



# Remembering Harry Wasserman

## Vol. 1

Please send any memories/photos  
you would like to share to  
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## Library (Mis)Management

*In 2002 Harry wrote and illustrated this account of the source of a favorite saying:*

In the mid-1950's, when Phil Lyons and I were aspiring assistant professors, Jack Kirkwood put us in charge of the Chemistry Library, which was in bad shape. There was no librarian, a poor representation of the important current journals, hardly any monographs, and checking out books from the library required running the gauntlet of overworked, underpaid and sometimes hostile secretarial and administrative staff in the main office. Phil and I were anxious to remedy the situation, and we went to work to accomplish it.

At about this time, Kirkwood went on a trip to the Netherlands and left us on our own. Henry Thomas was Acting Chairman. Within a short time, we made contact with staff in the main library and explained our plight. They were most cooperative. Realizing that some major changes were necessary, they expanded our budget from \$2000 to \$6000, arranged for a part-time librarian, the acquisition of new journals, the binding of journals without long delays, and generally set in motion changes that would bring our library into the 20th century. This of course required that the Chemistry Library be run under the aegis of the main library which, with Henry Thomas' approval, seemed realistic and even exciting.

Jack Kirkwood returned from abroad, and Phil and I met with him to discuss what was occurring. We were bursting with pride at our accomplishments. Jack picked up the paperwork which described the new arrangements, read it over carefully, took off his glasses, and turned to us and said:

"Now let me get this straight. Your budget was \$2000."

"Yes," we said.

"And you spent \$6000."

We said, "Yes, but..." and began to expound on what we had done, how important it was to the Department, etcetera.

Kirkwood fixed us with an icy stare.

"Your budget was \$2000, and you spent \$6000 - correct?"

"Yes, sir," we said.

His glasses, which he held in his hand, were then hurled down on the desk.

**"What sort of gross mismanagement is this??!!"**

At that moment, our hopes and dreams began to go up in smoke.

To his everlasting credit, Phil Lyons saved the situation. Without flinching, he spoke calmly, logically, and even forcefully, explaining the whole situation to the Chairman in detail. Eventually Kirkwood cooled down, responded favorably, and we parted on the best of terms.



## Harry Wasserman on the Early Days at Yale (memories Harry related in 2007)

When Harry came to Yale as lecturer in 1948, the glass blower was Mr. Noble. Harry, wanting to carry out a photooxygenation, came across a suitable broken piece of quartz tubing in Mr. Noble's display cabinet and thought to have him make it into a photoreaction vessel. He needed to seek a work order from Helen Goebel, the dragon-lady Secretary of the Department since 1919 and right hand of Arthur J. Hill, Department Chair since 1927. When Harry approached her she demanded, "How did you break it?"

He was not alone. He ran into Werner Bergman after one of the latter's encounters with Ms. Goebel. Bergman was muttering, "I'm a full professor here. I can't be treated like this."

Harry would sometimes pensively recall how Chairman Hill began a spring department meeting by announcing proudly, "I have good news. Once again I have been able to return money from our budget to the University."

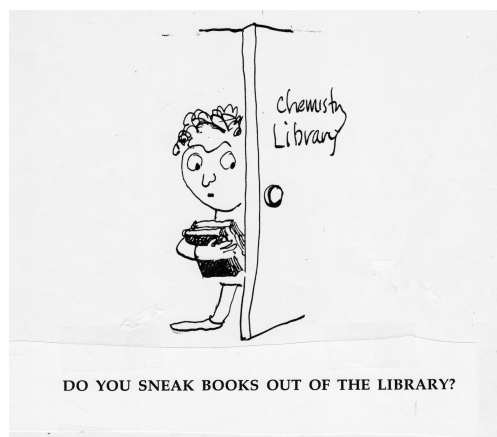
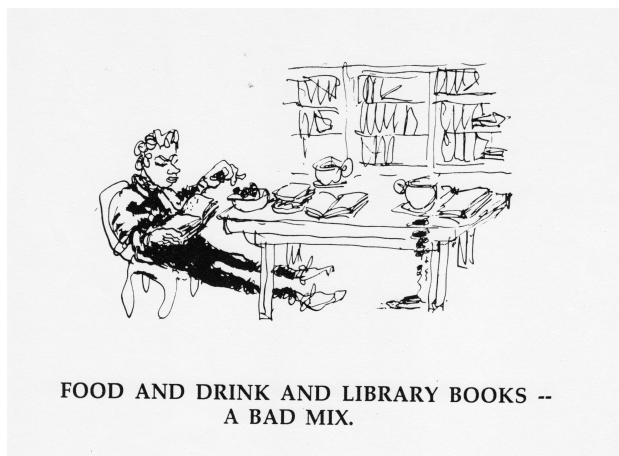
By 1950 Yale still had no IR spectrometer. Harry had permission from Harvard to use their Perkin-Elmer instrument from midnight to 6 a.m. He did so for his first publication in 1950 with Yale undergrad (by then a first-year graduate student) Howard Zimmerman.



Arthur J. Hill  
Chemistry Chair 1927-1951



Howard Zimmerman  
at 1952 Wasserman cook-out  
(Hervey Ackerman photo)



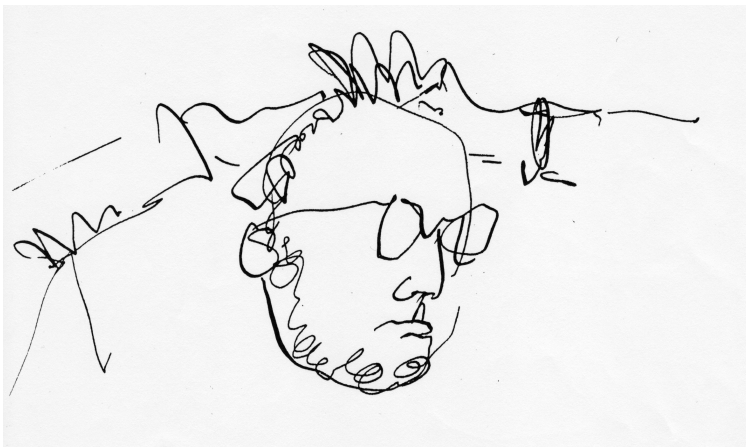


## Directors Lunch 1972

During administrative meetings, Harry would often sketch. When he was Director of the Division of Physical Sciences in the early 1970s, he met regularly for lunch with President Brewster, some of the presidential staff, and the other divisional directors. He developed some of these sketches into the little watercolor “Kingman Brewster, Directors Lunch 1972”. A keen observer of more than physiognomy, he was particularly amused by how, when served sandwiches, Brewster’s staff would follow his lead by using knife and fork to remove the top, set it neatly aside, and divide the remains into bite-sized pieces.



## From Other Meetings





### Frank Precopio was Harry's first graduate student

The ramifications of my association with Harry persisted to this very day. I'll explain. In 1954 the ACS held its annual convention in Kansas City. Harry had been preparing a paper authored by him, Rose Liu and me but was not planning to go to K.C. He wrote me and suggested that if I was going, I might like to present it. My boss at G.E. approved. One of my neighbors was from K.C. so I jokingly asked her if she had a friend there I might date. Surprisingly, she said she had and proceeded to arrange a blind date with a young lady, Rita Carr, who was a microbiologist from the U. of Wisconsin and was working at a hospital in K.C. Without delving into the improbable outcome, Rita and I celebrated our 58<sup>th</sup> anniversary this year.

As to my first encounter with Harry. In Sept. 1948, I reported to Sterling as a first year grad student. It was a beautiful day and a bunch of grad students were playing touch football on the field behind Sterling.. I joined them and was carrying the ball when a member of the opposing team hit me hard and I landed on my butt. He apologized profusely but I assured him that I was O.K., we shook hands and he said his name was Harry. I said my name was Frank and we resumed play.

IN those days, first year grad students were assigned bench space in a central lab on the second floor which we called the bullpen. The periphery was occupied by staff and some advanced grad students. The day after the touch football game, I was walking down the hall and saw Harry, who I thought was another first year grad student, sitting at a desk in one of the side labs. I went in and asked him what he was doing there. He sheepishly told me that he had just been hired as an instructor. In the course of the year, we became quite good friends and from time to time he would tell me about his research. I was intrigued.

At the end of the year when we were choosing our mentors, I had a problem. Paul Cross who was head of the chem. Department at Brown had recommended me to Arthur Hill who was dept. head at Yale at that time and it was tacitly assumed that I would work for him. With great trepidation, I went to see Dr. Hill and told him I would like to work for Harry. To my great relief, he said "Frank, that's a great idea. Dr. Wasserman is a brilliant chemist and he is going to have a fine career at Yale" Several of my fellow students said I was crazy. He is only an instructor and may not be here in a year or two and you will be left high and dry. Of course they were very wrong.

Best regards, Frank Precopio



## Mary Lou Oates was Harry's long time administrative assistant

I am extremely sorry to be unable to attend any portion of the Wasserman Symposium (the chemistry part or the "civilian, i.e., non-chemistry" part), because ironically, I will be on my way home from a week's vacation at the Cape on Saturday, September 13th. I say it is ironic, because it was usually Dr. Wasserman (as I always called him) who was at the Cape in the summer and later, into early Fall, while I was holding down the fort in New Haven. And so life comes full circle.

Some of you in attendance I know from "the Old Country" (that's a Wasserman-ism you may remember. I sure do). In my interpretation, that means, I've known you for a longtime (I remember you from your grad student or postdoc days) so you can't put one over on me. Other people's names I might know from submissions to Tetrahedron Letters, voices from telephone calls to Dr. Wasserman, or stories he might share with me about people (all positive, as he always was in his dealings with people, and that's not just the fond recall of a hazy memory) - members of the chemical community - academic, industrial - people from the publishing field (Elsevier), the Dreyfus foundation, people from the Yale and New Haven communities... the list goes on. He knew an amazing array of individuals, and through him, I met (or at the very least became aware of) these people too, and Thus Began my Education.

I must have typed "beta-lactams" five thousand, five hundred and ninety-nine times if I typed it once, but I still wouldn't know one if I fell over one. (I DID understand one thing about chemistry, the term chirality when a student or postdoc gave me a visual demonstration, holding palms facing each other, about 6 inches apart, illustrating the concept of mirror image). That's not the kind of education I'm talking about.

I learned on the day that I was hired about Dr. Wasserman's enthusiasm and tenacity, which led him to make a decision and move forward with it AS SOON AS POSSIBLE. He called me the same evening after I interviewed with him, and offered me the job, which I accepted. A few days into it, I learned how deeply he cared about the undergraduate class he taught, Organic Chemistry. The large lecture hall was always freezing cold, and he used to check the temperature of the room before the class began. If it was cold, the physical plant got a telephone call.

Once I started working for him, the unassertive me listened in abject horror as he told me that he and his last secretary used to argue over this task. She had told him, "You can't keep bothering the people in the physical plant. They have work to do." He said to me with intense conviction, "*You* have to feel that *what you are doing* is the MOST IMPORTANT THING when you are doing it. They're *always* going to have their work to do." Hence I became The Caller. And learned the names of the guys in the physical plant. And started to laugh with them as we discussed the daily room temperature.

And what do you know, Advocacy paid off, and was one of my best classes when I eventually chose to get my Masters in Social Work. To this day, I sit in my office with clients, and I hear the echo of his words coming out of my own mouth, telling people to step up and be assertive. Amazing.

I also learned that someone who was a busy person, well-known in his relative sphere of influence, could and should take the time out to be kind and genuinely interested in everyone he met, from Robert Maxwell, the publisher, to Bessie, the woman who cleaned our offices. He donated a small refrigerator and an extra TV to the maintenance worker's break room in the tiny windowless space next door to his office. He would ask people about their parents, their spouses, their children, their pets. He let me bring my poodle into work one day because he loved dogs, and he taught me that day and demonstrated by what he pulled from his pocket that all dogs love cheese (After that, I would sometimes refer to him at home as "The Cheeseman").

And so my education continued over many years, in many ways, as I left the Chemistry Department, went to school for Creative Writing, came back to the Chemistry Department, changed my interest to psychology and ultimately, social work. I saw him deal gracefully with several rounds of cancer. I marveled as he would throw back his head and laugh, recounting how under the influence of anesthesia, he was told that he had given a marvelously unintelligible lecture in chemistry to the Boston College chemistry faculty standing at the foot of his hospital bed. These individuals had welcomed him to their campus and department with open arms, and later wrapped him in a warm embrace as he dealt with his diagnosis and treatment.

I saw the beauty of his loving relationship with Elga - wife/mother/chemist/attorney - he used to say that if it were not for Elga, he would never have come out of the lab and done so many of the things that he did (which would have been a terrible thing for all of us). I saw his love for and pride in his children - Dan, Diana, Steven - as well as his grandchildren. I sometimes typed brief notes at his request, which he signed and mailed along with a piece of quick artwork to his nephew Matthew, or his sister or brother. In all of the time I worked for him, I never stopped laughing.

Dr. Wasserman had a way with words and a love of them, and once he told me that his favorite teacher had taught him English. Another time he said he wasn't sure how he had turned out to be a chemist. He had wanted to be an artist, and so he was, doing chemistry on the side. He painted pictures of places where he traveled as well as landmarks at Yale, he sketched profiles of faculty members on the pages of faculty minute meetings, he illustrated a book of sayings selected by his sister-in-law Mary which were compiled in a small published book.

A photocopy of one of those illustrations (a bird on a perch with the proverb, "Don't go looking for trouble. Enough will come to roost.") hangs inside the door of my current office. I try to abide by those words, but trouble often comes in the door. Fortunately, trouble sometimes dissipates within the office walls. I usually attribute this to my Chemistry Department education (demonstrating kindness to and genuine interest in those who come to see me) as opposed to my formal education.

P.S. I don't laugh nearly as much as I used to, but that's an important lesson I'm still trying to work on. After all, I learned tenacity from A Master.





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November 16, 2014

Dear Elga,

I deeply regret that I cannot join you for this special memorial for Harry due to sabbatical time in Paris including speaking at a conference starting Sunday in Bologna all of which was pre-scheduled before the Yale event was announced.

As you know, I worked with Harry as an undergraduate during the summers following my sophomore and junior years at Yale and some during the academic years. Harry inspired me to study chemistry and to pursue graduate studies in synthetic organic chemistry at Harvard with his and your mentor R. B. Woodward. Although I eventually chose to follow a more mechanistic and biologically oriented program with Frank Westheimer after your and Harry's wise counsel, Harry set me on the right foot with the proper foundation and inspiration for biochemical research.

Martha and I have especially enjoyed getting to know you and Harry during your occasional trips to La Jolla and we were hoping you would make it a more permanent home, but instead you sent your son Steve to settle at UCSD and keep the Wasserman name alive in San Diego. Whether in La Jolla or New Haven, or in more recent years in Waltham, we always enjoyed the wonderful warmth and friendship we had with Harry. We will always remember his special smile.

We always savored our conversations with Harry and you about a broad range of subjects from science to academia including Yale's changing attitudes toward science and women over the last fifty years! Harry's many talents served him so well in all circumstances. We are especially fond of his wonderful watercolors of Yale buildings, several of the originals of which we have hanging in the front hall of our house as a constant reminder of Harry, his talent and his joy for life. We will miss him.

Best wishes,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "Ed".

Edward A. Dennis  
Distinguished Professor of Chemistry and Biochemistry and Pharmacology

## **Wally Ewart   Grad Student**

My short message for this occasion is more personal than scientific, but for my life and happiness it was even more important than all the wonderful scientific mentoring Harry did for me. My then very important girl friend and love was in France studying for a semester while I was in the spring of my first year being Harry's grad student. I received a 'Dear Wally' letter from her in April that indicated that she wanted to be free of any obligations to me. Friends rallied to help me and I called her in Paris to say that I wanted to come to Europe to see her.

I then went to Harry and told him the story and he was very sympathetic to my determination to fly to Europe to see her. He said that he had experienced a similar barrier during his time at Harvard and that it was something he would support even if it interfered with my summer initiation of the research in the lab. He also directed me to go to the Yale Bursar's office and ask for a loan and to tell them that this trip was critical for my advancement toward the Ph. D.

I went to the office and told them what Professor Wasserman had said and asked for \$250 dollars to cover the cost of my flight. I had determined that the local ACS was having a group flight to Amsterdam at that amount. I also told the office that I had another reason for going and that was going to see my love. The lady carefully omitted that statement on the application that only contained the support by Harry. When I received a call from the bursar's office a week later, they stated that they were worried that 250 was insufficient for the trip and would I like more. Elated with the call I said that 250 would be fine and that I would pick up the check the next morning.

The trip, the discussions in France and Scotland and her return to the US 2 months later added up to an engagement 5 months later, a wedding 1 year later and 51 years and 47 days thus far of wedded bliss with my French speaking love, Joanna Vallentine Ewart.

## **John Scheffer   Post-Doc**

Although I was a Post-doc with Harry for less than a year (October 1966 to July 1967), my time at Yale had a profound effect on my career. My research project was to determine whether the oxygen liberated in the thermal decomposition of 9,10-diphenylanthracene peroxide was normal ground state (triplet) oxygen or excited state "singlet" oxygen. Within a few weeks of arriving at Yale I managed to show that singlet oxygen was indeed generated in this reaction, and a month or two later Harry and I had a Communication to the Editor accepted for publication in the *Journal of the American Chemical*

*Society*. He and I also traveled to the American Chemical Society Meeting in Miami Beach, where he presented our results in a short oral presentation. The significance of the work was that it was the first demonstration in the laboratory of the production of an excited state species from a ground state reaction (something that bioluminescent organisms do routinely). Heady stuff for a new Post-Doc! The upshot of this was that Harry gave me a glowing recommendation when I started writing for academic jobs, and by early 1967 I had accepted an Assistant Professorship at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, where I remained happily for the next 40 years doing research in organic photochemistry.

So thank you, Harry, for the great project, the great recommendation, and the chance to live my life in one of the world's most beautiful cities. May you rest in peace.

## **Dave Ennis    Post-Doc**

Some fond memories of Harry:

1. **A sense of fun:** Harry made me a verbal offer to be a post doc in his laboratories in 1990. Some of my lab colleagues in Liverpool UK, however had taken to calling my lab and in American accents, were offering me positions at various labs I had applied to. On this one occasion, I received a call from “Harry Wasserman”, who introduced himself and proceeded to discuss his work and the opportunity. I kept saying “yeah”, “yeah” in response to his questions thinking it another hoax. After a few minutes of this I said: “is this really Harry Wasserman”. I suddenly realised it was a legitimate call. I apologised and explained I had been receiving a lot of “rogue” phone calls. That really resonated with Harry. He thankfully had a great sense of humour and offered me the post doc position. When I arrived at Yale, he had a certificate waiting for me, addressed to the “Rogue”, confirming I was actually at Yale. His sense of fun was an endearing feature. That humanistic side to Harry had a profound influence on me and has contributed to making me the leader I am today.
2. **Loyalty:** Harry announced to us in 1991 that he was going to have a 70<sup>th</sup> Birthday celebration funded by his friend and supporter at Tetrahedron, Robert Maxwell. I shared with Harry that I had a tenuous connection with Robert Maxwell. When Robert Maxwell was an MP in Buckinghamshire, UK, I was one of twins born on Christmas Day in 1965. As the MP for the County, Maxwell sent my parents a letter, promising to buy them a “pram” (stroller) as a gesture of good will to the first born twins on that day in his constituency. We never received it.



Harry loved it. I had the letter faxed over from the UK. He shared with Robert Maxwell, and had some real fun about it. He said jokingly he would get me a Mercedes car for the delay in receiving it ;-)

Sadly, Robert Maxwell died soon afterwards in suspicious circumstances and his irregular financial dealings were exposed to the world. Many of Maxwell's friends deserted him at this time. However, Harry had a strong sense of honour and loyalty. I remember he wrote an article in a British newspaper, reminding people that Maxwell was not all bad, and that he had been a true supporter of science and had been an innovator in scientific publication. Again, an illustration of a characteristic I saw in my mentor.

My time at Yale was a wonderful cultural and scientific experience. I was blessed working for such a "Gentleman" chemist. It wasn't just the experience of working with a great scientist and coach, but working with a man who had the characteristics he had; a sense of fun, a broad outlook on life, a sense of decency and compassion for all.

He showed me the importance of "people" and this has carried me through my industrial career.

Please raise a glass to Harry on my behalf. I will be thinking of him, today especially.

***cheers, Dave***

**Dave Ennis**

VP Global Chemical Development

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## Oft-Quoted Punch Lines:

### **“Pea soup.”**

Pronounced with a supercilious tone of disparagement, bordering on contempt, by Armand, maître d’ at Rôtisserie Normande on Chapel St., as he noted the appetizer order of the diners. Harry had conspired with his industrial hosts to order enthusiastically the “renowned”, but free, “Potage St. Germain” in place of the pricey alternatives that Armand was always pushing.

### **“Steroids, Alkaloids, Carboxylic Acids”**

Harry’s gift for sympathy and diplomacy meant that he was the one who was often chosen for the task of conveying unpleasant news. For example, in the 1950s or early ‘60s he had to break the sad news to a first-year graduate student from overseas that his performance in his first-semester graduate courses had been so abysmal that he would have to leave the program even before all his possessions had arrived (by ship) from home.

“But that is impossible,” the deficient student objected, “I have already mastered all this material in my college. I can prove it! I can show you my notebooks. They are in my footlocker, which should arrive soon. I have mastered all this material: steroids, alkaloids, carboxylic acids!”

Harry colored his conversations with allusions to old popular songs like “The Sheik of Araby” or “Avalon”.

## **Some of Harry’s Favorite Sayings:**

### **“Sukoshi”**

A little bit.

(Harry loved the sounds of foreign languages and using colorful phrases, like this Japanese way of responding politely to an offer of food or drink.

### **“Pénz beszél, kutya ugat”**

Money talks; Dog barks.

(Hungarian proverb, learned from Dezsoe Steinherz, Elga’s father)

### **“Respect the food.”**

(Italian host at restaurant urging Harry to begin immediately when his dish was the first to be delivered to the table)

### **“Military Plan”**

A visitor from the ETH, perhaps Albert Eschenmoser or Vlado Prelog, once referred to the schedule for his visit as a “military plan.” Forever after that was how Harry referred to such schedules, usually with just the hint of a continental accent.

### **“Bombay Lecture”**

This is how Harry (and then others) would refer to what a friendly colleague was requested to supply when some professor had to miss a scheduled class period because of travel. Presumably this initially referred to an actual trip to Bombay, but the description soon became generic.

### What did he have to do with it?

Harry relished the human comedy. As American editor of *Tetrahedron* and *Tetrahedron Letters* Harry made periodic trips to meetings of the editorial board in Oxford. He would include a courtesy call in London on Nobel laureate Sir Robert Robinson, co-founder of the journal and honorary co-chair of its editorial board. By 1973 Robinson, nearing his 90<sup>th</sup> year, physically impaired, and suffering from failing eyesight, was intensely engaged in preparing his autobiography, “Memoirs of a Minor Prophet”, which was published as Vol. 1 (of 1) after his death in 1975.

Harry was always on the lookout for a topic of conversation that would capture Sir Robert’s interest, and for his visit in 1973 he had found it. In connection with their research on the reaction of singlet oxygen with oxazoles, Harry’s student Fred Vinick had just used an <sup>18</sup>O-labeled  $\alpha$ -amidoketone to clear up an ambiguity in the mechanism of the Robinson-Gabriel oxazole synthesis. This procedure had been in use for more than sixty years since the initial independent publications by Robinson in 1909 and by the Berlin chemist Siegmund Gabriel in 1910.

Harry was ushered into Robinson’s dimly lit penthouse office and seated on a shortish chair facing Sir Robert’s imposing desk. After saying hello, Sir Robert peered over his desk at Harry, who launched into his story. “Sir Robert you might be interested that by using isotopic labels a student in my laboratory has recently clarified the mechanism of the Robinson-Gabriel synthesis.”

He had gotten no further when Robinson cut him off, scowling and pounding his desk for emphasis, “Gabriel! Gabriel! What did he have to do with it?”

### Harry’s Age Jokes

Vlado Prelog of the ETH, who would be awarded the Nobel Prize in 1975, visited Yale as Treat B. Johnson Lecturer about 1962. Though he was only in his mid-50s, was always in fun complaining of his advanced age. During a party at Harry and Elga’s home, Prelog repeatedly called Dick Wolfgang “Wolfram,” which Dick would quietly correct. Later in the evening Harry heard Prelog ask youthful-looking Dick how old he was. “34,” Dick replied. Prelog stepped back in feigned shock, “You are only 34!! I’m glad I called you Wolfram!”

Victor Borge may have been the source of one of Harry’s standard comic routines. He would ask the age of some young person, and when they answered, “9,” Harry would reply in shock, “9!! Shame on you! When I was your age I was 10.”



