

Chapter 1

A Brief History of The American Cryptogram Association

The American Cryptogram Association was organized originally to place the "cryptogram" on an equivalent basis with chess, thus contributing to the happiness of mankind. It has grown to encompass many phases of cryptography, using both pencils and paper and computers.

During the 1920s, *Detective Fiction Weekly* had a feature on cryptography by M. E. Ohaver. Dr. C. B. Warner and some friends were attracted by the technical aspects of this as a hobby and joined to form the American Cryptogram Association on September 1, 1929. The ACA was at first concerned only with what we now call mono-alphabetic substitution ciphers, termed by them "The Aristocrat of Puzzles".

Meanwhile, in Burton, Ohio, George Lamb ran the "Secret Corner" in the local newspaper. He read Ohaver's column and was also a member of the National Puzzler's League (NPL). The ACA inherited the idea of using noms-de-plume, noms, as a means of bringing equality – or at least anonymity – to their cipher-solving from the NPL. Lamb chose **DAMONOMAD** as his nom and became known as **DAMON**. He too was concentrating on Aristocrats. With the demand for his column increasing, he and Warner agreed to publish a magazine which would be the official journal of the ACA. It was to be named *The Cryptogram*. The first issue appeared in February, 1932. The ACA now has members all over the world, and *The Cryptogram* has grown to a 32-page bimonthly journal with six major departments.

In 1933, "The Master Puzzler" was published and contained the name of Helen Fouché Gaines under the nom of **PICCOLA**. Her major interests were in ciphers – various systems of disguising text aside from the Simple Substitution. Her first article appeared in *The Cryptogram* in December 1933, and was followed by the opening of the "Cipher Exchange" in that issue. In August 1933 the "Foreign Cryptogram Department", now known as "Xenocrypts", appeared in *The Cryptogram*.

In 1936, interest having grown in ciphers and methods of breaking them, it was suggested that the ACA publish a textbook. The contents would be taken from the "Round Robin" lessons that had been a major method of spreading information and practice among members with additional material from foreign sources and hard-to-find books. With help from many volunteers, *Elementary Cryptanalysis (Elcy)* appeared for the first time in 1939, under the editorship of Helen Fouché Gaines. The book was also dedicated to George Lamb, who died before it appeared in print. PICCOLA died soon after. *Elcy* was the first book of its kind to appear in English and was reprinted by Dover in 1956 under the title *Cryptanalysis*. It remains a standard text to this day. The ACA has since published many other booklets on specialized subjects. Each was produced by volunteers among our members.

In 1982 a regular "Computer Column" was started. In deference to those who do not possess computers, only hints and suggestions for enciphering and deciphering but not fully developed programs are published in this column. In 1986, a Computer Supplement was published; it contained more information on computer activities. Lack of involvement from interested members led to the dissolution of this publication. At the present time, archived copies of the computer supplement can be found at http://www.cryptogram.org/computer_supplements/

Cryptography has been more than merely an entertainment for the enjoyment of ingenuity. It engages the mind fully and can provide a healthy period of work for those unable to do much else. George Lamb was confined to a wheelchair, and the world of cryptography opened its content as well as its friendships to him. So captivating are the efforts required in grappling with a problem, it can become a harmless addiction – a passion.

A member reminded us once that it's a nice hobby in that it can be enjoyed with no more equipment than a pencil, an eraser, paper, and little expense beyond postage and a membership in the ACA which includes a subscription to *The Cryptogram*.

The ACA is a non-profit organization devoted to the dissemination of cryptographic knowledge. There are few limits on membership. Officers receive no reward for service other than the joy of promoting cryptography.

Cryptographers are diversified in every way. Hardly a trade or profession has missed representation among us. Age is not a factor; we have had members under 10 and over 90. Formal education seems totally unrelated to the curious talent. The use of noms brings a degree of anonymity to the members; only cryptography counts. We are banded together in an organization which represents everyone with these aims: to gain the most from a study of cryptograms, to form worthwhile friendships, and to pass on the knowledge we have been able to add to the Art.

Once a year members and friends, experts and novices, gather at the ACA Convention. Many meet for the first time, although they may be old friends by mail or email. New enthusiasm is generated for the hobby as mutual help is given and experience is shared.