

The Peripatetic Egg of 1961

“Imagine the surprise...”

What do you think would happen if you took a hard-boiled egg, wrote a message and an address on the shell, and took it to the U.S.P.S. and asked them to send it? Would the postmen accept the challenge? Would the “can-do” spirit embodied in the traditional postal creed that nothing “stays these couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds” apply? Six decades ago, that spirit prevailed.

It was late spring of 1961. I was a fresh graduate from Georgetown (TX) High School, newly arrived in Nashville (TN) to take my very first college level courses in summer school at Vanderbilt University. My parents were moving to Nashville later in the summer, my father having accepted a new position as Dean of Vanderbilt Divinity School.

Shortly after arriving Nashville, I contacted Brian Wicke, a friend from Georgetown. Brian’s family had just moved to Nashville, his father being the new Assistant General Secretary of the Division of Higher Education of the United Methodist Church. Brian and I quickly renewed our friendship, but we did not have a lot of time to spend together, for Brian was soon traveling out to UC Berkeley with his father, who had a summer teaching contract there.

Before Brian left, we promised to stay in touch by mail, which, as shall be seen, we certainly did. In fact Brian wrote me a letter while on the plane flying out to California. He had a small portable typewriter with him, and banged out his missive using an air sickness bag as stationery. A stewardess (as they were then called) offered him a sheet of paper, but he happily declined. *Imagine my surprise* when I received a letter in an envelope with a strange squishy feel to it.

And thus began an exchange of goofy letters that lasted throughout the summer. Brian adopted an alias for his return address “Wickethorpe Brian”. I never knew where the “thorpe” business came from—or its significance, if there was any-- but happily addressed letters to his chosen new moniker. I do not remember the content of any of our letters, but I know they were goofy, probably inane. My specialty was to address letters to Wickethorpe Brian in extremely ornate hand-inked lettering, mostly copied off of Confederate States paper money which I was avidly collecting during the centenary of the beginning of the War Between the States.

As the summer wore on, I developed the urge to concoct a letter to Wickethorpe Brian that would top his barf bag stunt. Whatever I sent would have to be good to

eclipse his first missive! And I wanted it to be something that he was unlikely to out-do. I pondered possibilities until I had an inspiration: I would hard boil an egg, and would mail it to Brian, unwrapped, with a message on it!

And so, on Aug. 3rd, I took my boiled egg down to the main Nashville post office, a sprawling FDR-era behemoth (now the Frist Art Museum) to put my message on it and get it in the mail surreptitiously. Addressing the egg and writing the message proved challenging: the boiled egg had been in the refrigerator and in the warm humid summer air it began sweating and the ink tended to run. But I got it done.

Space was limited (and I had to leave room for stamps), so I addressed it to just "Brian W. T." at his Berkeley address. And I inscribed it with the following message:

"Judgment by the Gods:
Arriving whole, you are a good egg;
Arriving broken, you're cracked;
Not arriving, U.S. postmen are poor sports."

The final line was, I hoped, the goad that would get the post office to actually send the egg on its way.

Next I weighed the egg on a handy scale set out on a writing table for the use of postal patrons. Three ounces: 12 cents worth of postage needed. I went to a nearby postal clerk's window and purchased two 6-cent stamps.

After affixing the stamps and waiting long enough for the egg to finally cease to sweat (I feared the stamps might not stick), I found an unattended clerk's window. Here I placed the egg on the greenish-black serpentine topped counter, carefully nestling it against some object so that it would not roll away and smash onto the floor, and walked briskly away and out the door back into the summer heat. Obviously, these were the days before constant video surveillance!

Imagine my surprise when the next day's issue of the Nashville Tennessean carried a photo of postmaster Lewis Moore examining the egg, and describing its message. Postmaster Moore declared that his postmen certainly were *not* poor sports. The egg, unwrapped, was in the postal system, on its way to Berkeley. My goad had worked! And I enjoyed being described as "an unidentified Nashvillian with a good sense of humor."

So far so good, all according to plan. Unfortunately, Brian was no longer in Berkeley. In an earlier, more conventional, letter I had asked him when was he returning to Nashville, but he had not answered my query. Unbeknownst to me,

Egg in the Mails Fails To Daunt Post Office

An unidentified Nashvillian with a good sense of humor mailed an egg to California yesterday.

It was hardboiled — the egg, that is.

Two 6-cent stamps — first class mail, no less — were glued to the thin, white shell.

And there was this message:

"Judgment by the gods: arriving whole, you are a good egg; broken, you're cracked; not arriving, U.S. postmen are poor sports."

Postmaster Lewis Moore promptly declared his postmen are certainly not poor sports.

He hand-canceled the delicate "package" and tossed it into a mailbag, bound for a 2-day trip to the home of W. T. Brian, 2820 Buna Vista, Berkeley, Calif. There was no return address on the egg.

The 3-ounce egg was dropped in a mail box somewhere in the Nashville area yesterday. It was discovered later by a clerk at the post office.

"I've never seen anything like it come through before," said Moore.

And neither had anyone else.



—Staff photo by Joe Rudis

The hen that laid this egg never dreamed it would be stamped and sent through the mails. Neither did Postmaster Lewis Moore, who gets a close look at the "package."

MYSTERY DEEPENS

His Egg Pulling Postman's Leg

BERKELEY, Calif. (AP)—The latest episode in the saga of the egg, which has baffled postmen from here to Nashville, Tenn., involves a mystery man named Finch and a poet who is no egghead.

The egg—unwrapped and hard-boiled—was mailed Aug. 4 from Nashville to a Berkeley address.

But Berkeley Postmaster Frank Spires discovered when the egg arrived Sunday that W. T. Brian, to whom the egg was addressed, apparently moved, leaving a Nashville forwarding address.

Sadly commenting that "it's too much to ask of an egg," Spires forwarded it on to Nashville Monday. Soon after the egg rolled out of the Berkeley Post Office, Nashville said the forwarding address was fictitious.

Nashville postal authorities were trying to find out who sent the egg.

Then Spires received a letter, giving W. T. Brian's fictitious Nashville forwarding address but airmailed from Anaheim, Calif. Aug. 6.

The letter named, in non-egg-head doggerel, one Richard Finch, Box 1171, Station B, Nashville, as the original sender of the egg.

Titled "I want my egg," the letter read in part:

"It seems I got 'bout all I need 'cept for an egg which I need indeed. A guy named Finch back in Tennessee is the guy who sent the egg to me.

"Thanks again for your kind favor. I am sorry for the trouble and Finch's behavior."

The letter was signed: "Wicke Thorpe Brian."

Neighbors at Brian's Berkeley address said Brian might be a student who was occupying the home during the absence of J. P. Carter, a University of California employe now on vacation. But the University said they had no attendance record for a W. T. Brian.



—Associated Press Wirephoto.

Postmaster Spires and egg.

Brian was now touring California with his family. And while they were in Anaheim to visit Disneyland, he was perusing a local newspaper when he read a strange article about someone sending a boiled egg, unwrapped, through the mail. *Imagine Brian's surprise* when he read that the egg had been sent to his alias at the address he had just vacated a few days earlier! [As we soon learned, stories about the peripatetic egg were appearing in newspapers all over the U. S...and elsewhere.] The egg, of course, carried no return address, but Berkeley postmaster Frank Spires found a forwarding address for "W. T. Brian" and started the egg en route back to Nashville.

Note that the egg, completely unpackaged, had reached Berkeley intact, not cracked. But fearing it might get broken, Spires packaged the egg in a box before putting it back in the mail. And guess what—looking like an ordinary package, it did not get the careful handling the naked egg had received on its westward journey. It arrived back in Nashville cracked!

So what did Brian do when he read about the egg addressed to his alias in Berkeley? He sent postmaster Spires a letter explaining, via poetry, that the egg was his and he wanted it back. Here's the key line of Brian's doggerel:

"It seems I got everything I need, 'cept an egg which I need indeed.
A guy named Finch back in Tennessee is the guy who sent the egg to me."

He also included my name and Vanderbilt post office address.

Of course, none of this was known to me, until one morning when someone knocked on my dorm room door and told me I was wanted on the phone down the hall. *Imagine my surprise* (and chagrin) when I found myself talking to a reporter who wanted to know if I was the guy who mailed the egg. I denied it at first, but soon saw he had the goods on me, so I admitted culpability, but refused to tell him anything about Brian, myself or our families. I wasn't sure how Dr. Wicke would react to this kind of undignified publicity, but I was pretty sure that my father, having just taken on his new position at Vanderbilt, would not be enthusiastic. Fortunately, both my parents happened to be in Oslo, Norway, attending the Tenth World Methodist Conference. By the time they returned to Nashville, this egg thing will have blown over...or so I thought. If I got really lucky, they might not even find out about it.

As it happened, several articles about the egg appeared in the Stars and Stripes (the US Armed Forces overseas newspaper), and someone at the Methodist conference in Oslo read one of these news stories and proceeded to show it to my parents! *Imagine their surprise.*

The egg arrived back in Nashville before the Wicke family did. Dr. Wicke's secretary, who had been picking up their mail, received a notice informing her that

Gentle Postmen Deliver Hard-Boiled Egg Softly

By SARAH TAYLOR

Nashville's vagabond hard-boiled egg, slightly cracked, arrived by return mail from California yesterday, and the mystery that had intrigued postmen for days was solved.

A series of events, involving bad timing, fictitious names and puzzled postmen, had scrambled what started as a boyish prank into a hilarious mix-up which received nation-wide publicity.

The egg, bearing two 6-cent stamps, was mailed from Nashville Aug. 3. It was addressed to W. T. Brian, 2820 Buna Vista, Berkeley, Calif., and carried this message: "Judgement by the gods: arriving whole, you are a good egg; broken, you're cracked; not arriving, U.S. postmen are p or sports."

There was no return address on the egg.

POSTMEN ROSE to the challenge and proved their sportsmanship by getting the fragile "package" to California undamaged.

But the Berkeley post office was unable to locate a W. T. Brian.

Then Richard Finch, 18, son of William C. Finch, dean of the Vanderbilt University Divinity School, was revealed as the sender of the egg, by a letter received by the Berkeley post office.

Titled "I want my egg," the letter gave a forwarding address for it, and pinpointed Finch as the original sender. The letter was signed "Wickethorpe Brian." Yesterday the identity of "Wickethorpe Brian" was revealed. He is Brian Wicke, 17, son of Dr. and Mrs. Myron Wicke, 727 Davidson Road.

Dr. Wicke, associate general secretary of the Methodist Board of Education, had gone to Berkeley to teach at the University of California for six



—Staff photo by Eldred Reaney
Mrs. Marshall Pentecost directs a perplexed look at the hard-boiled egg that arrived in the mail yesterday.

weeks. He took Brian with him, while Brian's twin brother Alan stayed home with their mother.

THE WICKE TWINS had known Richard Finch in Texas at Southwestern University, where Dr. Wicke taught and Dr. Finch was president. Both families recently moved to Nashville.

Richard mailed the egg to Brian in California as a prank. But he discovered — too late — that Mrs. Wicke and Alan had driven to California to pick up

Dr. Wicke and Brian. The family began the return trip to Nashville the same day Richard mailed the egg.

During the family's absence, Dr. Wicke's secretary, Mrs. Marshall Pentecost, has been picking up their mail and keeping an eye on their home. Yesterday she went to the post office to pick up a large batch of mail—and discovered the wandering egg among it.

"The egg is now in Brian's refrigerator at home, waiting for him," Mrs. Pentecost said.

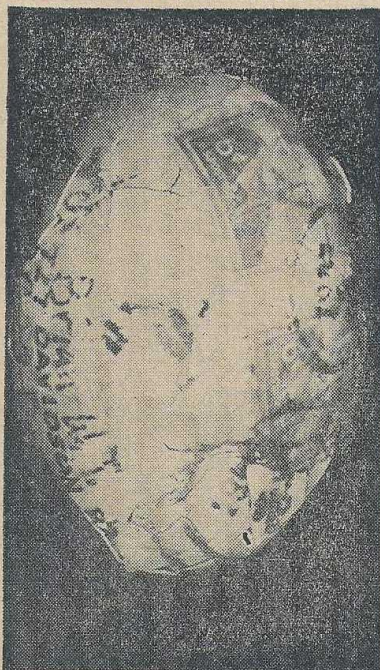
Strolling With Eldon Roark

Famous Egg Visiting Memphis

We have a distinguished visitor at our house, sitting on top of the piano—the world's best known egg!

Next week it will be seen on exhibit at The Eldon Roark Museum of Unnatural History at the Mid-South Fair.

Stories about this egg were carried by the wire press associations and were printed in papers all over the country a



few weeks ago. This egg had done something no other egg had ever done.

It traveled by regular mail all the way across the country — U N - WRAPPED, U N - PACKED — and didn't get broken!

Perhaps you remember reading about it.

Richard Carrington Finch, 18, college freshman, and Brian Garfield Wicke, 17, high-school senior, both of Nashville, are very good friends. They kid each other a lot.

Brian went to Berkeley, Cal., this summer to go to school, and he and Richard carried on a lively correspondence. In August Richard thought up a little gag. He got a hard boiled egg and addressed it

THE EGG — The only one that ever made such a trip.

to Brian. He also wrote on the shell: "Judgment by the gods: Arriving whole, you are a good egg; broken you are cracked; not arriving, U. S. postmen are poor sports."

Then he stuck two six-cent stamps on the shell, and carefully dropped the egg into a mailbox. He did not put his name and return address on the shell.

Arrives Safely!

Postal clerks went along with the joke. They handled that egg gingerly all the way from Nashville to Berkeley, Cal. It arrived unbroken.

Brian, however, left Berkeley before it arrived—left to return home. While in Los Angeles, en route, he read in the paper about the unpacked egg that had been sent to him by his pal, Richard. So he wrote to the post office at Berkeley, about the egg, and explained that it had been sent by his friend Richard, and gave them Richard's Nashville address.

A clerk in the Berkeley post office then packed the egg and returned it to the sender.

And that time in crossing the country, the egg was broken! How 'bout that? Isn't that sump'n?

The egg makes the trip to California without mishap UNPACKED, and then gets cracked while packed for safe transit on the return!

Richard and Brian were amazed at the publicity their egg received. Richard had no thought of making a funny newspaper story when he conceived the idea of mailing an unwrapped egg. He was thinking merely in terms of a little private joke between him and Brian.

Anyway, no other egg has ever made a trip in such a manner.

Altho the shell is cracked, the egg is still in one piece.

I asked Richard and Brian if they would lend me the egg to exhibit at the Fair. They agreed to let me have it, after they had treated it with a preservative to keep it from getting too smelly.

I have it now, and it is a splendid oddity for my Museum of Unnatural History.

she needed to come in and pick up a package. When she arrived at the post office the postal officials stalled for time until a reporter could arrive to record the moment when she received the unusual package. As it turned out, she had missed the news stories and knew nothing about the egg. *Imagine her surprise.* Caught off guard, she told the reporter all about Brian and me and our respective families. More unwanted publicity.

Were the travels of the peripatetic egg finally at an end? They were not. Not long after the Wickes returned to Nashville a letter arrived from Eldon Roark, a well-known columnist for the Memphis Press-Scimitar, asking us to lend him egg for display in the Eldon Roark Museum of Unnatural History at the up-coming Mid-South Fair! *Imagine Brian's and my mutual surprise* at this turn of events. And so the famous egg, re-packaged (and shellacked to help preserve it in spite of its cracked shell) traveled to Memphis where it was viewed by who knows how many fair-goers. Roark eventually returned the egg to us --its final trip in the mail-- but by the time it got back to Nashville it was covered in fuzzy black mold. We had to dispose of it. I hope we gave it a decent burial, but I don't remember.

Several years later, I happened to read a news article stating that someone had attempted to mail an unwrapped hard-boiled egg. The post office refused to send it. It did not fit the new postal regulations regarding size and shape of packages. Evidently the peripatetic egg of 1961 had left a lasting legacy! *Imagine my surprise.*

--Ric Finch, Oct. 2023