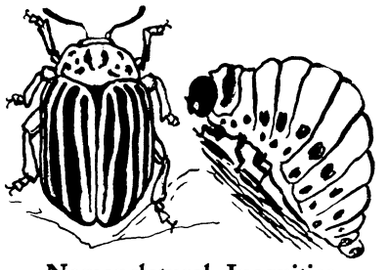
BIOLOGY

NATURE RAMBLINGS

by Frank Thone



Nomenclatural Inequities

ISN'T IT odd, how particular countries and regions get the credit for good things, and the blame for ill, that they never provided!

Quite familiar, of course, are the facts that Irish potatoes did not originate in Ireland, and that turkeys are not Turkish. Neither did Guinea pigs come from Guinea, which is in Africa. They came from South America. Similarly, English walnuts started their career not in England but in Persia. Panama hats are not straw hats from Panama; they come from Ecuador and are made of split palm leaves.

Perhaps, however, geographical misnomers are most frequent on the debit side of the ledger. We are always ready to blame the wicked foreigner for our misfortunes — never mind if it happens to be the wrong foreigner.

The Dutch elm disease, that threatens all the elms in the eastern United States, emphatically did not originate in the Netherlands. It was merely first observed there, shortly after the first World War. It did not even come to this country from the Netherlands, but in a shipment of elm veneer logs, probably from France. The disease itself may have come from Asia; nobody knows for sure.

Colorado bears, probably forever, the injustice of name-responsibility for the striped potato beetle. Actually, the pest has its home in Mexico, feeding on wild relatives of the potato. When large-scale potato cultivation was begun in Colorado, 50 or 60 years ago, this Mexican beetle just took advantage of the new source of easy and abundant food, and then spread eastward from its adopted state.

The Mormon cricket is native in the West where the Mormons settled. But surely these pioneers are treated unjustly when the insect that several times menaced them with dire famine is given the folk-name of their church. It somehow does not seem right that victims of a pest should be made its sponsors.

How Spanish influenza came to be named is hard to guess. Certainly the disease did not originate in Spain. It raged there during the first World War, but it was just as bad, and maybe worse, in a dozen other countries.

Similarly, the Germans, whatever their other sins, did not invent German measles. Incidentally, it was just about the nadir of pseudo-patriotic silliness when an effort was made, 22 years ago, to rename this disease "Liberty measles!"

There may be some trace of partial justice in the name of the Norway rat. This brazen-mannered pest is not native to Norway, to be sure, but it is not improbable that it got to Europe from its original home (wherever that may be) in the world-ranging ships of the Vikings' descendants.

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ASTRONOMY

War Prevents Celebration Of Copernicus Anniversary

First Account of Heliocentric Theory Published In 1540; Another Celebration Possible in 1943

WERE it not for the war, scientists in Germany, Poland and other European countries might this year be celebrating an important anniversary.

Just four hundred years ago first public announcement was made of the theory propounded by Nicholas Copernicus—that the earth revolves about the sun.

During the summer of 1540 a 26-year-old scholar from the University of Wittenberg, Georg Joachim Rheticus, as he called himself, was in the middle of an extended visit to Copernicus, canon of the Roman Catholic cathedral at Frauenberg, in East Prussia.

At that time it was generally believed the earth was fixed, that the sun and the planets revolved about it as a center. While Aristarchus, a Greek who lived several centuries before Christ, had made the suggestion that the earth, and the other planets, circled the sun, this idea had been rejected. But the studies of Copernicus led him to believe this would give a much better explanation of the motions he observed in the sky. So radical was this theory that he hesitated for a long time in announcing it, although several copies of a hand-written account, prepared perhaps as early as 1512, had been circulated among astronomers.

In order to learn more about these ideas, Rheticus decided to go to headquarters, so in 1539 he was received cordially by Copernicus. As he promised, he sent his old Nuremberg teacher, John Schoener, an account of the new ideas. This was published at Danzig in 1540, and was the first announcement of the Copernican theory. Today it is one of the rarest of scientific first editions.

Because of the favorable response accorded to the "Narratio Prima," or "First Account," as this book is called, Copernicus finally decided to publish his own book. The manuscript was entrusted to Rheticus, who ended his visit in 1541, and after some delays, it was published in Nuremberg in 1543, entitled "De Revolutionibus Orbium Coelestium," or "On the Revolutions of the Celestial Orbs." By this time its author, 70 years of age, was ill, and one of the first copies was placed in his hands the day he died. In this book was presented a carefully worked-out theory, and from it came, eventually, the complete acceptance of the fact that the earth moves.

Despite its great importance, Copernicus' book has never been published in an English translation, though one of the "First Account," and also of the "Commentariolus," the manuscript account, has been made by Edward Rosen, and issued recently by the Columbia University Press. In the preface, Mr. Rosen announces his plan to translate "De Revolutionibus" by 1943, the fourth centenary of its original appearance. Perhaps, by that time, a more peaceful world will be able to have a fitting celebration of the anniversary of this great event in scientific history.

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Yellow *traps* attract about 50% more Japanese beetles than green and white traps, scientists have discovered.