

Uranium in The Cranium

or Why Daddy Glows in the Dark

I undertook at one time to do a rather extensive photo control survey in San Francisco. This was for the purpose of putting in yet another highway, and the natives were, as Custer remarked at the Little Big Horn, a little uptight. In the first place, the route went through the ball park, a shrine which the fans were prepared to defend with their blood. Or, even better, ours. The planners, reluctant to inconvenience the rich, had aimed right through Hunter's Point, where the black people lived, and that made us, in this racially restless period, about as popular as wasps at a wedding. Nobody actually attacked us, but we got a lot of painful suggestions about where we could put our theodolite. Little things happened which seemed to suggest that the people would consider it a privilege to dance at our funerals. On one occasion I was walking along a railway overpass, when a man sitting on the abutment said something to me. I could see his lips move, but the traffic was too heavy to hear what he said. So I stepped off the track, just as a locomotive glided silently past, from behind. Petrified, I looked up at the engineer, who was gazing at me with an expression which might have been relief, but which looked like disappointment. The man who had spoken to me then repeated his question — he wanted to know the time, and hadn't seen the engine either. He remarked cryptically that the engineer was probably a baseball fan.

But enough of this paranoia. After the ball park, our survey visited a brewery, an abattoir, and then the naval base — not that these vital organizations were about to be black-topped. But some of the points were, as usual, in the most awkward places. One was on the top of a low wall in the middle of the brewery refuse area, where the rotting grain was home for millions of rats. In fact, a migration, or possibly an Oktoberfest was in progress when we were there, and not only was the whole place rustling with rats, but more were arriving all the time — by water. It was like a company picnic to Centre Island. As we located our point, I tried to look like Puss in Boots — high boots. Another point was on the deck of the abattoir loading ramp, an experience which made vegetarians of us for at least a week. And some of the points were inside the Hunter Point Naval Base, to be reached only after the most tedious security checks. You see, there was some top-secret nuclear activity going on, and, we were informed breathlessly, all kinds

of precautions, such as lead-lined shorts no doubt, were in effect. Besides, the nuclear subs, missile carriers and all of the other lethal playthings designed for Armageddon were to be kept from prying eyes.

But, in single-minded pursuit of horizontal and vertical values, we didn't worry about such things as we worked our way along the outside perimeter of the base, wishing that we could get inside, and avoid a long loop from the entrance, at the other end. Then fate helped us. A truck drew up to one of the supply entrances and after an interval passed majestically through. We could see one of our stations beckoning to us from inside the fortress, before the gates closed. Just in case, we checked them, and found them unlocked. No doubt the truck was delivering something, and for only a few minutes, the regulations went out the window. That, in essence, is the whole trouble with security. The human organism, both lazy and unsuspecting, simply can't take it seriously.

It was the work of a moment to establish a turn, and rush through the gates with a prism and rod, ignoring the signs which, in our opinion were only operative if read by spies. But, alas, half way through our work the truck came back, and, ignoring the obviously innocent if stunned looking level crew, drove back out and locked everything up tight. We swallowed hard, but finished what we were doing, and then headed up the road, towards the real entrance. Nobody paid any attention to us at all . . . as I've mentioned before, the sight of two men with an instrument and a rod confers instant legitimacy. By now, of course, we had time to look at all the notices, warnings, admonitions and just plain threats which festooned the area, and we could almost feel the neutrons battering our corpuscles.

We strode purposefully up to the security area, a modest complex suitable for processing applicants for the Ark, and there the first security officer smiled genially at us, and asked for our base clearance slip. Avoiding his eye, shuffling our feet, and blushing brilliantly, we confessed that . . . well, no, we didn't have one. We'd found our own way into this impregnable base. It was obvious that since Sec. 460A stated that all persons entering the base must obtain a base clearance slip from the Security office, what we were saying was beyond belief. We might just as well have

claimed to be Martians, interested in canal assault craft. He called for his boss.

And here, we realized, we'd better be careful, or we'd never get out. As foreign nationals wandering around inside the nuclear holy-of-holies of a naval base, we could be caught in a bureaucratic labyrinth, which would take days to get through, before we were ejected, never to be allowed back to finish our work. We had one thing going for us. When a security program is innocently but successfully circumvented, the security personnel become, so to speak, insecure. Clearly, the best thing we could do would be to satisfy them that, while admittedly stupid, we were harmless, and there would be no repercussions if we were allowed to go quietly on our way. And so it happened. We furnished them with names, addresses and phone numbers, and it was proved beyond doubt that we were there on behalf of the State. But our transgression had to be erased. So a patrol truck drew up, and we were taken in style, side-arms and all, back to the gate we'd come in. We sidled apologetically through it, and thus, officially, it had never happened. We continued with our work, and in due time appeared at the main gate, and were issued with the clearance slip. It allowed us to go anywhere in the base, except the one place where we'd already established a control point.

The moral is that while security precautions may be necessary, they're not natural to North Americans. We tend to take people at their face value, unless they're encyclopedia salesmen, P.R. men or Dale Carnegie graduates. So it is prudent, should we come upon a security situation, to touch carefully all of the bases. Only by so doing is bureaucracy safe.

There were no ill effects, as far as I know. Although I notice that if I carry an unexposed film in my breast pocket, I get an excellent photograph of my ribs. Do you think that I should have myself counted by a Geiger?

The more important fundamental laws and facts of physical science have all been discovered, and these are now so firmly established that the possibility of their ever being supplanted in consequence of new discoveries is exceedingly remote . . . Our future discoveries must be looked for in the sixth place of decimals.

Albert Abraham Michelson
*Address, dedication ceremony
Ryerson Physical Laboratory,
University of Chicago (1894)*