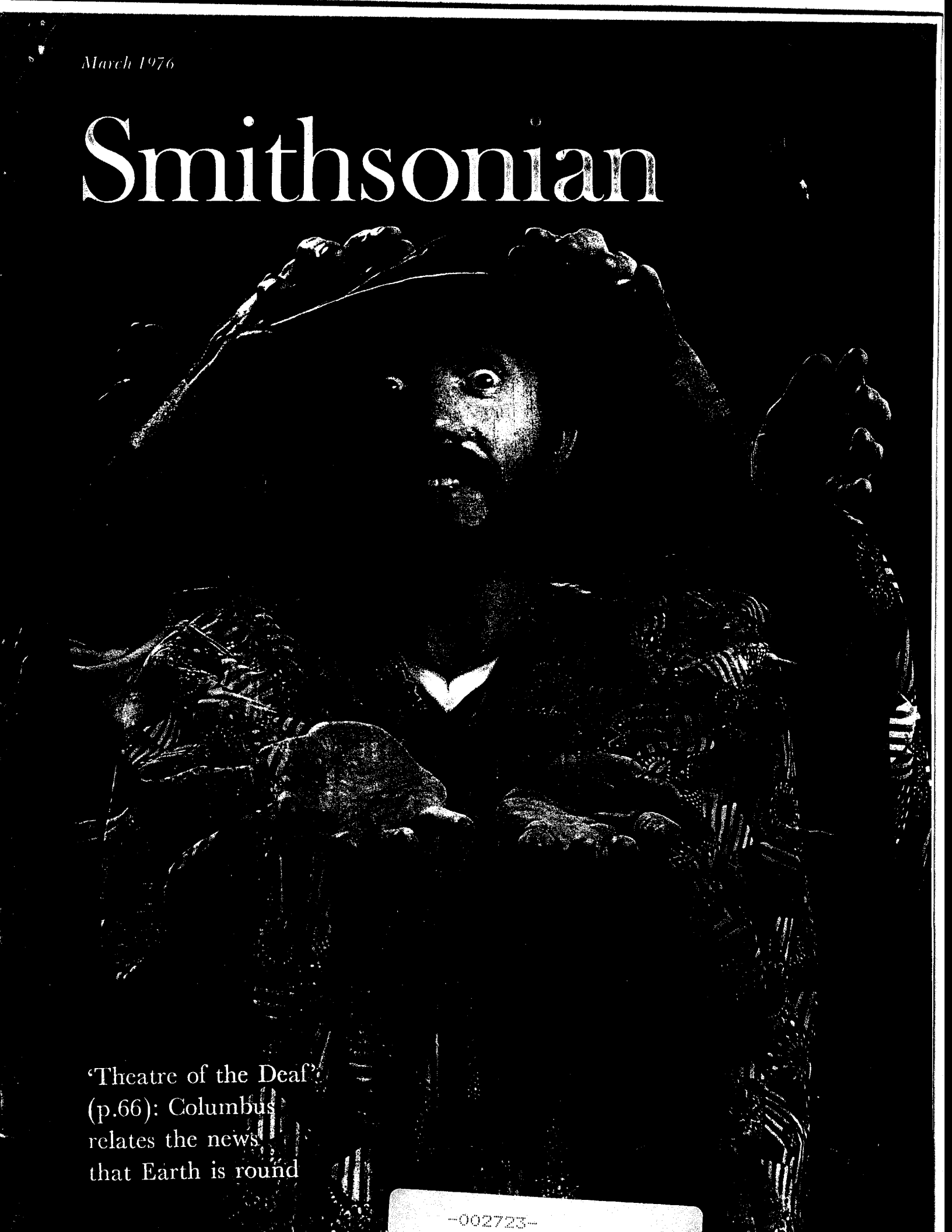


March 1976

# Smithsonian



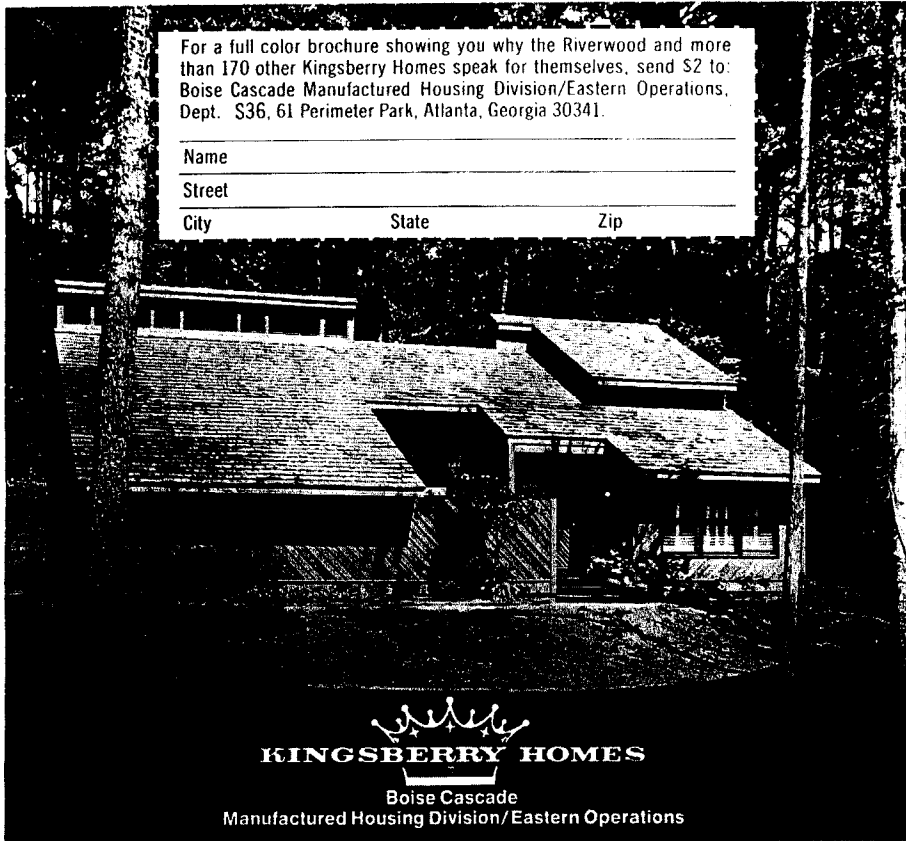
'Theatre of the Deaf'  
(p.66): Columbus  
relates the news  
that Earth is round

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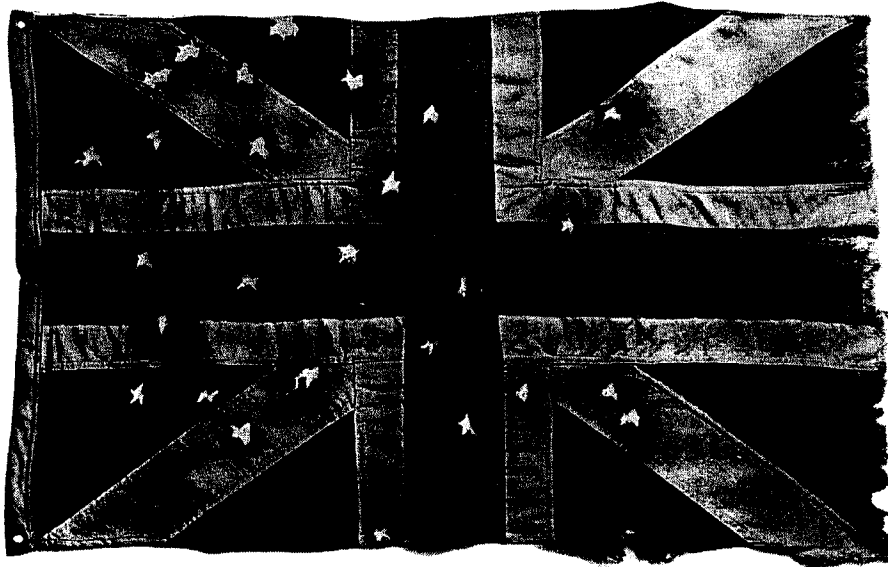
In these days of searching for ecological and energy-wise solutions to everything, it seems reasonable to look at the small Parsi community in Pune (Poona), India, which traditionally has a very direct biological means for disposing of their dead. They put corpses up on top of the Tower of Silence where scavenging vultures soon arrive and "ensure timely disposal."

According to Bombay's *Free Press Journal*, however, there's trouble on the Tower of Silence—thanks to a suicidal Parsi gentleman who recently did himself in with cyanide. Subsequently a number of the helpful vultures died of the same cause, and the rest apparently took note and decided to boycott the holy place.

*The quokka question*

A most appealing aspect of marsupials is their diagnostic feature—the pouch. Sentimentalists coo at the thought of the newborn kangaroo crawling up its mother's stomach and tumbling into the warmth and safety of her welcoming pouch, later to peek out beguilingly. But how does the baby know how to get there? It can't see, after all.

It has nostrils, so it may smell its destination; what scientists call chemotaxis. However, looking at opossums, some researchers have suggested that the newborn reacts to gravity, though how it could do so with such poorly developed inner ears (where the sense of balance is found) is a mystery.



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# The Bourbon Smoke

Now four Australian scientists, writing in *Nature*, (Volume 259, Number 5538), claim to have settled the question once and for all, at least for quokkas. Among several laboratory observations they made, they tilted a newly delivered quokka mother slightly off the vertical. Her newborn steadfastly headed straight up, thus missing the pouch by one centimeter. Then the mother was turned head down: the little joey turned around and went toward the pouch.

So, however they sense gravity, baby quokkas make their first voyage by navigating on the basis of what is called "negative geotropism."

## *Proving the obvious*

Children, it has long been suspected, are dangerous to the health of adults, and British investigators have now documented one way this is true.

Primary schoolchildren were invited to scream into a sound level meter. The mean level of some 200 screeches was 114 dBA. The highest was a 12-year-old girl who logged in at 122 dBA, which, according to *New Scientist* (Volume 68, Number 980), is at the threshold of listener pain. A four-year-old reached 111 dBA.

What is generally considered a safe noise level for extended periods of time is 90 dBA. So now it is proved that children can be a specific occupational hazard for teachers who run a noisy class or who mind the playground.

## *An old fish story*

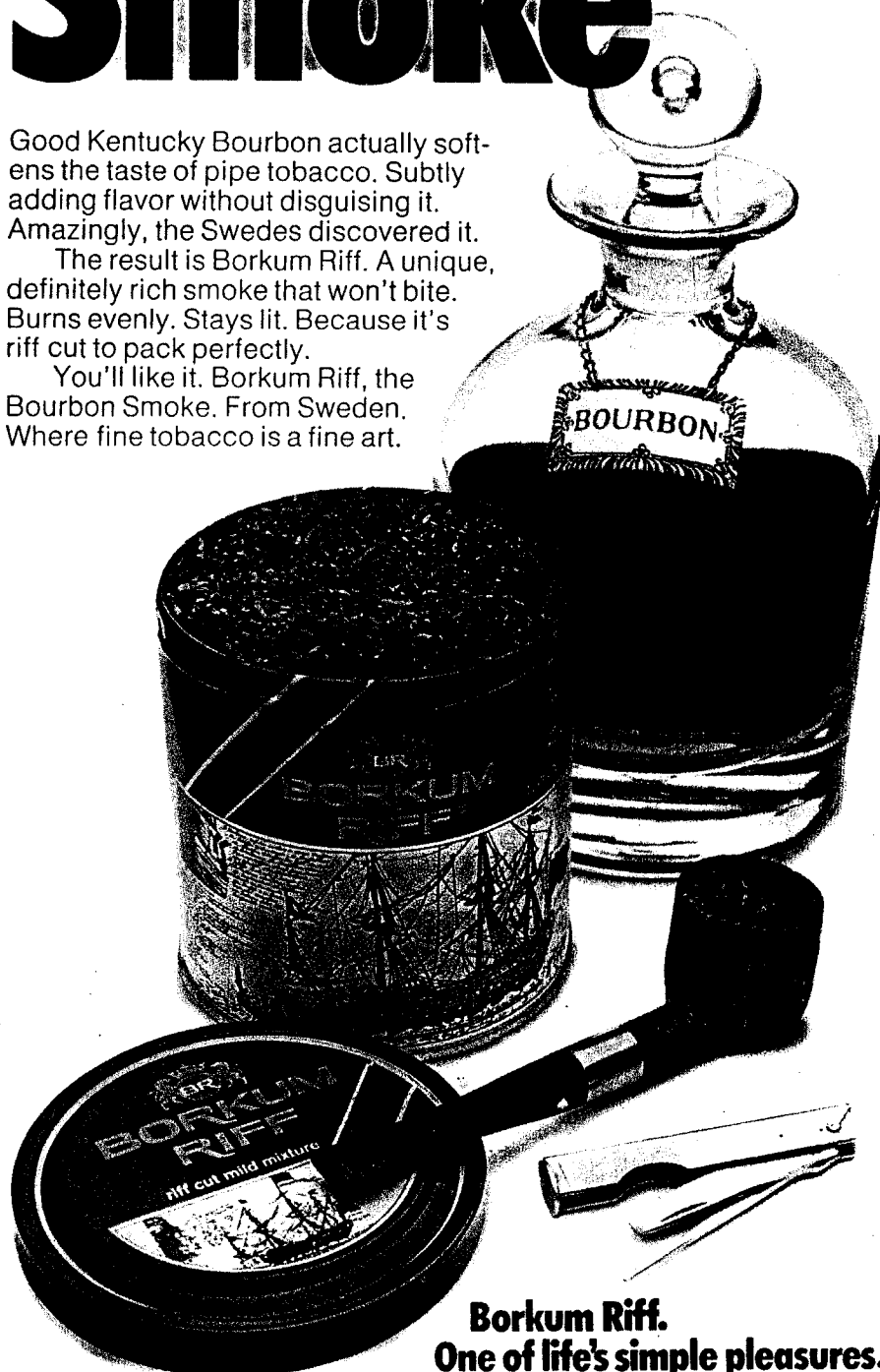
The coelacanth (pronounced see-la-canth) is a fish that has been much misunderstood by scientists, though much admired. In the first place, it was long supposed to have been extinct for 70 million years until one turned up in 1938, caught by fishermen off the coast of South Africa.

Since then, this lobe-finned fish, thought to be a direct precursor of the four-legged animals and therefore of us (though even this is now in doubt), has turned up often on fishermen's lines: some 85 have been taken from the Indian Ocean off Mozambique. But none has been captured alive, which has left biologists guessing about some of the coelacanth's most intimate biological processes—reproduction, for example. Is it oviparous (bearing eggs) or ovoviviparous (bearing live young)?

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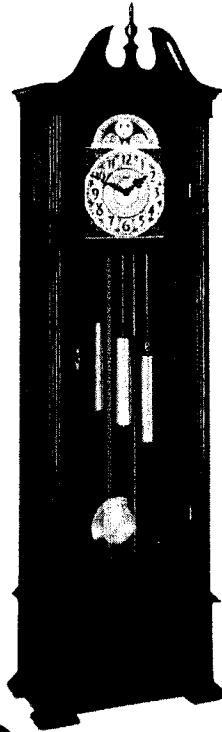
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In the absence of a clearly identifiable sex organ capable of internal fertilization, the fish was said by many biologists to be oviparous, but others wondered about the small number of large eggs found in some specimens. Too few, they thought, to insure survival.

The puzzle now has been solved by ichthyologists at the American Museum of Natural History in New York. Dissecting what turned out to be a gravid female (which had been in the museum's collection for more than a decade), they found five fully formed young coelacanth.

So the coelacanth is ovoviviparous. Now, isn't it nice, these days, to have something settled?

*Air quality index*

There is practically no way the citizen can really tell what is meant when the radio announcer gives the air quality index as part of the weather forecast. It is especially confusing if the citizen travels very much.

According to *Environmental Science and Technology* (Volume 10, No. 1), the President's Council on Environmental Quality made a survey in 1974 and discovered that among the 33 largest U.S. cities, no two indices were the same. They differed in such things as the number of pollutants counted, and in the manner in which they were interpreted.

So, in combination with several other federal agencies, the Council has been developing guidelines for a standardized index, which will be released next month. There's no way to force all locales to use a standardized index, but it does seem to make sense that we all get the bad news in the same format.

*Medical clues*

If your fingernails are distinctly darker at the tips, then you have chronic kidney failure and you should get to a doctor right away. Researchers at the University of Mississippi Medical Center say they have "found the half-and-half nail to be a highly specific sign, according to *Medical World News* (Volume 17, Number 1).

It was already known to medicine that uremia makes Lebanese dark and Scandinavians yellow, so Mississippi's John D. Bower began looking for other physical clues. He examined the nails of kidney failure patients, people chronically ill

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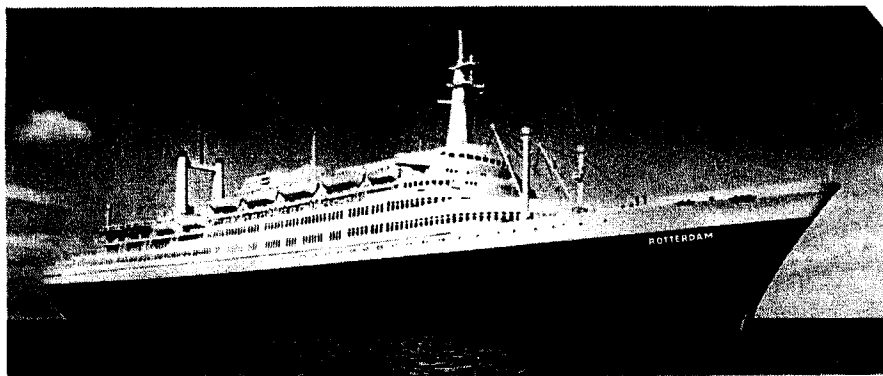
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from other causes, and some healthy people. The half-and-half nail, which is a result of melanin being deposited in the nail bed, was found exclusively among patients with chronic kidney failure—though not all such patients have it. In any event, it can serve as a valuable diagnostic clue for GPs.

Meanwhile, one finds in the same issue of *Medical World News* that doctors are seeking clues to the identity of another affliction. It seems that someone is sufficiently disgruntled with the policies of the American Medical Association to be swiping its documents and leaking them to the press and to federal investigators. AMA staffers say they know who it is but cannot prove it. They also say the informant is no doubt connected with the Church of Scientology, which the AMA considers a suspect cult. The informant, in phone conversations, says he's not so connected at all.

Of course, the informant is known as Sore Throat.

## Redoing history

There is a move afoot to make a science of history. It is being attempted by mathematically minded historians who call themselves "cliometricians" and apply to the past the techniques of mathematical and statistical analysis used by the social sciences. While this sounds distressing to those for whom history has always been, among other things, a "good read," the cliometricians are turning up some surprises in American history, according to *Mosaic* (Volume 7, Number 1).

- For example, most historians believe the Civil War gave impetus to U.S. industrialization but that the economy stagnated in the 1870s. Precisely wrong. Manufacturing sagged in the 1860s and per capita income in the '70s grew faster than any time afterward until the second World War.
- In the 20 years before the Civil War, per capita income in the South was not stagnating but grew as fast, probably faster, than in the North, though presumably from a lower base.
- Shipping costs declined from 1600 to 1850, not because of technological improvements in ships but because piracy was eliminated and, with markets concentrated, ships simply spent less time in port getting loaded.