

WHAT MIGHT HAVE BEEN.

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In this review of a century of scientific achievements in Indiana isn't it worth while to take a few minutes to rejoice that some things through the help of the Indiana Academy of Science have been frosted in the bud? We remember the conclusion to the parody on Maud Muller

“If of all sad words of tongue or pen
The saddest is ‘It might have been,
Sadder yet by far to see
What is and hadn't ought to be.’”

In the early spring of 1899 vague rumors reached Indiana University and Purdue that some sort of mathematical legislation was pending at Indianapolis. It was evident, however, that the state solons there assembled thought themselves well equipped to attack the problems, whatever they might be, with wisdom and justice for they made no appeal for help to their two state supported fountains of erudition.

As the session of the legislature was drawing toward its close it chanced to be the duty of the writer to visit the State Capitol and make sure that the Academy appropriation was cared for. When admitted to the floor of the House, imagine his surprise when he discovered that he was in the midst of a debate upon a piece of mathematical legislation. An ex-teacher from the eastern part of the state was saying; “The case is perfectly simple. If we pass this bill which establishes a new and correct value for π , “the author offers to our state without cost the use of his discovery and its free publication in our school text books, while everyone else must pay him a royalty.” The roll was then called and the bill passed its third and final reading in the lower house. A member then showed the writer a copy of the bill just passed and asked him if he would like an introduction to the learned doctor, its author. He declined the courtesy with thanks remarking that he was acquainted with as many crazy people as he cared to know.

That evening the senators were properly coached and shortly thereafter as it came to its final reading in the upper house they threw out with much merriment the epoch making discovery of the Wise Man from the Pocket.

This remarkable bill establishing a new value of π had thus passed five readings and it then needed but one more favorable reception in the Senate to secure for itself the inscription “Enacted by the State of Indiana.”

And what was this new and correct value of π ? The jargon of the text of the bill is difficult to understand. But the nearest the writer could come

to the rational interpretation of its meaning was this: At the outset it gave 4 as the true value of π while towards the end it gave 3.2 (three and two-tenths as the final truth) for which mankind waited in suspense until the fortunate appearance of the learned doctor. But the state did not father this monstrosity and it was probably the Indiana Academy of Science alone which prevented it. If this deduction is correct then that one act of prevention was worth more to Indiana, jealous of her fair fame as she is, than all she ever contributed or can contribute to the publication of the proceedings of her Academy of Science.