

Chance (Winter 1996)

Sufferin' Succotash! Another ASA Cartoon Meeting!

The Disney corporation was recently prevented from building a new theme park in our Washington, D.C. area. Disney had wanted to build a park around historical American themes, so you could do things like relive the experience of the civil war or take educational rides, such as Custer's Last Ferris Wheel. No sooner was Mickey Mouse routed from our neighborhood than I learned that the American Statistical Association (hereafter referred to as the ASA or the party of the other part) was holding its annual meetings in Disney World (last summer) and Disneyland (the summer after next). It seems like we just met at Disneyland a short time ago. It really is a small world after all.

Other statistically related associations hold their meetings either in exciting cities (the Population Association met last year in San Francisco and meets this year in New Orleans) or at real vacation resorts (The American Association of Public Opinion Research has a motto for its meetings: Sun, Sand, Surf, and only then Statistics). Moreover, it meets in the spring when these places are enjoyable. ASA, on the other hand, meets in August--when their pick cities are sweltering. I understand that Death Valley was once seriously considered as an ASA meeting location, but the American Society of Masochists had already booked the convention center.

How does the ASA come to choose Disney theme parks for its meetings? One can imagine the process starting at the breakfast table of an ASA staffer. "When are you going to take me to Disney World?" screams the fourth grader. "You know I have my association meetings in the summer," replies the staffer. "Why not meet in Disney World?" replies the fourth grader. "All right," sighs the staffer, "if you finish your cereal, I'll ask the Board of Directors." At the office, the staffer dutifully puts the suggestion on the agenda for consideration by the Board.

It's not surprising that such a request becomes an ASA Board decision, for two reasons. First, no one cares. ASA Board members spend most of their time at the annual meetings in Board or other committee meetings. They are concerned not about the hotel's location but whether the air conditioning works and how many little bottles of fancy shampoo they can take home. Second, no one on the ASA Board will ever suggest a meeting place. For whatever place you name, there will always be someone who will complain. San Francisco? It was so cold, I got pneumonia there. Washington, D.C.? I got mugged there. New York City? The *Times* misquoted me. It's better to keep your mouth shut than to risk offending a colleague, especially when you'll need their vote on extra pages for *JASA* so it can publish your paper on yet another dubious application of Gibbs sampling.

So, at the Board meeting, the president brings up the issue in a serious tone: "We have a request to hold the annual meeting in Disney World. Does anyone have a better suggestion?" (Silence) "All right, then, it's unanimous."

The biggest problem with annual meetings in theme parks, is that the parks compete with the meeting sessions--and usually win. I have to admit that, at this last meeting, rather than

brushing up on wavelet analysis, I went off instead to Universal Studios to catch that new feature, "Honey, I shrunk the census."

One of the more popular things to do at the Disney World meeting hotel is to go to a "character breakfast," where, while you're dining on waffles in the shape of a Mouseketeer, your table is paid a visit by Donald Duck or another of your favorite Disney characters. I don't know why we in ASA couldn't have our own character breakfast. For example, while gobbling down a soggy bagel, you could be paid a visit by George Styan or Ingram Olkin. Now, there are real characters!

I really don't mind annual meetings with cartoon character themes, but why are we giving all of our business to Disney? Shouldn't we also be sharing our meetings, for example, with Looney Toons? Instead of last year's session "Goofy goes graphics," we could have "Bugs Bunny goes Bayes." Or the President's invited address could be given by Yosemite Sam. He would teach those Bayesian varmints a lesson or two.

The advantage of Looney Toons characters is that we don't have to travel to Orlando or Anaheim to see them. We can bring them to whatever city the ASA Board of Directors selects. Think how it would have brightened up the Board's choices of Cincinnati or Cleveland.

Maybe next year we can get the theme for the next ASA meeting to be "Daffy does Dallas!" I'll suggest it to the ASA. I'm sure its president will bring it up at the next meeting of the Board of Directors. In which case: See you in Dallas!

T-T-T-T-T-T-That's all Folks!

Additional reading:

"Bibidy Bobidy Zoo," *CHANCE*, Vol. 3, No. 4