

The Great Emu War, and, Who Knows?

By Dennis Payton Knight

Historians mark big events with hyperbolic names and sometimes roman numerals. But this essay is not about world wars, hurricanes, and assassinations, but of lesser milestones that may too have altered history.

For instance, who knows how our national morals would have declined had a parrot been allowed to cuss? When Andrew Jackson died in 1845, the preacher conducting services at the White House reported, "Before the sermon... a wicked parrot... got excited and commenced swearing... loud and long... and had to be carried from the house." He said the presidential parrot "...let loose perfect gusts of cuss words." People were "horrified and awed at the bird's lack of reverence."

Liechtenstein has not been in a war since entering the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 with an army of 80. None were injured. It is said that 80 soldiers were sent in support of the Austrian-led combatants, and 81 returned, including an Italian who probably fought on the other side. Who knows what a bully the little country might have become had it actually fought and beat somebody?

Who knows what hubris Australia might have taken on had it won its war on emus? By order of the Australian defense minister, a significant force of soldiers, two to be exact, were sent off with machine guns and 10,000 rounds of ammunition to conduct the Great Emu War of 1932. Their mission was to cull the 20,000-plus population of the flightless birds plaguing farmers at the height of the Great Depression, eating crops and leaving gaping holes in fences where rabbits could enter and cause further havoc.

Only a few unfortunate emus fell to the assault. Ornithologist Dominic Serventy assessed the war thusly: "The machine-gunners' dreams of point-blank fire into... masses of Emus were soon dissipated." He speculated the Emus' own high command had ordered defensive guerrilla tactics, and its unwieldy army split into innumerable small units that made the use of military equipment uneconomic.

Who knows how much more the Russians could have consumed if they hadn't run out of vodka for a time? In the earliest hours of May 9, 1945, word got out to the Russian people that Nazi Germany had surrendered to the Soviet Union. Celebrations broke out in the streets immediately and, when Joseph Stalin finally addressed his people later in the day, the entire country had already run out of vodka. As one reporter put it, "...we drank it all."

And, if President Jimmy Carter hadn't been attacked while fishing in Georgia by a killer rabbit, maybe he would have beaten Ronald Reagan in 1980 to win reelection. A press account said the swimming bunny was hissing, teeth flashing, nostrils flared, and making straight for the president. A photo released to prove the attack just made things worse. Carter was mocked on Saturday Night Live and in the press for weeks, and the grateful Reagan didn't have to do much more than laugh.

Who knows?