

Chance (Fall 1990)

Bibidy Bobidy Zoo

As most of you know, the site of the last annual meeting of the American Statistical Association was Disneyland. I went with some trepidation, even though it was nice to meet some old friends: Mickey, Minnie, Donald, Our kids, on the other hand, really enjoyed our going to Disneyland--they stayed home.

To be precise, it was more than just an ASA meeting. We tend to forget that some members from the Western North American Region of the Biometric Society also attend. They call their organization WNAR, pronounced "wee-nar," as in "Do you want mustard on that thar' weenar?"

In the old days we used to have the statistics meeting in a single hotel (I remember all night sessions at Widow Kipp's Boarding House). Now the meetings have grown so large that we're holding them in theme parks. It certainly offers a change of scenery, but the meetings were exhausting enough when they were in the hotels and all we had to do was run from one conference room to another--and that was just to keep up with the parties. Now we're called upon to race around several thousand acres. Here is how I spent my first day:

In the morning, I heard an early morning lecture by Donald Rubin in Tomorrowland after which I had to run to hear a talk by Arnold Zellner in Fantasyland. Then I ran to catch the jungle safari boat to take me to hear Steve Fienberg lecture on contingency tables. I would have made it on time, if it weren't for those Bayesian crocodiles encountered on the way. I got there in time, however, to see Fienberg, who was appropriately dressed as Indiana Jones, show off his expertise with odds ratios and leather whips.

Then I had to run to the Economic Outlook Luncheon in Aunt Matilda's kitchen on Main Street, U.S.A. We were offered a choice of hot dogs or buffalo burgers, depending on whether we were liberals or conservatives. Instead of audiovisual illustrations of the changing economy, we were given a free pass to Mr. Bush's Wild Ride. In the afternoon, I ventured over to Frontierland, where ASA President Vincent Barabba and Department of Commerce Under Secretary for Economic Affairs Michael Darby were engaged in a shootout over the census at the Not-So-OK Corral. Congressman Tom Sawyer played the part of Matt Dillon, encouraging each side to accept an adjustment, but, in the end that matter was left for Judge Roy Bean. Lincoln Moses was really great in the role of Gabby Hayes.

Following the shootout, it was time for the President's invited address. This year, in keeping with the theme of the conference, President Barabba invited Goofy to deliver the speech. The only ones to have understood the talk were some operations researchers from outer space. Some colleagues of mine from Berkeley, however, claim that if you embed the speech in a weak C^* -algebra, you get a homomorphic image of the Gettysburg address.

At the next session, I heard Jim Heckman at the Alice in Wonderland ride. It was a bit difficult to understand him while we were spinning around in those teacups. On the other hand, my head is always spinning after one of his lectures.

At the last session of the day, I heard papers by Graham Kalton and Ingram Olkin. Kalton's paper was down to earth, but, to hear Olkin's, you had to take a rocket ship to the moon.

At the end of the day it was time for relaxation and entertainment. What do you do for entertainment in a place where the strongest drink they serve is Pepsi Cola? I went down to the bar, ordered a non-decaffeinated coffee "straight-up," and joined several colleagues watching TV on a screen that was larger than my hotel room.

Cable TV has really advanced out there. Not surprising, since southern California is the second entertainment capital of the world. (The first this year is Washington, D.C.). They even have a statistics channel. The trouble is that nobody knows what number it is. By chance, we were able to tune it in, and I got to watch some of the offerings:

L.A. Statistician. Rosalind Sheys, in an employment discrimination suit, was whipping up some pretty fancy statistics and statisticians.

Proof or Consequences.

Name That Theorem.

The Jane Fonda--Fred Mosteller Twenty-Minute Workout: For a Sound Mind and Body. I must admit that Jane Fonda was difficult to understand, but Fred's aerobics were just my speed.

My favorite, I must admit, was

Star Trek: The Search for Statistical Significance.

I have complained for a long time about the locations of the statistics meetings. This time, I stayed around to the very end and stormed into the meeting of the site selection committee. To my surprise, the chairman welcomed me and said that the committee was giving serious consideration to going back to San Diego for the annual meeting.

"That's great!" I said. "San Diego was one of the most popular sites. But the resort hotels there were small. Won't you have a problem?"

"Not at all," the chairman said. "We'll hold it at the zoo!"