

THE ELUSIVE ANTON KHROPOCHNIK

By George Hamlin

At the most recent alumni gathering, Mr. Tino suggested that I should set down the saga of Anton Khropochnik. The statute of limitations having run out, I agreed. This is the story of the most famous White Oak staffer who never was. I did it.

Anton was the brainchild, originally, of one Frank Pierce in Publications. He was attending a party in early 1962 and was set upon by some blowhard woman who knew everything about everything. Seeking either to put her off or deflate her, he asked if she had ever heard the opera "The Village Idiot" by Anton Khropochnik. She immediately averred that she indeed had, several times. Both the opera and the composer having been made up on the spot, Pierce had had enough of this woman and made good his escape.

When he related the story back in Publications the following Monday, several of us could see the potential in this chap. Eventually there emerged a whole set of "Khropochnik Papers" relating his fictitious life story, and how he seemed to be in just the right place to change history (the man was timeless), usually in his eagerness to stage his unsuccessful opera. The flood scene, for example, caused problems when he staged it in 1912 aboard RMS TITANIC. He caused Horace Greeley to leave town and head west. The opera's 1914 performance in Sarajevo inadvertently set off a conflict when the shot of Gavrilo Princip, intended for Khropochnik, struck Archduke Ferdinand instead. You get the idea.

And so eventually it occurred to me, someone this omnipresent should probably be in the NOL phone book. The process was easy enough: fill out a Form PRNC Gen 109 and drop it on a certain desk in GC when no one was there. We gave Anton a middle initial, O (the initials AOK being very "in" right about then), a home phone number (which if memory serves was also that of the National Zoo), and assigned him a desk code. One of our resident geniuses recommended BP, the Hyperballistics outfit comprising only Berger Shepard and a few hardy souls 'way back in Building 411. That way, he insisted, no one would ever notice.

And that idea, it turned out, was the project's undoing.

Anton Khropochnik entered the NOL phone directory with the January 1963 edition and we all whooped it up on the third floor. He remained through several succeeding editions. Then someone started blabbing about it in the barbershop, and lots of wise guys began phoning the listed extension to ask for Anton, and they obviously got fed up with the gag in Building 411 (we apologize for that unexpected development). And so it came to pass that Herr Khropochnik was yanked from the listings, effective with the January 1964 edition. Shortly after, a NOLNOTE came out changing the procedure for submitting names to the phone book: they now needed Division signature. That might not have kept him out originally anyway - our Division Chief was one of Anton's biographers - but by this time it was a Hot Issue, and there was obviously no chance of getting him back in. Charlotte Love was on to us, and the game was no longer afoot.

Anton was not dead yet, however; a FOR SALE ad ran in the 16 June 1980 edition of "**This Week**" offering a European billiards table complete with "hexahedron style balls." The seller

was given as one Anton Khropochnik, this time in N15. Someone was perpetuating the legacy, sort of, but we never found out who. We knew it wasn't anyone from Publications, because the ad lampooned Poland and that wasn't our style. Besides, everyone in our shop knew that Anton was Serbo-Croatian.

Looking back, we should have put ol' Anton in HS, where there were 1000 employees and no one would ever have twigged to it. He might even have survived the mergers and reorganizations, for all I know. As for the present: a Google search for Anton Khropochnik produced no results. I'll have to work on that one.