.

The eighty or ninety per cent of the answers which never reach the judges are discarded by a clerical staff, for reasons within the terms of the contest: the entrant's name, or address, or both, have been omitted; he wrote Neb. instead of the name of his state in full; he omitted the name of his country; he wrote in pencil when the regulations clearly specified that he employ ink or a typewriter. Cruel though it may seem that thousands of hearts be broken in this cursory fashion, it is unlikely that many gems go by the board. Anyone unable to follow simple rules is unlikely to have a prize-winner's mentality.

Next a staff of trained workers, often schoolteachers or librarians, go over the material. They find many duplications, even multigraphed contributions. There will be some facetious, some dishonest—patent adults giving their ages as twelve or fourteen, offers to split with the judges, etc.—and some, though surprisingly few, obscene. Most are eliminated simply because they are platitudinous and commonplace. The remaining one or two per cent go to the judges.

How the final selection is made, obviously, depends upon the same human variables which determine what books are going to be published or what plays produced. The judge's mental slant and the state of his digestion both play their parts. And if, when two entries in a cigar contest seem to be of equal merit, and the prize goes to a traveling salesman rather than to a minister; or if, in a rural territory the distribution of the product is poor and the awards are made there rather than in a metropolitan district, who shall say that wish fulfillment and not undue pressure is the ultimate determinant?

### III

The probability of contestants of slightly more than average intelligence winning prizes is so great that there exists a large group of professional contest fans. About fifty thousand of them actually make a living by their winnings. One man, an unemployed actor, cashed in two thousand dollars in prizes in one year, and has since, in recognition of his talents, got a good job at a regular salary with an advertising agency. Another resigned from the staff of Columbia University because he found contesting more lucrative than teaching. A third, in Chicago, takes in ten thousand dollars a year. Others go in for contests as part-time work. A Texas housewife and a Cleveland sales executive reported considerable earnings, while a stenographer earned twenty-five thousand dollars in a few years. Such gluttons for punishment are these regular contestants that they compete among themselves, with a silver cup awarded annually for the winner of the most prizes. Opinion among them, however, is divided as to the advisability of such publicity. What they gain in glory they may lose in cash, by having their names too well known.

Not that the pursuit of contest gold is a business. No, indeed; it is a "pastime". The stamp of sportsmanship is put upon it by the annual selection of ten winners for an All-American Contest Team. Only the noblest motives inspire winners who submit their answers in other people's names. Do bearded men impersonate housewives, schoolteachers write as soldiers in the first person singular, or non-smokers praise cigarettes in a friend's name, because they are afraid that if they win too many contests they will be spotted? Not at all. In the best Rotarian tradition, such a use of stooges merely offers an opportunity for



service. "I believe that prize contesting is a means whereby the profits may render helpful service to others. I believe that for prize contesting to be of greatest value one must take his friends into silent partnership. I believe that in prize contesting one's life should be rich, expanding—an abundant life, giving to others while receiving from them." This is the creed suggested by one contestant who made good.

Like other professional groups, they have a literature of their own. *Contest Gold: An Authoritative Treatise on How to Win and How to Write Winning Contest Statements* and *The Complete Contest Manual* are included in their bibliography. They have their own trade journals; *Contest Magazine*, *Contest News*, and *Contest World*. These publications list current contests, give news of personalities in the contest world, report winners, print winning answers with analyses of why they won, and losing replies with criticisms of why they lost.

Editorial comments are illuminating, though often contradictory. In the same month the editor of one magazine urged contestants above all, to be sincere, and to study the product before they wrote about it; while an article in another stated with equal conviction that sincerity was a great mistake—since the product isn't perfect, as both the writer and the manufacturer know, the best thing is not to know too much about it, but to imagine the perfect product, idealize it, and write about that. One can hazard a guess as to which method was followed by the woman who won minor prizes in both Pabstette and Pyrex contests. In both cases the winning statement began, "The heart of any woman, anywhere, swells with pride as she beholds the last morsel of food she has prepared vanishing." In the Pabstette Contest, she found that it

was the delicious flavor of cheese which made her family eat so heartily; in the Pyrex contest it was because the food was cooked in a glass baking dish.

Contest-wise entrants go to all sorts of trouble to have their entries differ in wording, handwriting, signature and place. Sometimes they organize into groups and there are veritable syndicates of contest fans. Complete parts are exchanged, assembled with a note of individuality, and entered from different parts of the country. But over all this activity hangs a fine mist of idealism. The *Contest World* heads its editorial page in the March, 1935, issue, with the following effusion:

Dear Lord, in the battle that goes on  
through life,  
A courage to strive and to dare;  
And if I should win, let it be by the code,  
With my faith and my honor held high;  
And if I should lose, let me stand by the  
road,  
And cheer as the winners go by.

#### IV

The amount of time and energy expended by contest entrants is appalling. Where numerical odds can be fifty thousand to one, 49,999 individuals will obviously have wracked their brains in vain. Many of them will have gone to great lengths to find favor with the judges. Answers come in embroidered on quilts or pillows, set up in electrical displays, or bound in books of leather or even velvet and ermine. In a tooth paste contest words were listed on a paper strip emerging from a giant metal tube; in a coal contest, piles of coal were drawn with thousands of separate pieces, every piece containing a word. Those with a less whimsical turn of mind also consume many work hours. A list of twenty thousand words, so incorrect that it was discarded after the second page was read,

represented the labor of a week of fifteen-hour days. A fifty thousand word list used up thirty working days of eight hours each; and to be in at the finish the contestant would have needed seventeen thousand words more, or the equivalent of a hundred and two eight-hour days.

Many sponsors, too, feel that the contests they have held were a waste of time and money and that the same energy expended in other advertising schemes would have brought better results. True, through trial and error, a technique of holding contests has been worked out which, if followed, prevents them from being a total loss. The simpler the requirements, the better. Rules must be clearly stated, entries acknowledged, names of winners announced promptly, all letters answered, in order to forestall ill will. O.K.'s from the local post office should be obtained in advance and releases secured before the prize money is awarded. Throughout, there should be legal counsel. Many small prizes

are better than a few huge ones, because fifty dollars which will pay the doctor's bill seem more within the realm of possibility to Jim Smith than an income for life. For the same reason, short-term contests are preferable: a small prize next week is more alluring than a large one six months from now.

The fact, however, still remains that from the advertiser's point of view, the simple offer of a six cent premium or sample brings just as good a response as all the rigmarole, hullabaloo, and agonies of contests. Whether the latter are gaining or waning, whether they will be replaced by the simpler mechanism of offers, which have all their advantages and none of their disadvantages, is a moot point. It is generally admitted that contests are still flourishing but have about reached a plateau, though it is still too early to judge the general 1935 trend. Meanwhile, sponsors continue to expend untold energy, and entrants continue to waste untold hours of time.

# PERJURY IN THE COURTS

BY JOSEPH N. ULMAN

**B**UT why are you so angry about it, my dear? The man wanted to win his case, so he lied. Or maybe he didn't lie at all; he may have believed what he said. Anyhow, it's not a thing to get in a rage about. When you go on like that, I wonder whether it's because you love the truth or because you hate to have anything put over on you."

Thus the lady who keeps my judicial Jehovah complex in order and cannot be held in contempt of court. I had come home tired and much annoyed. The case on trial was a suit on an insurance policy and was full of close questions of law that taxed my powers all day. Late in the afternoon, the general agent of the company testified that the insured had failed to give a certain written notice within the time limited by the policy. This was a crucial point in the case; if his testimony was true, I should probably have to direct a verdict for the defendant. But on cross-examination this witness began to falter when asked searching questions about his own letters to the home office of the insurance company; and suddenly, cross-examining counsel played an unexpected trump. He called on the witness to hand over for examination at the trial table his whole correspondence file. There, neatly filed in its chronologically proper place, was the missing notice, bearing in lead-pencil the initials of the witness who had just said he never received it. So far there might have been a mistake, a lapse of

memory. But counsel followed up this find by producing from the same correspondence file not one, but three letters written by the witness; and in all three he had mentioned this very notice and discussed its importance and legal effect.

At that point the court blew up. I did not trust myself to preserve the dignity that is supposed to hedge me, and announced abruptly that there would be a short recess. Safe in the privacy of chambers, I paced the floor and swore. When enough steam had blown off to make it safe for others to be in the room, I sent for counsel and suggested that they might deem it wise during the evening to discuss settlement, adding that I was inclined to adjourn court for the day to give them a chance. The case was settled that night; and the plaintiff got every cent he claimed.

Such was the event responsible for my bad humor, an event not without precedent. I remembered that in the voluminous notes I take in court there frequently appears, diagonally across a page in large, bold letters the word LIAR. I remembered also that from time to time when a witness seems especially untruthful I am apt to take a hand in the examination and ask a few questions on my own account, trying hard to trip the witness up. And I remembered that lying witnesses always make me very angry, though I take it for granted that everywhere off the witness stand men lie whenever it suits their convenience. Is my moral fervor for the truth