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Be Not Afraid to Repeat Funny Line

A FEW days ago a state senator delivered a humorous speech in the Legislature which depicted how politicians equivocate on the volatile liquor issue. It amused some, offended others.

As reported in the newspaper, it sounded like an original oration but it had a familiar ring. My files, by strange coincidence, turned up another item, almost word for word like it, published in *Forbes* magazine, Nov. 1, 1977.

That one was presented as a letter from a southern congressman to a constituent who had demanded to know his stand on whiskey. *Forbes* had picked it up from the newsletter of the Seraphic Secretaries of America. It could date back to the temperance movement before Prohibition in 1920.

It's a much-used piece of humor and this shows how such material hangs on. Entertainers and after-dinner speakers hold onto and repeat jokes which have gotten big

laughs, whether they originated them or merely paraphrased them.

Most good jokes have been published, not always with due credit. Awhile back Jack Wettengel sent some self-contradictory statements, including "If George Washington were alive today he'd be turning over in his grave." That one has been credited to Samuel Goldwyn and other public figures, and no telling how many times it has been used without credit.

American Heritage magazine (Feb-March 1985) contains a reader's letter questioning originality of Franklin D. Roosevelt's assertion that "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." The reader thought the remark had been made by Sir Francis Bacon 400 years ago. The magazine determined that what Bacon said was "Nothing is terrible except fear itself."

"Montaigne expressed it this way: 'The thing I fear most is fear,'" the editors added. And Thoreau wrote in his journal: 'Nothing is so much to

be feared as fear.' Perhaps all were basically rephrasing the biblical proverb that says 'Be not afraid of sudden fear.'"

Catchy sayings of philosophy, wit, humor and poetry are often quoted by people who actually may suppose the thoughts were their own rather than something they'd read or heard. Listeners don't always know the difference, either. Really original material is rare, so repetition is inevitable.

A vaudeville magician once told me that in his day a performer could start out, gradually perfect his act, and repeat it for years with little change. Now TV puts an act on the air and it's used up, except for reruns and night clubs.

That's why entertainers hire professionals to think up, plagiarize, write and rewrite jokes for them. Some politicians and businessmen hire professional humorists, too.

Will Rogers wrote: "As our government deteriorates our humor increases." That was funny 60 years ago.