

COLLEGE TIME TROUBLES

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IN THE sum total of loss and waste which results from the irregularities of the Gregorian calendar, there is one group of items which is ordinarily overlooked, but which certainly bulks very large in the aggregate. This is the host of trivial annoyances that calendar irregularities cause in the daily life of the individual. This group bulks large because it involves so many millions of people and because it occurs practically every day. Trivial in themselves, these annoyances are multiplied so many times that it would be folly to ignore them.

In this article, then, I propose to talk about trivial matters. But I maintain that they are important by reason of their very frequent occurrence.

Let us take, for example, an incident selected haphazardly out of my memory—a sample of personal inconvenience from our antique calendar.

On June 1, 1938, I was in New York City for the purpose of receiving a degree from Columbia University. The conferring of degrees at Columbia has taken place in past years on a Tuesday, so I naturally figured that the same procedure would hold good in 1938. I made my plans for an extended trip immediately after the exercises and my plans involved advance preparation of transportation and hotel accommodations. Then I suddenly learned that two calendar traditions had clashed. The University exercises, by unwritten law, must come in June, but in 1938 June did not begin until Wednesday. Therefore the Tuesday tradition was discarded and the exercises took place a day later. My vacation plans were thrown into turmoil and I was detained in New York by an unanticipated 24 hours and some very difficult rearrangements had to be made.

It was purely a personal matter and one of no importance to the world at large. But to me it was a great inconvenience, an inconvenience due entirely to the fact that our modern world is still using an antiquated calendar that has refused to yield to the intellectual revival of the Renaissance, the Reformation and the Industrial Revolution.

It was this occurrence that led me to devote a part of my summer to an inquiry of the calendar. I questioned many people whom I met, people in all walks of life. I found that some of them had never before been really aware of the irregularities of the calendar but that when the matter was called to their attention they were able to recollect ways in which they had been personally inconvenienced. They were almost unanimous in agreeing that our less than modern calendar interfered frequently with the otherwise ordered routine of their lives.

College students and professors are particularly receptive to the idea of calendar reform, because they are keenly aware of the difficulty they have, year after year, in attempting to regulate a school year according to the laws of a medieval prelate who,

through no fault of his own, was unable to foresee that the system of irregular months and quarters would not be able to cope with the inevitable advancements of scientific thought and precision.

One of the educational institutions of which I know personally, having been a student there, is St. John's College, in Annapolis, Maryland. A thoroughly modern institution of higher learning set against the background of a rich colonial history, St. John's begins its classes on the third Tuesday of September, plays its traditional football game with Johns Hopkins on the last Saturday of November, and recesses for the Christmas holidays between the day before Christmas Eve and the day after New Year's Day. After a second recess called Spring Vacation, which always coincides with Easter, the students and faculty of the venerable college look forward to the June Ball and other activities of Graduation week.

Because of the vagaries of the Gregorian calendar, a different schedule has to be arranged and posted each year. This new schedule has to be consulted by every student and faculty member. Parts of it have to be memorized. But in spite of all possible publicity and precaution, in spite of a great total of laborious mental exercise, there are numerous mistakes made each year, particularly by those who rely either upon the schedule of the year before, or upon their own calculations. From year to year the opening of college moves through a seven-day cycle between September 15 and 21. A classmate of mine absent-mindedly returned to school a week too early on one occasion, because he had committed the unpardonable sin of remembering the opening date of the previous year and had subtracted one day from it. Mathematically, his reasoning was fairly sound, but he arrived in Annapolis on September 14, the second Tuesday in September, instead of September 21, the third Tuesday in the month. Because this student lived on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, he was compelled to make an arduous journey by car and ferryboat, back and forth between Salisbury and Annapolis three times within 8 days. The mistake caused his parents a considerable expense as they were financing his education, and the student had a good basis for bitter complaints against a calendar which forced his family to undergo additional sacrifices which it could ill afford.

One of the important calendar dates at St. John's College is the football game with Johns Hopkins, and here the calendar plays some of its dizziest of jokes on frequent occasions. The game traditionally takes place on the last Saturday in November. Since the national Thanksgiving holiday may fall at any time between November 24 and 30, the game takes place in some years *before*, and some years *after*, the annual festival. When the big game comes *after* Thanksgiving, many of the students are at home and miss it, because classes are suspended for a Thanksgiving "pause" between Wednesday noon and Monday morning. Members of the football team of course cannot observe the national holiday. All this seems very stupid and most unnecessary, and would never occur in a revised and modern calendar.

Christmas holidays are another good example of calendar eccentrics. At St. John's, they vary from ten days to two weeks, according to the day of the week on which Christmas Eve falls. If it comes on Thursday, school is dismissed at noon of the

day before and classes are not resumed until a week from the following Monday. If Christmas Eve falls on Tuesday, the college authorities do not attempt to keep their students over the week-end just for Monday morning classes, so the vacation begins on the Saturday before Christmas. Other days call for various other rearrangements of the school calendar, and any educators who have ever wrestled with this problem need no long and complicated argument to persuade them that a stable calendar would save a great deal of worry and annoyance.

There are a certain number of legal holidays which fall during the school year, and which provide welcome oases of rest and recreation for students and faculty. When these fall on Sunday or Monday, they afford lengthened weekends, which make them definitely valuable for mental relaxation. When they fall in mid-week, they are merely spots of idleness, which break the week's schedule into two parts and dislocate classes with very little compensation of a rest or recreational value. ⁽¹⁾

The greatest of all educational battles with the calendar comes at Easter. It is a battle in which many of our greater colleges have given up the vain struggle, and simply decided to ignore the holiday completely, letting their spring vacation come where it will, without regard to Easter.

At St. John's, however, the spring vacation still coincides with Easter. Each year the school calendar allows a week off from the noon of Wednesday before Easter until the morning of the following Thursday. Professors and instructors, moreover, must give their quarterly examinations during the week preceding the vacation. The result is so unequal that it is a wonder nobody ever thought to remedy it. Easter fluctuates between the last week in March and almost the whole month of April—a period of 35 days, in fact. So completely does this upset the balance of the school year that it is only reasonable to assume that some students fail in their quarterlies for no other reason than this calendar instability. Certainly the fluctuation is unfair and costly in many ways.

Several faculty members called my attention also to the fluctuations of the date fixed for the close of the college year. As the school calendar is set ahead each year to meet the demands of the tyrannical Gregorian system, so must Graduation day recede into the earlier figures, until in some years most of the so-called "June Week" festivities and social functions actually occur in May.

In college athletics, the calendar plays some very odd tricks. A member of the faculty at the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis told me about a curious example of this kind. "I am very fond of basketball," he said. "One year the season began in December, and I was on hand for the opening game. When I failed to see a certain player whom I had admired the year before, I asked an usher where he was. He explained with a grin that the Academy has a rule forbidding a midshipman from engaging in more than one major sport during the same month. The young player in whom I was especially interested had been on the football squad, and the traditionally final game of the season, with West Point, had taken place, as usual, on the Saturday

after Thanksgiving. But this year that particular Saturday had fallen in December so he would not be allowed to play basketball until January of the new year.”

The Naval Academy, like St. John’s, has its “June Week,” famous wherever the American Navy is known. But *June Week* sometimes proves an absurd misnomer, owing to calendar irregularities. On a recent occasion, the Navy’s “June Week” opened on May 26 with the famous Army-Navy lacrosse game, and closed with President Roosevelt’s conferring upon the graduates their commissions on the following Thursday, May 31!

Wherever one goes in educational circles, the school calendar must be built anew every year. Each year the deans and faculty committees must get together and pay their tribute of time and labor to the relentless cycle of the Gregorian schedule, fitting their two semesters and two sessions into its inequalities and irregularities. Each fall and spring, the professors must rearrange their highly specialized lectures and courses to cope with this ever-changing reality of calendar instability.

In my personal business, as the writer of a weekly column in *Gotham Life*, a metropolitan magazine, I must consult a calendar each week to find out how to date my article for the coming issue. I am a slave to the calendar which hangs above my desk. There is no rule for me to follow save the printed tabulation, no scheme that will bring order and stability into the calendar every year.

Since finishing at Columbia, I have accepted a directorship in a small research foundation in downtown New York. There are meetings of directors the first Thursday in every month. Under the present system, there is no key number, such as “527,” which would indicate a regular order of dates upon which the meetings would fall each quarter.

No wonder then, that I endorse the efforts of The World Calendar Association to bring to justice the Gregorian calendar, and to repair its tyrannical inefficiencies. The proposed reform is a splendid and successful attempt to equalize the quarters, balance the year, and give order and permanence to a method of time-reckoning which has somehow failed to keep pace with the progress of the human race.

⁽¹⁾ Even after the United States legislated that most holidays shall fall on Monday, their dates continue to shift within the month and non-Monday holidays, “as usual”, float within the week. Gregorian calendar confusion, thus camouflaged in convenience, only became less obvious. What else explains assorted references to expense and frustration that remain relevant and accepted nearly seventy years after this article was written? –Ed.