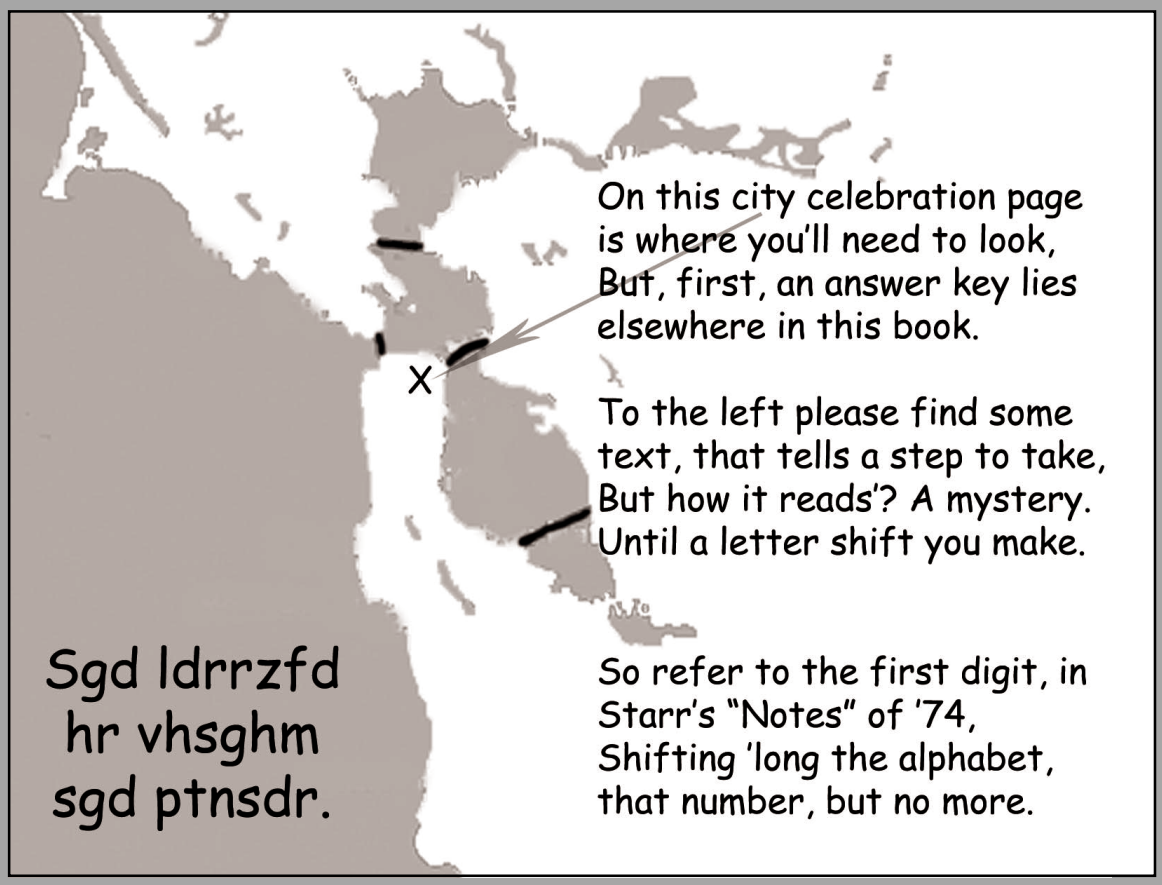
Solve this Rootles® clue within the pages of this magazine and reveal a secret message



The Game is My Business

by John Poor '93

{Editor's Note: One afternoon last Spring when I picked up my goddaughter Nellie Ruedig '07 from St. Paul's School for a visit, she immediately started talking about "clues," "a secret name for author Lewis Carroll" and how she hoped her house would win "Rootles®." It all sounded very exciting and very confusing and I wanted to find out more. I did. The spring-time SPS phenomenon "Rootles®" is the creation of John Poor '93. He agreed to write for* Alumni Horae *about the game "Rootles" and how it came to be.}*

**Lewis Carroll is a pseudonym of Charles Lutwidge Dodgson.*

If A=1 and Z=26 then a natural conclusion is C=3 and E=5. But what happens if A=2? Does Z=27 or 52 or 101? Under what circumstance would each of these, in turn, be the correct solution? Designing clues that will ask questions such as these is what I have enjoyed doing for the last three years, while developing a business called Rootles®—Quests for the Curious.

Rootles® designs and hosts custom "treasure hunts" as team-building and social activities for adventurous schools, corporate, and family groups. During the past two springs, these hunts have been enjoyed by St. Paul's students, providing a healthy challenge between houses similar to that of the Fiske Cup theater competition.

The first hunt was launched with assistance from the Dean of Students office, along with the house prefects, who sold the idea to their respective houses. The prefects, deans, and I met once during the winter term to talk through the possibilities of a spring term hunt, and left the Reading Room with our objectives: I would create a hunt to challenge and energize the students; and they would talk about the hunt with their houses, to explain the concept and create excitement before the clues were released. Prior to the start of the hunt, we were all a bit uncertain as to how this would work in each of the houses, but once the first clues were posted, for view on the school intranet, the hunt seemed to sell itself, and the competition was on!

To decipher clues, all Rootles® hunts require a group of people, with differing areas of expertise, working together and challenging each other. A clue cannot be solved until multiple layers of visual and language-based hints, referencing topics such as literature, science, local geography, or pop culture, are put together to form a solution. At St. Paul's the hunts required each house look to its own members and use all their different abilities to find the answers. During the first SPS hunt my estimated time of 45 minutes to an hour for solving each clue was quickly dismissed, as within 10 minutes first answers were submitted; the value of teamwork certainly proved its worth.

As individuals, we cannot help but view our surroundings from our own unique perspectives. A lifetime of experience helps to mold our responses to surrounding stimuli. Treasure hunts help us break our habit of relying on past performance: they push our thinking into broader perspectives, while entertaining us over the course of a hunt. We are asked to tackle a complete unknown where the greatest strengths available are the collective imagination of any given team and the communication among its members.

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In the initial SPS hunt, house members gathered around computers, following Seated Meals, to view and then decipher clues. Over the course of the hunt each of these clues led teams to the location of answer tags hidden on campus. These individual tags revealed a phrase or code that was in turn submitted by email determining the order of finish for each clue; points were awarded based upon the order.

In order to solve those clues, a house was required to recognize images faded into the background of the clue or to translate a cipher back into English. The first hunt at SPS took place over a period of about two weeks with a total of five clues. At the end of the hunt, the house with the most accumulated points was announced in Chapel.

Building a Business

I first experienced treasure hunts while growing up with my family in northern New England. At a young age, my cousins and I would entertain ourselves with simple hunts that incorporated similar sites and clues from hunt to hunt. The house piano, for example, would nearly always be referenced by a mention of 88 keys or black and white drawings of the keyboard. We solved those hunts quickly, and without too much guesswork.

As I grew older, the hunts became more sophisticated, with a family friend creating puzzles to delight the whole group. Challenges often lasted for hours and encompassed larger and more diverse areas. These clues were rarely solved at a first glance, but, instead, required the varied intelligences of each team's members. The maturation of hunts into this more complicated form drew me into designing such puzzles myself. A few years after college, I began to wonder if I could turn the fun and challenge into a business.

The first years of Rootles'® have been an adventure. From finding the name and building the Web site, to soliciting clients and developing products, the challenges I encountered allowed me to expand my original concept; while forcing me to grow and adapt as a new business owner. As each aspect of the busi-ness confronts me I am repeatedly forced to restructure my thinking, consult others, and learn whatever I need to know, in order to choose the best course of action. This is the case for any start-up, or business for that matter, but I feel that these hurdles reflect the very essence of Rootles®. Just as I listen and observe, constantly refining what Rootles® is for each hunt, the business adapts and reflects the necessities of the current situation.

That flexibility has been present from the very beginning. In seeking a name with trademark, Web and branding possibilities, I, initially, came up empty until a friend looked through root words in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, and upon paging through rootlets of words, the old English "rootle"—v. to dig or uncover with intent to discover something—appeared. An early exchange with a retired businessman, interested in aiding entrepreneurs, resulted in an utter lack of understanding. Our conversation became his monologue about why I really wanted to be selling real estate.

Instead of real estate, I focused my energy on more familiar areas of development, and found some answers in a familiar place. As a graduate of SPS, and a former faculty member at Deerfield Academy, I recognized that the very things key to designing a successful hunt were present in an environment I knew reasonably well. Rich histories, intricate settings and engaged audiences are all aspects of independent schools that make them logical venues for hunts, and make their students ideal participants.

> According to the Oxford English Dictionary the old-English verb "to rootle" means to dig or uncover with intent to discover something.

While I developed clients at independent schools, I also continued to build activities for various other groups. I spent summers in Nantucket, Mass., designing hunts with different markets in mind. I created walking and biking hunts for vacationing families and individuals, which introduced them to the history and magic of the island through an entertaining and enjoyable activity. In that same environment, I designed activities for local newspapers and artist associations, which brought visibility to those organizations. I also provided the first hunts for corporate retreats resulting in a fun and challenging team building experience for such groups.

Defining a treasure hunt can be a challenge.

It's dark, cold, and dreary . . . time for Rootles®!

The end of the winter term can be a tough time for students. The holidays are a distant memory and it's been dark, cold, and dreary for what seems like too long. In an effort to avoid the doldrums, the Dean of Students office was looking for a student pick-me-up plan when Rootles® appeared on the scene.

A group of people examines a Rootles® clue.

"We were in the last month of the winter term and people were in their usual good moods . . . " laughed Associate Dean of Students Scott Heitmiller '81 talking last year about why the game was introduced at the School.

"We saw it as a good pick-me-up. It was something really positive for the kids to do."

And the idea has worked well for the past two spring terms.

"The students have absolutely fallen in love with it," he said.

They have not only fallen in love with it they have begun to build a culture around it. Talks of forming alliances, clothing strategies, and a "Queen of Rootles® abound during the game playing season.

"Other dorms have formed alliances; my dorm has not. I've seen pictures of girls dressed completely in black with face paint, prepared to "rootle," wrote Mary Gamber '07 in an e-mail last year in the middle of the second season of Rootles® at the School.

Explaining the theory and speaking in support of the face-paint-black-clothing approach to playing Rootles® was Eli Mitchell '06.

"Rootles® is absolutely amazing. The infamous and completely dominating Kitt II-Kit III alliance has found that when we dress all in black and wear black face paint, we find the clue faster."

One student last year, Lizzie Mills '05 became known for her abilities to quickly solves clues and earned the moniker "Queen of Rootles®."

"Almost all the clues are very challenging, and I don't know how people are able to figure them out so quickly," said Karen Winterhof '05. "Ask Lizzie Mills '05, she is renowned for her Rootles® prowess and determination."

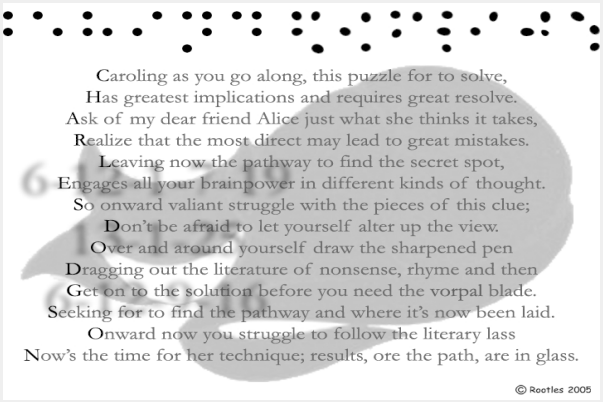
In the end Rootles® is about having fun and uniting the campus after a long, hard winter. And it seems to work.

Robert Gosney said that the game united his house in an effort to solve the clues. "It's a great way for the dorm to bond and explore the campus."

"I find that that game is a great break from the routine of SPS. It's fun to "rootle" with friends across campus searching in obscure locations for the answer. The clues are difficult to solve, but are random enough that everyone is able to help find a solution," Gamber said.

"It encourages everyone to participate and compete regardless of Form or gender," Winterhof said.

Anatomy of an SPS "Clue"



Above is the second clue of last year's hunt at St. Paul's School. It is also the clue referred to the Editor's Note that opens this feature.

A Rootles® clue is open to many different interpretations. In asking participants to puzzle their way through to a solution, decisions need to be made among the many outcomes. Twelve of the 18 houses solved the clue and gained points for that round of the hunt. The first answers were submitted about 12-15 hours after the clue was first posted on the intranet, considerably longer than previous clues. The knowledge that students were working in larger groups, and with access to computers, allowed me more freedom in creating the clues than I have for most audiences.

Here are the major elements of the clue:

1. The first letter of each row is in bold *(often an indication of significance)*.

a) This spells Charles Dodgson *(Lewis Caroll's pseudonym)*.

b) The first word of the first line also references Carol, albeit in an oblique manner.

2. The background image of the Cheshire Cat furthers the tie to the darkened letters.

a) The Cheshire Cat and "vorpal blade" refer to *Through the Looking Glass*.

b) The mention of "vorpal" is from the poem *The Jabberwocky*, in that book.

3. The dots across the top are in Braille (though slightly distorted). There are two words.

a) The first word in Braille, "behind," starts from the left and reads left to right.

b) The second word, "Sheldon," starts from the right and reads right to left—mirrored just as the Jabberwocky poem is in its original form, in *Looking Glass*.

4. The background image of faded numbers is a substitution cipher (A=1, B=2, C=3, . . .). It is bit of a distraction, as the translated phrase (Flags May Flip) is used as a hint to crack a subsequent clue.

Therefore, the answer tag was behind Sheldon (from the Braille), "ore the path" (from the last lines of the clue), on the "glass" windows of the squash building. The tag read: "Somehow it seems to have filled my head with ideas —only I don't know what they are!" As well as: "who the quote is attributed to." Correct submissions for this tag contained the quote as well as "Lewis Carroll," or "Charles Dodgson."

A successful hunt design will provide the participants with sufficient guidance to ensure a certain outcome, but be open enough as to allow limitless creativity from the participants. At times this is a daunting task. The nature of a particular hunt often appears clear to me from the first conversation or site visit, yet remains somewhat vague for the client until they experience the hunt themselves.

That mysticism, which is inherent in deciphering puzzles, cannot be quantified. Some of the valuable lessons garnered from a hunt may be ones learned by a team struggling with a clue, while another group slips by with the solution. These teams recognize their missteps, recover, and through the process learn. Often those lessons enable them to complete the next challenges more easily. We are made stronger by overcoming those hurdles than we are by the straightforward success of a single clue's solution. These intangible, undefined aspects create the mystery and magic of a Rootles® hunt.

Designing a hunt

Perhaps the most treasured aspect of Rootles® is the creativity required for hunt design. Because one of the key variables in creating a hunt is the unique layout of each location, the design of a successful puzzle requires full exploration of the prospective site. Does it have unique physical features or historical relevance that can be used in the game? I explore the nooks and crannies of schools' buildings and grounds, churches and family homes, absorbing as much of the culture of a place as possible, in order to create clues that will challenge and induce participants to observe and explore their environment.

The design of one hunt, held on the morning of a wedding, found me wading across a beaver pond and digging through the remnants of a collapsed farm out-building on a family property. Using digital images and copious notes, I mapped out the course that different teams might be required to navigate on the day of the hunt. In exploring the property, I found rusted out vehicles, sunken culverts and sinking foundations. (What an interesting backdrop the couple was using for their wedding!) The task at hand was then to trans-

late the whole area into clues and map a route to explore on the big day.

In addition to geography, the technicalities of clue design must be considered. Is a clue too obscure? Is it too straightforward? Is it too visual? Is it aesthetically pleasing? Who is the hunt designed for? Are they familiar with each other? Are they familiar with the area of the hunt? How much of a challenge are they interested in? Would they prefer a more physically challenging hunt, or a leisurely stroll through town? Exploration of the site, careful clue design and clear communication with the client, come together to ensure that a hunt best reflects the needs of its participants.

For the wedding mentioned above, I took advantage of the time when the family and friends converged on a local eatery for their rehearsal dinner, and spent the evening secretly placing clues at the family property and laying out the hunt for the morning of the wedding. Watching the hunt transpire the following morning was inspirational. Children and grandparents, friends and family, teamed up, and meeting one another (some for the first time), discovered the many beautiful aspects of their surroundings. The clues varied in their difficulty and style. Kids were able to determine where images led, while other attendees worked to decipher puzzles and codes. When everyone returned from hunting, the cumulative efforts of working together were rewarded, and the two families were taking steps toward becoming one.

When all is said and done, the process of building each hunt is my main focus in Rootles®. Every part of creating a hunt and watching participants work toward the final solution is rewarding. From the first visit to a site, when I begin to think through the layout of clues and explore a new area, to a final competition, where groups may be asked to compile information they have gathered during the hunt, I can see and feel the energy of participants as they tackle these puzzles.

Organizing a hunt and building the individual clues taps into the same creativity that was the focus of my undergraduate degree in studio arts. While not the correct fit for everyone, the non-traditional aspects associated with this kind employment are energizing and incredibly fulfilling for me. Ultimately, it has allowed me to keep exploring whatever interests me on a given day, all in the name of designing clues and building Rootles®.

The Rootles® designer gives tips for the magazine hunt and the answer.

John Poor '93 lives in Fort Collins, Colo., and comes East to design and run hunts for groups such as SPS.

- The coast line depicted in the background indicates the location of this west coast city.
- The coded phrase needs to be unscrambled to reveal instructions to find the message.
- The 1974 Form Notes contain a note from Peter Starr. Refer to the first digit in that note, and, accordingly, shift the scrambled letters along the alphabet.

Now if you haven't figured it out, and you have really tried you can turn this magazine upside down and read how to solve the clue.

- The first clue is San Francisco

- The coded phrase unscrambles to "The Message is Within the Quotes"—You deciphter the message by using the first digit "1" (found in the 1974 form note for Peter Starr) to move the letter sequence one place. So instead of A=A the pattern is moved "1" place forward and for this code A=B, B=C, etc.

Now reading the clue you note that it begins with "At this city celebration page is where you ought to look." On page 171 is the photo essay of the San Francisco Celebration. In the text on the page is only one phrase within quotes that reads, "Happy Birthday St. Paul's School." That is the message you have been searching for.