

What was Sky King's plane number?

Callers' questions border on the absurd

By KATHY SALAMON
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Some people think of the funniest questions ... not to mention bizarre, obscure and off-the-wall.

And having thought up the questions, they must find someone to ask them to. They prey on vulnerable librarians, available chambers of commerce, and busy police and fire department receptionists.

Karen Hibble of the Aptos

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— Heidi Smith

Chamber of Commerce has fielded questions ranging from "How do you get reliable help?" to "How do you get rid of ants?"

Hibble said she usually researches questions, if she can, and tries to provide an answer. Many times, members of the chamber can provide answers. For instance, a member in pest control was able to answer the question about ants.

"We get over 2,988 calls per year," Hibble said. "These are some of the most remembered."

Other memorable questions:

"Is it safe to send my 12-year-old to the Boardwalk?"

"Could you please call and make a reservation for me in Bryce National Park? It's long-distance for me."

"I am alone in my house, and the phone has not rung. Could you call me and see if it's working?"

"I cannot reach my children. They are home. Could you send someone to see if they're OK and call me back?"

"When is it sunny?"

Librarians also get bombarded with unusual questions.

Heidi Smith and Janis O'Driscoll Schechter, librarians at the Aptos library, recently recalled several of their favorites.

"Once this guy called and wanted to know what Sky King's plane number was," Smith said.

A friend suggested that Sky King piloted a Cessna airplane, so Smith wrote Cessna and requested the information. A Cessna representative wrote back a few weeks later and said a photograph of Sky King's airplane had been located showing the number.

"A lot of people don't realize that a lot of our answers don't come out of books," Smith said. "They come from personal contacts."

For instance, a person wanted to know how to make Portuguese linguica sausage. Smith said she agonized over this for several days until finally a staff member came forward and said her mother was Portuguese. The staff member looked through old family recipes and found the sausage.

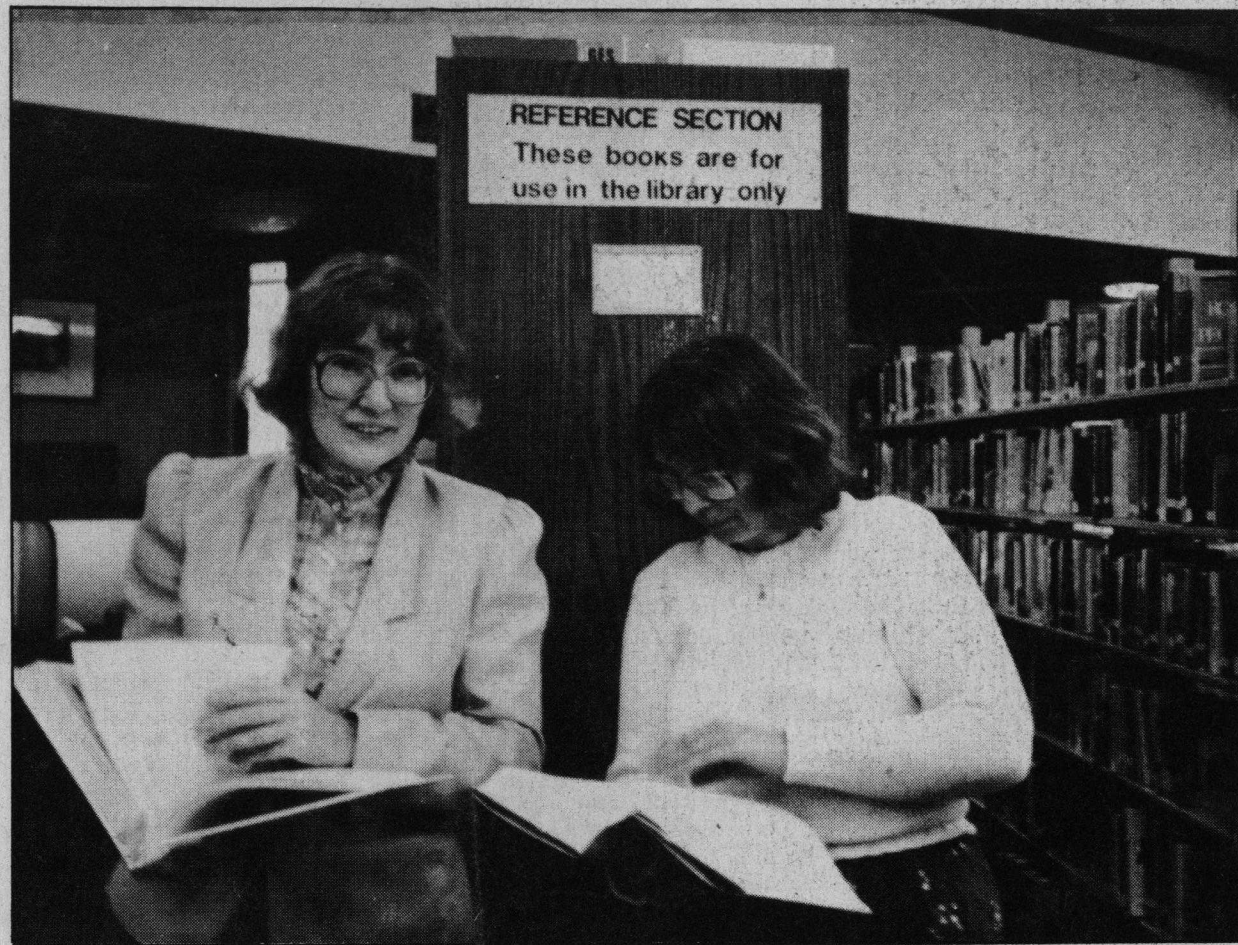
Other questions that are more obscure, Smith said, must be referred to other agencies. The library system sends its more technical questions to the Bay Area Reference Center, a service of the San Francisco Public Library.

That's where Smith sent the question, "How do you build a dumbwaiter for a three-story house that could carry a 150-pound person who is physically handicapped?"

Smith said it took the reference center three months to find the answer, but eventually they sent the plans for such a dumbwaiter.

O'Driscoll Schechter said one of her most memorable questions came during the height of the Cabbage Patch doll craze when a mother with a seriously ill child wanted to know where she could find a Cabbage Patch Kid.

"All the stores were sold



Kathy Salamon

Heidi Smith and Janis O'Driscoll Schechter have searched the reference books of the Aptos branch library for answers to some strange questions.

out," she recalled. "I was finally able to find one, and we sent it to the hospital by UPS."

Did it ever occur to O'Driscoll Schechter to say the question was out of her field?

"Librarians have a hard time saying no," she said. "This lady was very upset — her child may have been dying. It wasn't the time to give her red tape."

Currently, Smith and O'Driscoll Schechter are stumped on a question asked by an avid Steinbeck reader. In "The Grapes of Wrath," Steinbeck refers to a sign that says, "IITYWYBAD?"

"If anyone knows what this means," Smith said, "we'd appreciate a call."

In Watsonville, librarian Seely Sumpf recalled her favorite question: "How many Navy ships can you put in the San

Francisco Bay?"

"It was a very fascinating question, and it took me a lot of work to find the answer," Sumpf said. It took a 1914 source to find a general answer — that the bay could hold all the navies of the world. But that, of course, was in 1914.

It's obvious that Sumpf doesn't mind. "I love this sort of work. It's very time-consuming and you have to be very careful. We try to document everything we can."

In another instance, Sumpf was asked what the three pedestals on Beach Road are for. After contacting local historians, Sumpf found that the pedestals were for water tanks used either to wet the dirt road or to refill steam engines.

An easier question, she said, was "How much money did Abraham Lincoln earn as a lawyer?"

Murray Crawford, of the Watsonville Chamber of Com-

merce, said the organization often gets calls of complaints, such as poor cable television service and late newspaper deliveries.

Mirian Ivanovich, also of the chamber, said one particular woman used to call up regularly and ask how to spell certain words.

"I could tell she was an elderly woman, so I would just look up the word for her," she said.

Another woman, Ivanovich said, called and wanted to know where she could find a justice of the peace. "She had just gotten back with her boyfriend after having broken up for three months," she said. "They decided they wanted to get married right away. Immediately."

Ivanovich found a justice of the peace for the couple.

"We try to take every question we get seriously," she said.