# Where Are They Now?
# April Fool!

**by James Thurber**[1]

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One snowy January evening in 1910 about a hundred professors and advanced students of mathematics from Harvard University gathered in a lecture hall in Cambridge, Massachusetts, to listen to a speaker by the name of William James Sidis. He had never addressed an audience before, and he was abashed and a little awkward at the start. His listeners had to attend closely, for he spoke in a small voice that did not carry well, and he punctuated his talk with nervous, shrill laughter. A thatch of fair hair fell far over his forehead and keen blue eyes peered out from what one of those present later described as a "pixie-like" face. The speaker wore black velvet knickers. He was eleven years old.

As the boy warmed to his subject, his shyness melted and there fell upon his listeners' ears the most remarkable words

they had ever heard from the lips of a child. William James Sidis had chosen for the subject of his lecture "Four-Dimensional Bodies." Even in this selective group of erudite gentlemen, there were those who were unable to follow all the processes of the little boy's thought. To such laymen as were present, the fourth dimension, as it was demonstrated that night, must indeed have perfectly fitted its colloquial definition: "a speculative realm of incomprehensibly involved relationships." When it was all over, the distinguished Professor Daniel F. Comstock of Massachusetts Institute of Technology was moved to predict to reporters, who had listened in profound bewilderment, that young Sidis would grow up to be a great mathematician, a famous leader in the world of science.

William Sidis, who at the age of eleven made the front pages of newspapers all over the country, was a Harvard student at the time. To explain how he got there, we must look at his father, the late Boris Sidis. Born in Kiev in 1868, the elder Sidis had come to this country, learned English, and gone to Harvard, from which he was graduated in 1894. His specialty was that branch of psychotherapy which

engages to alleviate the nervous diseases and maladjustments by mental suggestion. He wrote a book called "The Psychology of Suggestion," and he was greatly interested in experiments in transmitting suggestion by means of the hypnotic state. It was his belief that in its very first years the brain is many times more susceptible to impressions than in later life. When his son was born in 1898, he was born, so to speak, into a laboratory. Boris Sidis by the time was running a psychotherapeutic institute in Brookline, Massachusetts. He was an admirer and friend of the late William James, and he named his son after that great psychologist.

Boris Sidis began his experiments on his son when little William was two years old. It appears that he induced a kind of hypnoidal state by the use of alphabet blocks. The quick results he got delighted his scientific mind. The child learned to spell and to read in a few months. Within a year he could write both English and French on the typewriter. At five he had composed a treatise on anatomy and had arrived at a method of calculating the date on which any day of the week had fallen during the past ten thousand years. Boris Sidis published several papers in scientific journals describing his baby's achievements. At six, the

little boy was sent to a Brookline public school, where he astounded his teachers and alarmed the other children by tearing through seven years of schooling in six months. When he was eight years old, William proposed a new table of logarithms, employing 12 instead of the usual 10 as the base. Boris Sidis published a book about his amazing son, called "Philistine and Genius," and got into Who's Who in America.

The wonder child was going on nine when his father tried to enroll him at Harvard. He could have passed the entrance examinations with ease, but the startled and embarrassed university authorities would not allow him to take them. He continued to perform his wonders at home, and began the study of Latin and Greek. He was not interested in toys or in any of the normal pleasures of small children. Dogs terrified him. "If I see a dog," William told somebody at this time, "I must run away. I must hide. I like the cat. I can't play out, for my mother would have to be there all the time—because of the possibility that I might see a dog." His chief recreation seems to have been going on streetcar rides with his parents. The elder Sidis explained transfers to him and interested him in the names of streets and places. Even before

he was five, William had learned to recite all the hours and stations on a complex railroad timetable. He would occasionally recite timetables for guests as other children recite Mother Goose rhymes or sing little songs. Those who remember him in those years say that he had something of the intense manner of a neurotic adult.

In 1908, at the age of ten, William James Sidis was permitted to enroll at Tufts College, in Medford. He commuted daily from Brookline with his mother, who was as interested in his phenomenal mental development as his father was. They always went to and from the college on streetcars. The youngster attended Tufts for one year and finally, in 1909, when he was eleven, Harvard permitted him to enroll there as a special student. He matriculated as a regular freshman the following year, and thus became a member of the class of 1914. Cotton Mather, in 1674, had become a Harvard freshman at the age of twelve, and it is probably because of this distinguished precedent that William Sidis was allowed to matriculate at that same age. He was a source of wonder to his fellow students and to the faculty; some of the newspapers assigned reporters to cover "the Sidis case."

Just how William was prevailed upon to speak before the learned scholars in January of his first year at Harvard is lost to the record, but it is known that he took an eager interest in hearing others lecture and joined easily in group discussions of metaphysics. In his spare time he began to compose two grammars, one Latin, the other Greek. The pressure of his studies and his sudden fame began to tell upon him, however, and it wasn't long after his notable discourse that he had a general breakdown. His father was running a sanatorium in Portsmouth, New Hampshire, at the time, and William was rushed off there. When finally he came back to Harvard, he was retiring and shy; he could not be persuaded to lecture again; he began to show a marked distrust of people, a fear of responsibility, and a general maladjustment to his abnormal life. He did not mingle much with students and he ran from newspapermen, but they cornered him, of course, on the day of his graduation as a Bachelor of Arts in 1914. He was sixteen years old. He wore long trousers then, and he faced the reporters who descended on the Yard with less of a feeling of embarrassment than he had as a knickered child. But definite phobias had developed in him. "I want to live the perfect life," William told the

newspapermen. "The only way to live the perfect life is to live it in seclusion. I have always hated crowds." For "crowds" it was not difficult to read "people." Among those who graduated with William James Sidis that day were Julius Spencer Morgan; Gilbert Seldes; and Vinton Freedley and Laurence Schwab, the musical-comedy producers. The reporters paid no attention to them.

At sixteen, William James Sidis was a large boy, and when he entered Harvard Law School, he was no longer the incongruous figure he had been. The newspapers had little interest in his comings and goings. He attended law school quietly for three years and was apparently a brilliant student, but his main interest was mathematics, and in 1918 he accepted a teaching position at a university in Texas. His fame preceded him, but even if it hadn't, the extreme youth of this mathematics instructor would have been enough to set him off as a curiosity. He found himself the centre of an interest that annoyed and dismayed him. He suddenly gave up his position and returned bitterly and quietly to Boston, where he lived obscurely for some months.

It was on May 1st, 1919, that young Sidis's name reached the front pages of the newspapers again. With about twenty other

young persons, he took part in a Communistic demonstration in Roxbury and was hauled into the municipal court as one of the ringleaders of the group, as, indeed the very individual who had carried the horrific red flag in their parade. On the witness stand, Sidis proved to be more forthright and candid than tactful. He announced to a shocked court that there was for him no god but evolution; asked if he believed in what the American flag stands for, he said only to a certain extent. At one point he launched on an explanation of the Soviet form of government, for the instruction of the magistrate. His Marxist leaning had developed over a period of several years. When the United States entered the war, he had announced himself as a conscientious objector, and on several occasions had delivered himself of the opinion that the troubles of the world were caused by capitalism.

A policeman who had helped break up the parade of the radicals identified Sidis as the man who had carried the red flag. The officer said that he had asked Sidis why he was not carrying the American flag, and that Sidis had replied, "To hell with the American flag!" Returning to the stand, the famous prodigy hotly denied that he had ever spoken

to the witness and that he had ever said to anyone, "To hell with the American flag!" He repeated that he was opposed to war and that he believed in a socialized form of government. After a pause, he announced that, as a matter of fact, he had carried an American flag, whereupon, to the amazement of the courtroom, he pulled a miniature American flag from his pocket. He was sentenced to eighteen months in jail for inciting to riot, and assault. He appealed, and while out on bail of $5,000 disappeared from the state in which he had startled erudite professors and shocked patriotic policemen. It marked the beginning of a new and curious mode of life for the young man.

For five years after that, William James Sidis seems to have achieved the "perfect life" he had spoken of on the day of his graduation, the life of seclusion. Apparently he drifted from city to city, working as a clerk, or in some other minor capacity, for a salary only large enough for him to subsist on. In 1924 he was dragged back into the news when a reporter found him working in an office in Wall Street, at twenty-three dollars a week. He was dismayed at being discovered. He said all he wanted was to make just enough to live on and to work at something that required a

minimum of mental effort. The last few reporters who went down to his office to interview him didn't get to see him. He had quit his job and disappeared again.

Two years later, in 1926, Dorrance & Company, a Philadelphia publishing house which prints "vanity" books—that is, books published at the authors' expense—got out a volume called "Notes on the Collection of Transfers." It was written by one Frank Folupa. Frank Folupa, some pitilessly ingenious reporter discovered, was none other than William James Sidis. Again he was run down and interviewed. He announced that he had been for a long time a "peridromophile"—that is, a collector of streetcar transfers. He had coined the word himself. His book (now out of print) ran to three hundred pages and was a scholarly and laborious treatise on the origin, nature, and classification of nothing more nor less than the slips of paper streetcar conductors hand to passengers when they ask for transfers. Many a psychologist and analyst must have been interested to read in the papers that the genius of the precocious child who had astounded the academic world sixteen years before had flowered in this bizarre fashion. The book is worthy of examination. Sidis wrote a preface

to the volume, which began this way: "This book is a description of what is, so far as the Author is aware, a new kind of hobby, but one which seems on the face of it to be as reasonable, as interesting, and as instructive as any other sort of collection fad. This is the collection of street car transfers and allied forms. The Author himself has already collected over 1600 such forms." The preface revealed, in another place, that the Author was not without a certain humor. "We may mention," it read, "the geographical and topographical interest, both in the exploration and in the analysis of the transfers themselves. There is also the interesting sidelights which such a collection throws on the politics in which transit companies are necessarily involved; though we hardly recommend that this political interest be carried far enough to induce the collector to take sides in any such disputes. And again: "One may derive much amusement out of transfers—It is said that a Harvard College student got on a street car and, wishing an extra ride, asked the conductor for a transfer. When asked 'Where to?' he said, 'Anywhere.' The conductor winked and said, 'All right. I'll give you a transfer to Waverly.' The student was afterwards laughed at when he told the story,

and was informed that the asylum for the feeble-minded was located at Waverly." Sidis also included in his preface some verses he had written when he was fourteen years old. They begin:

> From subway trains at Central,
> a transfer get, and go
> To Allston or Brighton or
> to Somerville, you know;
> On cars from Brighton transfer
> to Cambridge Subway east
> And get a train to Park Street,
> or Kendall Square, at least.

"We know," the Author concludes, "someone who was actually helped to take the right route by remembering a snatch from one of these verses." The book discusses all kinds of transfers: standard types, Ham type, Pope type, Smith type, Moran type, Franklin Rapid transfers, Stedman transfers. Of the last (to give you an idea), Mr. Sidis wrote, "Stedman transfers: This classification refers to a peculiar type turned out by a certain transfer printer in Rochester, N. Y. The peculiarities of the typical Stedman transfer are the tabular time limit occupying the entire right-hand end of the transfer (see Diagram in Section 47) and

the row-and-column combination of receiving route (or other receiving conditions) with the half-day that we have already discussed in detail."

The year after his book came out (it apparently sold only to a few other peridromophiles), Sidis came back to New York City and once again got a job as a clerk with a business firm. To his skill and experience in general office work, the mathematical genius had now added, ironically, the ability to operate an adding machine with great speed and accuracy, and was fond of boasting of this accomplishment. He lived at 112 West 119th Street, where he made friends with Harry Freedman, the landlord, and his sister, a Mrs. Schlectien. Sidis is no longer with them and they will not tell you where he has gone, but they will forward any mail that comes for him. They are fond of the young man and appreciate his desire to avoid publicity. "He had a kind of chronic bitterness, like a lot of people you see living in furnished rooms," Mr. Freedman recently told a researcher into the curious history of William James Sidis. Sidis used to sit on an old sofa in Freedman's living room and talk to him and his sister. Sidis told them he hated Harvard and that anyone who sends

his son to college is a fool—a boy can learn more in a public library. Frequently he talked about his passion for collecting transfers. "He can tell you how to reach any street in any city of the United States on a single streetcar fare," said Mr. Freedman in awe and admiration. It seems that Sidis corresponds with peridromophiles in a number of other cities, and keeps up on the streetcar and transfer situation in that way. Once the young man brought down from his room a manuscript he was working on and asked Mrs. Schlectien if he might read "a few chapters" to her. She said it turned out to be a book on the order of "Buck Rogers," all about adventures in a future world of wonderful inventions. She said it was swell.

William James Sidis lives today, at the age of thirty-nine, in a hall bedroom of Boston's shabby south end. For a picture of him and his activities, this record is indebted to a young woman who recently succeeded in interviewing him there. She found him in a small room papered with the design of huge, pinkish flowers, considerably discolored. There was a large, untidy bed and an enormous wardrobe trunk, standing half open. A map of the United States hung on one wall. On a table beside the door was a pack of

streetcar transfers neatly held together with an elastic. On a dresser were two photographs, one (surprisingly enough) of Sidis as the boy genius, the other a sweet-faced girl with shell-rimmed glasses and an elaborate marcel wave. There was also a desk with a tiny, ancient typewriter, a World Almanac, a dictionary, a few reference books, and a library book which the young man's visitor at one point picked up. "Oh, gee," said Sidis, "that's just one of those crook stories." He directed her attention to the little typewriter. "You can pick it up with one finger," he said, and did so.

William Sidis at thirty-nine is a large, heavy man, with a prominent jaw, a thickish neck, and a reddish mustache. His light hair falls down over his brow as it did the night he lectured to the professors in Cambridge. His eyes have an expression which varies from the ingenious to the wary. When he is wary, he has a kind of incongruous dignity which breaks down suddenly into the gleeful abandon of a child on holiday. He seems to have difficulty in finding the right words to express himself, but when he does, he speaks rapidly, nodding his head jerkily to emphasize his points, gesturing with his left hand, uttering occasionally a curious, gasping laugh. He seems to get a great and ironic enjoyment

out of leading a life of wandering irresponsibility after a childhood of scrupulous regimentation. His visitor found in him a certain childlike charm.

Sidis is employed now, as usual, as a clerk in a business house. He said that he never stays in one office long because his employers of fellow-workers soon find out that he is the famous boy wonder, and he can't tolerate a position after that. "The very sight of a mathematical formula makes me physically ill," he said. "All I want to do is run an adding machine, but they won't let me alone." It came out that one time he was offered a job with the Eastern Massachusetts Street Railway Company. It seems that the officials fondly believed the young wizard would somehow be able to solve all their technical problems. When he showed up for work, he was presented with a pile of blueprints, charts, and papers filled with statistics. One of the officials found him an hour later weeping in the midst of it all. Sidis told the man he couldn't bear responsibility, or intricate thought, or computation—except on an adding machine. He took his hat and went away.

Sidis has a new interest which absorbs him at the moment more than streetcar transfers. This is the study of certain aspects

of the history of the American Indian. He teaches a class of half a dozen interested students once every two weeks. They meet in his bedroom and arrange themselves on the bed and floor to listen to the one-time prodigy's intense but halting speech. Sidis is chiefly concerned with the Okamakammessett tribe, which he describes as having had a kind of proletarian federation. He has written some booklets on Okamakammessett lore and history, and if properly urged, will recite Okamakammessett poetry and even sing Okamakammessett songs. He admitted that his study of the Okamakammessetts in an outgrowth of his interest in Socialism. When the May Day demonstration of 1919 was brought up by the young woman, he looked at the portrait of the girl on his dresser and said, "She was in it. She was one of the rebel forces." He nodded his head vigorously, as if pleased with that phrase, "I was the flag-bearer," he went on. "And do you know what the flag was? Just a piece of red silk." He gave his curious laugh. "Red silk," he repeated. He made no reference to the picture of himself in the days of his great fame, but his interviewer later learned that on one occasion, when a pupil of his asked him point-blank about his infant precocity and insisted on a

demonstration of his mathematical prowess, Sidis was restrained with difficulty from throwing him out of the room.

Sidis revealed to his interviewer that he has another work in progress: a treatise on floods. He showed her the first sentence: "California has acquired considerable renown on account of its alleged weather." It seems that he was in California some ten years ago during his wanderings. His visitor was emboldened, at last, to bring up the prediction, made by Professor Comstock of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology back in 1910, that the little boy who lectured that year on the fourth dimension to a gathering of learned men would grow up to be a great mathematician, a famous leader in the world of science. "It's strange," said William James Sidis, with a grin, "but, you know, I was born on April Fools' Day."

—Jared L. Manley (James Thurber) 1

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1 In The Years with Ross Thurber wrote: "It was one of the 'Where Are They Now?' series, for which I did the rewrite (Grossett & Dunlap, 1957, p. 210)." But Jared Manley was Thurber's pseudonym. "Bernstein writes: 'In early 1936 Thurber began to write (really rewrite, since some of The New Yorker's best reporters, like Eugene Kinkead, were doing the

research) a number of short, retrospective profiles. Bernstein also reveals that Jared L. Manley was a name that Thurber cobbled together when writing his first piece about an old boxer based on the initials of the boxer John L. Sullivan and Manley based on "the manly art of self-defense".'" —Privacy, Information and Technology

2 Norbert Weiner, who was at the math club meeting wrote: "Young Sidis, who was then eleven, was obviously a brilliant and interesting child. His interest was primarily in mathematics. I well remember the day at the Harvard Mathematics Club in which G. C. Evans, now the retired head of the department of mathematics of the University of California and Sidis's life-long friend, sponsored the boy in a talk on the four-dimensional regular figures. The talk would have done credit to a first- or second-year graduate student of any age, although all the material it contained was known elsewhere and was available in the literature. The theme had been made familiar to me by E. Q. Adams, a companion of my Tufts days. I am convinced that Sidis had no access to existing sources, and that the talk represented the triumph of the unaided efforts of a very brilliant child (Ex-Prodigy, Simon & Schuster, p. 131 - 132)."

3 Minutes of the Harvard Math Club, Wed., Jan. 5, 1910

4 Cf. The Failure Myth by Dan Mahony: "Research shows that most child prodigies go on to lead productive lives. As did Sidis."

Typing by Bill Paton