

The Perpetual Motion Machine

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His identity was a true question mark -- nominally, physically, and behaviorally and in bodily shape. In profile, his bent frame displayed that rounded form of punctuation by curving down to his knees, below which his legs extended straight to the ground. The point at the bottom of the question mark consisted of large black hightop shoes -- clodhoppers, we called them -- which he wore all seasons, along with his woolen mackinaw. It was inconceivable how he maintained any degree of comfort on hot summer days, when my friends and I enjoyed the minimal clothing acceptable. His behavior, while unusual, ranked him as one of the more benign figures among the many local characters who inhabited our particular town and most towns of mid-century America. Other characters who enhanced local color included Delroy Terwilliger, a gentle neighborhood drunk, who could be seen almost daily tottering along the sidewalks and pathways to and from his sister's house. That saintly soul tried her best to protect him from the vicissitudes of small-town life, including prankful youths. When called to a pre-induction physical for the army in World War II, Delroy attributed his test failure to "more applejack than blood in my veins," with his distinctive guffaws.

Albert Ball, slight of frame but with an intrepid stride, always carried an empty tin can in his right rear trousers pocket. It was about the size of a small Campbell's soup can. He took seasonal employment in the local canneries where the favorite prank was to fill his can with various fluids and watch him slosh them around while performing his chores. Ah the days of such innocent fun.

Bert Bushman was a swaggering figure on Main Street where, in response to any greeting, he would say "Oh, bullshit." So, of course, he received many salutations, from young and old alike, whether they knew him or not.

But our enigmatic hero, the walking, breathing question mark had a special place in the constellation of folk figures. But just who was he - what was his true identity? He was known as "Professor Rhone," "Old Man Rhone," and "Crackpot Rhone," the particular descriptor depending on one's attitude toward him. My respectful mother used "professor," if partly in jest. My dad and my high school physics teacher, Frank Brink, used "crackpot"-- and regarding "Old Man Rhone," he certainly seemed ancient to my youthful eyes -- at least 60 years of age.

He was a regular figure walking slowly around the east end of town. I knew generally where he lived, about a block away from our house. There were several multigenerational households, one of which harbored him. Though his bent frame and overall scraggly appearance produced an ominous image to a young lad, he would give a cheerful, cackling "hello" whenever I was close, and I would reply in kind. If alone, I gave a courteous greeting, but with other boys I might tend toward mild ridicule or sarcasm. Most of my friends thought him quite a weird figure. In fact, had he donned a long fright wig and broom stick, he could have seemed a spine-tingling halloween witch.

Professor Rhone's claim to local notoriety was as the inventor of a perpetual motion machine. It was well known around town that he spent most of his waking hours working to perfect the apparatus. It all carried a bit of mystery and some degree of

anticipation in young minds about the prospects of such an invention being real and functional. As we progressed through the grades at school and studied rudimentary science, we learned that the search for a machine that consumed no energy -- like the alchemist's gold -- was, over the centuries, a goal of many serious thinkers and eccentrics alike. Which was Professor Rhone?

One summer day when I was about eleven years old, the great opportunity came. Phil, Wally and I were leaving Burnet's Esso station, a local hangout, just as Professor Rhone was passing by. After the typical greetings, he approached and we backed away slightly. But his friendly gap-toothed smile reassured us, and he asked if we would like to visit his laboratory. I don't recall laboratory being the term he used -- probably it was his workshop.

With his face just a few feet from mine, it was the first time that I had had the opportunity to see him up close. A weathered face featured a prominent down turned nose, thin lips, a scraggle of whiskers, and, completing this countenance, crystal blue eyes. Those surprised me and seemed completely out of place in that mysterious face. I can see those eyes to this day. They were bright, clear, gentle and probing. They certainly seemed the eyes of intelligent inquiry. His face was the same height as mine and I could look directly into the depths of those azure pools. I was embarrassed when he seemed to be conscious of my examining stare.

"Would you like to see my invention"? he crackled. "Sure," I exclaimed before Phil and Wally could respond. They seemed somewhat less eager -- even hesitant -- maybe even a little afraid. Professor Rhone began shuffling toward nearby Seventh Street and I slowly followed. Phil and Wally reluctantly joined the parade. It must have been quite a sight, the snail-like pace of the professor in full coat, clodhoppers and hat followed by a trio of youths dressed in shirt sleeves and short pants.

Seventh Street was one of the lesser streets in town; in fact, it was like a wide alley. One side was the burned-out furniture factory set in a disarray of sumac trees and horse weeds. The other side was lined by a string of garages which were in the backyards of houses which faced on Berwick Road. That segment of U.S. Route 11, at some time past, had veered northeast off the typical cartesian grid on which the town was originally laid out. Route 11 became an important street, and Seventh was relegated to alley status.

Seventh Street and the garages were in equal states of disrepair, characteristic of many places that received little maintenance during the Great Depression of the 1930s. Our odd quartet stopped at one of these garages. It was the professor's laboratory. The gable roof had worn, curled asphalt shingles. Walls of tattered wood siding bore peeling faded yellow paint. The entire message emanating from this shack, big enough to lodge one Model A Ford, was that a good wind would collapse it into a pile of kindling.

Professor Rhone unlatched the twin, hinged front doors of the garage and slowly urged one panel open. Remarkably, as heat rushed out of the closed-up space, there was no lock. I stared inside with great expectation. Phil and Wally still hung back. I was captivated. There it was, a complex assemblage of wheels, gears and levers. It seemed a jumble of odd pieces of machinery, gained from junk yards and old factories. The professor opened the other garage door to allow more light to flood in. The amorphous mass took on more defining detail. It was principally black in color with highlights of

chrome and polished brass which sparkled in the sunlight. Grease and oil were dabbed here and there. Though at rest it had a certain kinetic aesthetic. In my mind now I can picture it in the Museum of Modern Art -- or in a Rube Goldberg cartoon.

I walked around and around the contraption in genuine awe, wondering what it could do. Would it work? World War II was raging. I had been following the conflict in Life Magazine and the two newspapers which entered our house every day. One older brother was in the military, and another was soon to follow. My mind was racing with all the applications of a perpetual motion machine -- ships that would run forever without need of fuel, giant army tanks, new fearsome weapons. But would it work? Phil and Wally cautiously explored the strange creature. Wally's father was a respected automobile mechanic and I had frequently seen those budding attributes in the son. Wally loved cars and was frequently tinkering with them. He appeared both fascinated and skeptical of the monster was about the size of a small sedan.

Professor Rhone circled his Frankenstein, affectionately patting a wheel here, examining a gear there, fondling a lever elsewhere. It was truly a labor of love. It seemed to my young memory that he had been working on this project forever. I had known of the machine for much of my life. It was a town curiosity. It was simply known that this unusual man was working to perfect this unusual machine. Opinions were widely varied about the prospects for success. Now here I was face to face with the controversial contraption and its inventor. But did it work?

The professor cackled with delight. His eyes sparkled: "This invention will heat and light cities. It will help families live better. It will keep children warm and help them learn in school." His earnestness was clarion clear. He believed in his machine, with a mixture of idealism, practicality and romance.

Mr. Rhone stopped at one corner and grasped a shining lever with frail hands. Summoning all his strength, he gave it a pull and things began happening. Gears engaged, wheels turned, counterweights went up and down. It worked! There seemed to be a fine balance of elements helping each other into motion. Professor Rhone stood back and gazed with admiration. My mouth hung open in awe. Things continued to move. My young mind, of less than moderate scientific development, was quite impressed. Was I viewing history in the making? For what seemed like half an hour, the machine labored and cranked and whizzed. Probably the duration was more like four or five minutes. When, at about that same time in my life, I read of the Wright Brothers first powered flight of just twelve seconds, I knew that the professor's perpetual motion machine had at least run longer than that.

After the few minutes of motion, the machine gradually lost energy and stopped. Rather than looking disappointed, Professor Rhone was beaming. His blue eyes sparkled even more than before. "You see boys, my invention works" he exuded. "There are still a few adjustments to make and then it will continue in motion. I'm considering using electricity to improve the operation." That burst the bubble for me. I knew enough about energy that using an outside source would not constitute perpetual motion. I was extremely disappointed. My hopes had been that Professor Rhone's machine would be a success and that I would be an encouraging observer. We three boys quietly left the

garage as the inventor shuffled around his baby seemingly to be affectionately congratulating it on its performance.

Thinking back on the unlocked door to the workshop, I am amazed that he would not be concerned about theft or mischief. Of course, most doors in town were rarely locked, and indeed concepts of mischief have changed in the past half century. The other issue is the possibility of a child being injured while tinkering. But, in a small town with few lawyers, it was -- let the tinkerer beware.

That evening at supper, I related my experience. My dad and older siblings scoffed at the whole notion of perpetual motion. My mother was more sympathetic with the old man whom she frequently saw walking around the neighborhood. Her favorite summertime recreation, between numerous household chores, was sitting on the front porch swing, observing local activity and chatting with neighbors and passersby. She knew all of the characters and rarely had an unkind word for any of them. Whether or not Professor Rhone's machinery ever succeeded was of little concern to her. He himself was the topic of interest. She speculated on his past and his motivations - and his real identity.

A few years later in Frank Brink's high school physics class during a discussion of basic machines, he took the opportunity to chastise Rhone and his contraption -- in a too churlish manner, I thought. I was mildly offended at the rebuke of my friend. "Friend" is a strange term here. That brief encounter on a lazy summer day was my last actual contact. There was the occasional "hello" as we passed on the street. I walked near the old garage on Seventh Street periodically hoping to see the doors open -- but to no avail.

To most people, he was indeed a crackpot. I saw in that unhandsome face with the sparkling blue eyes, the idealism that is the better part of humankind. There is no doubt that he truly wished to improve the world through his invention -- as millions of inventors and scientists through history have been so dedicated. The pragmatic truth is that most inventions fail to achieve the high hopes of their creators. Most research produces little of historic significance. But the incremental developments and thousand-in-one breakthroughs have dramatic effects. The human drive to make things better continues to endure in most of us. For every Thomas Edison there are armies of Professor Rhones. I was too young to mow words like metaphor and symbolism, but looking back, that experience made such an impression because it was more than a machine. It was all about striving for improvement - of oneself and of surrounding society. Personal gain was less important than the satisfaction of accomplishment. The criticism of others was to be endured as we strive toward what we believed to be worthwhile goals. Let's hope that human curiosity and invention remain among the stimuli for living, and continue as identifying characteristics of us all.
