

SCHMULOWITZ COLLECTION
OF WIT AND HUMOR



A Gift to the San Francisco Public Library
from Nat Schmulowitz

THE COVER

A jester figured on a bookplate would suggest books of a merry disposition, and a jester is just what the San Francisco Public Library has provided for the 3 1/2- by 4 1/2-inch bookplate of the Schmulowitz Collection of Wit and Humor. Nat Schmulowitz (1889–1966), attorney and bibliophile, initiated this collection for the library on an appropriate date, 1 April 1947, by donating 93 books from his personal collection of literature on humor, wit, jest, anecdote, and the psychology of laughter, wit, and humor. He also donated \$500, a tidy sum then, to the library for the development of the collection, but his own fascination with the books kept him adding to it himself. Frances K. Langpaap, retired head of cataloging, wrote in her reminiscences of Schmulowitz that she recalled him saying “It’s a disease! My spare moments are completely filled with reading catalogues and sending orders. It’s a wonderful, wonderful disease!” He bought books, pamphlets, and journals from dealers all over the world; a comprehensive collection was his goal.

Bookplate courtesy of San Francisco Public Library

The *Catalog of the Schmulowitz Collection of Wit and Humor*, published in 1962, listed 11,200 titles, and the 1977 *Supplement One* added 3,100 more. These two catalogs record several centuries of intriguing titles such as *Anecdotes of the Learned Pig* or *Earthworms Through the Ages* as well as titles clearly related to the 1990s, such as *A Skeptic's Political Dictionary and Handbook for the Disenchanted*. The Schmulowitz Collection contains many titles relating to Nat Schmulowitz's own profession, such as *The Lawyer in History, Literature, and Humor*. A practicing lawyer in San Francisco, Schmulowitz specialized in probate and corporate law. Nevertheless, his most famous case was probably the successful defense of Roscoe ("Fatty") Arbuckle, the famous movie comedian, for the murder of a movie starlet. Schmulowitz published in legal journals, and was a highly successful lawyer, but humor prevailed, even in the naming of his country home, "Smilin Thru," in Saratoga, California.

In 1963 William L. Ramirez, then Principal Librarian of the Department of Rare Books and Special Collections, wrote that Schmulowitz edited and published five volumes of *Anecdota SCOWAH*, the American Journal of World Folklore, in addition to his legal writings and presentations.¹ The five volumes of *Anecdota SCOWAH* are historical studies on humor published as keepsakes for Roxburghe Club members. The first issue, published in a run of 250 by the Grabhorn Press, featured epitaphs. The text of one of the more subtle pieces of humor reads:

Here lies Jane Smith, Wife of Thomas Smith, Marble Cutter.
This monument was erected by her husband as a tribute to her
memory and a specimen of his work. Monuments of this same style
are two hundred and fifty dollars.

Schmulowitz was an active library supporter even before he donated his humor books. He was a member of the Library Commission of San Francisco for seven years and its president in 1944. He spoke about the Friends of the Library for the California Library Association and again in 1951 about his own collection. On 30 November 1950, when the San Francisco Public Library opened a special room to house the wit and humor collection, Schmulowitz spoke about his decision to present his books to the library.

I reflected upon the fun and pleasure which had been experienced in the acquisition of these jest books, and how selfish it was to keep them in a home library . . . How much better it would be if the whole community could somehow enjoy these books.

Although he appears solemn in photographs in the collection archives, Schmulowitz clearly had a delightful sense of the droll because he went

on to relate how he dozed off and found his room swarming with books—one of which spoke to him. The books insisted on speaking for themselves at the dedication ceremony. Schmulowitz said,

Suddenly, there was a commotion. Prefaces, title pages, tables of contents, indexes, leaves and gag-lines seemed to be floating through the air, accompanied by laughter in all of its infinite varieties, and then suddenly they seemed to coalesce into the jest books from which they had come.

He reports that he awoke to find that the books had left him with “an unusual manuscript,” a message in their handwriting. This message about the value of books and humor he proceeded to share with his audience that day.

Apparently others found the books unruly, too, for shortly after that dedication ceremony an 18 December radio broadcast of “This is San Francisco” highlighted the difficulty of housing humor books in a public library with No Silence rules!

At his death in 1966, Nat Schmulowitz endowed the collection’s acquisitions fund. His sister Kay Schmulowitz continued to support the collection during her lifetime and gave an additional endowment at her death. The wit and humor collection currently has over 20,000 volumes, spans four centuries, and now includes the twentieth century. Its books are written in over thirty-five languages and dialects. It is also part of the San Francisco Public Library’s Book Arts & Special Collections Center, formed in 1964. The Center continues to grow and provide an important research center for a number of special collections, large and small. Among these is the 9,000-volume collection on the history of books and printing which was initiated with the gift of the personal collection of the noted printer Robert Grabhorn, the 800 examples of modern calligraphy in the Richard Harrison Collection of Calligraphy and Lettering, and the 250 volumes of Anthony Boucher’s Sherlock Holmes collection. The Center’s collections all provide remarkable resources. However, only the Schmulowitz Collection of Wit and Humor can proclaim with a grin that stand-up comedians consulting the collection for material are among its “researchers.”

Judith A. Overmier, University of Oklahoma

Notes

1. William L. Ramirez in his 1963 article about the Schmulowitz Collection published in *The Folklorist and Folk Music Archivist*.