

Full Circle (Almost)

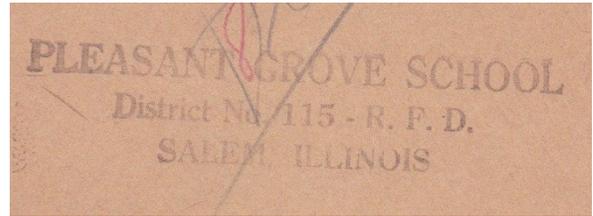
The Story of an Old Library Book

By David M. Baumann

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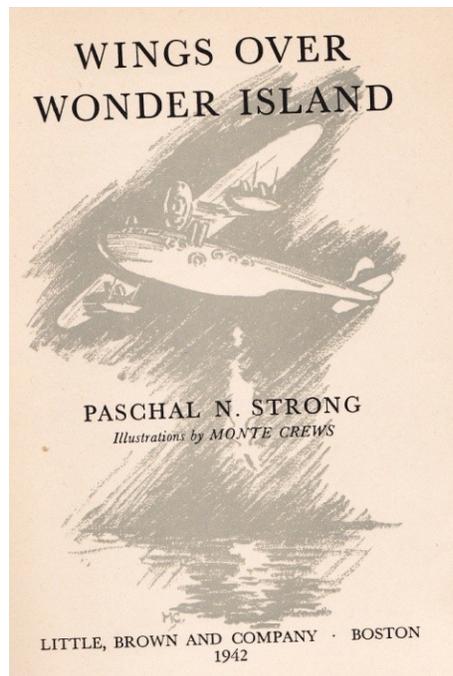
2,649 words

Little could I anticipate the adventure that was ahead of me when the pre-eminent editor and publisher of this incomparable magazine sent me an old book back in December 2019. His letter about it said, “At Friday’s general-public Friends of the Library sale I saw the enclosed book, *Wings Over Wonder Island*, and pulled it out of the shelf. On opening it I was surprised to see that it was a refugee from the Pleasant Grove grade-school in your city—an odd coincidence. How’d it stray so far?”



Well, how the book strayed from Salem, Illinois to Tucson, Arizona is a tale that can never be known, but Fred’s return of it to me in 2019 started me wondering about the book’s early years in the town where I live. I read the book, enjoyed it, and then was moved to try to discover its early history. It was not as easy as I supposed, but bringing the tale to light was a pleasant exploit.

But first, what about the book?



The Book

It was copyrighted in 1938, first published in 1940, and published again in 1942. In the late 1930s the latter part of the story was serialized in *Boys’ Life* magazine as a tale called “The Stratostreak”. It is an interesting story about a school for geniuses that was conceived and then built and endowed by a millionaire. Cosmos Tech, for that is its name, is situated on an island off the coast of Maine where there is an autonomous community of teachers and students, each of whom is a self-motivated scientific genius. The island came to be known as “Wonder Island”. There are no classes as one would find in most universities; each student is expected to pursue his own preferred field of research, and consult with other students and the teachers as needed. Whatever inventions he comes up with are to be offered to the world without charge; none of the students is permitted to retain the rights to whatever he

discovers.

Our hero is named Mark Venture; he is the product of a small town in the Midwest, and is a self-taught electronics whiz kid. He is discovered serendipitously by one of the professors of Wonder Island who stopped in for some repairs to a fancy gadget he had in his car. He recommends Mark to the authorities on Wonder Island, where he is accepted and works on a project similar to radar. He partners up with Ray, a fellow doing similar work; their roommate is Archie, a super-eccentric arch-genius who is working on developing atomic energy. This was a timely and no doubt fascinating topic in the late 1930s.



Archie has a number of adventures and nearly blows the place up once, but he succeeds at last, and then sets out to pilot a plane around the world powered only by the atom. The discussion of the morality of the use of atomic energy is somber and profound; the lads and their community are seriously worried about what would happen if a country “other than the United States” were to get hold of the secret and harness atomic energy for use in a weapon. The implication is that the United States is the only country on earth that would refuse to use atomic energy for any purpose other than good.



Slover was in the snow, rubbing his jaw

There is a bad guy, of course. He is Slover, a conscienceless cad who has lied his way into the Wonder Island community and only seeks to cadge the secrets of others’ research and use them for himself to build a fortune. All these strains come together at the end to build a whopping conclusion. It is an appealing story, well written and engaging.

The Author and Illustrator

The author was Paschal N. Strong, (September 24, 1901 – January 4, 1988) who was a career military man. He graduated from West Point at the age of twenty and achieved the rank of Brigadier General with a specialty as an Army engineer. On the side he was also an adventurer and writer of dozens of stories popular in his time—sailing, mountain, sports, and adventure stories. This book’s fascination with the development of atomic energy was probably hooked into real-life research known to someone with an inside track; similarly, Hal Goodwin was able to write the Rick Brants whose scientific themes were so convincing.

The illustrator was Monte Crews, (June 1, 1888 – October 5, 1946). He was much admired in his day and sold many works to a variety of publications. His illustrations for this book are attractive and draw the viewer into the era in which they were produced.

The Research

Well, when I turned the last page of this entertaining story, I was inspired to try to track down its history in Salem, Illinois. I started out by asking two or three longtime residents of Salem what they knew about Pleasant Grove School. To my surprise, no one had heard of it! The first inklings of a mystery had emerged.

So I went to City Hall and started with the office of the Supervisor of Assessments; this is where property records and so forth are kept. No one in that office had heard of Pleasant Grove School either! The clerk there sent me to an office on the second floor, that of the County Clerk and Recorder. Here also I struck out. But I was allowed into their records room to do my own research.

Now this was a magical place for someone who shares our interest in old books and the history of the age in which they were written! The records room is only about twelve by fifteen feet, but has floor to ceiling shelves with niches for the oversize books that hold the records of property sales, title changes, and so forth from the days of the Civil War. There must be about a thousand books there, each about eighteen inches by twelve inches, and four inches thick. They were bound in hardy red leather, and their pages were weighty parchment written on both sides in spidery fountain pen. The records are thorough, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century when Salem was founded and go right up to the 1980s when computers took over. I had only about ten minutes to look through the volumes that recorded information for the mid-twentieth century. I could only roughly guess that that was when Pleasant Grove School existed, judging from the publication date of *Wings Over Wonder Island*. I didn't find anything.

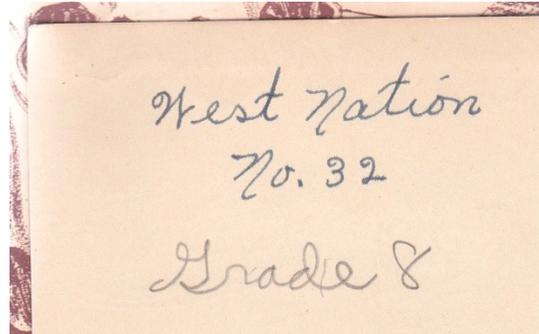
So the clerk in that office referred me to the office of the Superintendent of Schools, whose small office was catty-cornered across the street from City Hall. I was pleasantly greeted there, but the superintendent didn't know anything about Pleasant Grove School either. He referred me to a local retired school historian who, he said, "knows just about everything there is to know" about such things. I reached out to that individual, but he did not respond to my inquiry.

The School

Next I contacted the president of the Historical and Genealogical Society of Marion County. He provided my first break. A few days after my inquiry, I was given copies of old photographs of the student body of Pleasant Grove School in 1907, 1915, the mid-1940s, and 1949. Also the first page of an old, typewritten monograph on the history of the school. The title is "History of West Nation School Dist. 115, Salem Township"; handwritten after the title are the words, "Pleasant Grove". The monograph states that there was a school called Nation School prior to 1899. "Pleasant Grove" is a small, unincorporated area of the greater Salem area, which I knew about and often drive through, but I knew that there is no school there now.

But in 1899, an acre of land was donated by a local resident for the purpose of building a school in the newly-formed school district. The monograph says, “A one-room schoolhouse was built with a long concrete porch across the front. The room was furnished with double desks with inkwells, double seats, a teacher’s desk and chair, and a 6x4 ft. shelved glass door bookcase with only a few books.” This bookcase must have been the beginning of the school library that owned *Wings Over Wonder Island* several decades later.

Pleasant Grove School was obviously named for its community, and was built on Nation Road—hence its having two names, both “Nation School” and “Pleasant Grove”. This explains why in the front of the book there is an official stamp that identifies it as belonging to Pleasant Grove School, but a handwritten note on the next page that identifies it as West Nation.



Armed with this information, I returned to one of the longtime residents, a friend of mine named Danny Shuler. He recalled that about the middle of the twentieth century, one or two other one-room schools in the area were amalgamated into a little larger school. An infusion of federal funds made possible the building of two new facilities, which were given the names “East Nation School” and “West Nation School”, both of which were located on Nation Road. At a later time, West Nation School was closed and turned into a private residence. East Nation School was also closed and no longer exists.



with a picture of a school on it, and the words “West Nation”.

At this point I could have considered that my research was completed; I’d found the site of the school where *Wings Over Wonder Island* had begun its journey. But working on this mystery was such an adventure that I decided to take on another part of the project.

With these facts I was able to unearth the address of the old school. Interestingly, it was in a neighborhood I drive through at least once a week. Knowing now what I was looking for, I found the building without any trouble. It looks like a house, but with a little imagination one can see how it had once served as a school. And in the front yard is a little historical sign



The Student

[NOTE: To preserve the privacy of the family, the names of the individual and her family have been changed.]

Being a library book, *Wings Over Wonder Island* has a book pocket inside the cover. It had been checked out only once, by a preteen girl; let's call her Susan Miller. Was it possible that Susan was still alive, and still in the area? Salem has many families that go back generations, and it is not unusual that people live here all their lives. It was worth a try to look for Susan.

It didn't take long before I found out that there are many Miller families in the area. In fact, I know two of them myself. When both said that they had no idea of anyone in their families named Susan, I was only moderately disappointed. Setting aside enough time, I checked local records again, and was excited to find at last information about the family that showed that Susan Miller was part of a large clan. She was the sixth child of Charles and Patricia Miller, and was born in late 1939. Now I had not only the names of her parents but the records also gave me the names of her siblings.

I went back to the student body photographs the Historical Society had sent me, and there, in both photographs from the 1940s, was Susan Miller! Several of her siblings were also pictured. Now knowing the family names, I went back to Danny Shuler.



“Oh yeah, I met her brother's grandson once,” he said. Some of the family, then, was still in the area! If I could find even one of them, surely he or she would know something about Susan. Susan would be 79 or 80 now. In my ongoing search, I could only find information about her older brother; he had run a gardening business in Salem for years, and so he had been a public figure. He lived in a small house on... Nation Road! About a quarter mile from the building that had been the school. I wrote him a letter. He did not respond. I learned later that his wife had died and he had moved away. Once again, I was stumped.

A day or two later I was driving down one of the country roads that connects with Nation Road, and passed the Bethlehem Missionary Baptist Church. Adjacent to the church is a cemetery that goes back a century or so. I saw a large gravestone that bore the name “Miller”. I'd been by there dozens of times and had seen the stone, but this time I thought, “What the heck?” and stopped to take a look. I fell into a triple coincidence worthy of Nancy Drew at her best/worst. First coincidence, it was the grave of Charlotte, one of Susan's older sisters—except that it was the sister's husband's grave; the sister's name was on it but she was still alive. Second, oddly enough, Charlotte Miller had married a man named Eric Miller, so her maiden name and married name were identical; otherwise the name on the prominent gravestone would not have been Miller. And third, in the spot next over, under a nondescript stone, was the burial place of the Miller parents, Charles and Patricia. Completely by chance, I had found the family's burial plot and, most likely, the family church.

Curiously, there was no contact information for the church or its pastor on its sign. So I came home, wrote a letter to the pastor asking about the Miller family, and drove back and taped it to the church door. I never got a response. I was stumped again, but getting used to these dead ends.

But a few days later, Danny called me and said he had some information. He came by and said he had just come from the home of Charles Miller, Jr. Danny had found him, using the names I had given him from my research about the Miller family. Charles told Danny that the older sister,



Charlotte, who just turned 87, still lives locally. Moreover, he gave Danny the information I needed to bring my search for Susan to completion.

Sadly, Charles Jr. informed Danny that his sister Susan had died last October 31—less than seven weeks before Fred had found in Tucson the book she had read as a child. She was eighty years old when she died, and had lived in Oklahoma for fifty years. Had she still been alive, I couldn't have visited her, but I could have talked to her on the phone or written to her.

Now no one will ever know if she would have remembered reading *Wings Over Wonder Island* when she was about ten years old. But it was real life detective work tracking down the book's origins in my community as it was more than seventy years ago. And it was a reminder that whenever we lay hands on an old book and make it our own, we are entering into its ongoing history that had started decades earlier, and that we hold a volume which had been treasured by someone else of another time when the world was very different from our own.

The author is especially indebted to the following individuals who provided invaluable help in his research:

Danny Shuler, personal friend and lifelong resident of Salem.

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Wyett Colclasure, President of the Historical and Genealogical Society of Marion County, Illinois.