Mblem

2007 Old Time AG
Words from Nick

In November, Central Alabama Mensa held the third installment of the 2007 Birmingham Annual Gathering Planning Meeting. It is stunning to me how things are starting to pull together. Although the Porters may have pushed the snowball, it is now being helped down the hill by an army of Mensans. There were presentations by the hotel liaison, speaker co-chairs, treasurer, and registrar. The functions of security, hospitality, maintaining the website, and coordinating volunteers have all been well separated and handed to highly qualified individuals. This is not a single person planning an event, this is an AG orchestra with real people playing each instrument.

Where do you belong in this ensemble? Would you like to volunteer behind the scenes to keep the cogs turning? Perhaps doling out information is your thing? Maybe you would like to help keep the speakers taken care of? Anywhere you would enjoy donating your time we will be more than delighted to see you there. Just to mention a couple of areas that I have either not yet touched on or want to especially emphasize: graphics, action desk, registration, poker dealers, and of course, hospitality. I am sure I have missed many more areas, but the bottom line is that we need help, and lots of it. With that in mind, if you would like to volunteer then write or call me and I'll see to it that your time is put to good use. The main focus of this article, however, is not to recruit helping hands, I am actually writing to inspire you to register for the event.

Let me start with the RG virgins. I like to describe a regional gathering as a hundred geeks in one hotel. If food and drink is your thing then you found the right place. The real treat, though, is the conversation and presentations that are constantly occurring. I can and have gone on for many paragraphs about RGs, but I will stop at this brief description for now.

For the AG virgins out there, an annual gathering is a dozen regional gatherings in one hotel! Imagine not one, but six speaker tracks. There are so many people that the SIGs get their own area to gather. There are off site tours if you would like to participate in them. The whole thing starts two days earlier than an RG. The quantity of food is just mind-numbing, and the beer flows by the keg.

And now for the AG veterans I will answer the question of why you don't want to miss The Old Time AG in Birmingham. To start with, we have returned to old time pricing! We will be staying at the Sheraton hotel in downtown Birmingham for only $89.25 per night with free parking and a free airport shuttle. In addition to hospitality, we have a 3 meal package catered by the hotel for a total of $60 if you care to take advantage of it. Best of all, registration is only $50 for the rest of the year and starts the new year at $60! You must agree, that is amazing. The hospitality room will be fully stocked "southern style". That is, you can gain ten pounds during the event and never eat the same thing twice. Three dances, organized competition in the games room, short registration lines, and an experienced group to take care of all the other details that slip my mind right now. July 4th in Birmingham will be much more exciting than any local fireworks display that you are thinking about going to. So, join us in the festivities!

AG Dates: July 4 – 8, 2007
AG Website: www.ag2007.org
Sheraton reservations: 205-324-5000
Registrar: Mary Ambridge – 8444 6th Ave S., Birmingham, AL 35206
Me: Nick Sanford ActuaryGuy@yahoo.com 205-444-9587

COORDINATOR'S CORNER
Ellen Muratori/Tom Tyson

The New Year brings New Doings!! Tom Tyson will be hosting a Video Viewing Night at Lindley Recreation Center. Since the Center is closed on Saturday nights, we've had to schedule this for Fridays until new digs can be located. For the first few months it'll happen the second Friday of each month and we'll see how it goes. The Center has a kitchen, so that the aroma of freshly popped popcorn can accompany the featured film.

Come at 7:00, bring a beach chair or blanket for comfort (those metal seats can get cold).   Get your popcorn popping, 'cause the film starts at 7:30pm. Our first viewing, on January 12, will be: THE VILLAIN. (Release Date 1979) Hal Needham directs Kirk Douglas, Ann-Margaret, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Paul Lynde, plus almost every "B" actor in Hollywood in a Western Spoof that can best be described as "Cat Ballou meets the Road Runner"!!

For future events we'll view what our members have stashed in their vaults: quirky films that appeal to the Mensa-minded. The evening should be a soothing antidote to a demanding workweek.

When Cinderella Hour comes (10:00pm), it'll be time to vanish into the night, unless the local ice-cream bar beckons.

Send reservations to Tom at tgtyson@earthlink. Limited seating!

Last month's Greensboro Games Night didn't happen, and we submitted our newsletter writings too early to tell you about the Saturday Night specials (food) or Tweaky Tuesday twitterings (talk). But if you've let the whole year go by without even peeking in on us, for shame!

Hey, here's a New Year's Resolution to be broken:
I shall not attend any Mensa Events!

Hope you realize I'm kidding. We know you by email moniker; now let's get to know you in person.   If the activities seem to be occupied with too much fun, and you would prefer serious stuff, suggest a Pot Luck Supper, with a theme discussion afterwards. Help is for the asking. Contact Ellen at the address shown in the contact page, inside back cover.

Organization
LG Olds (as opposed to "News")
by Shiangtai Tuan

Sitting here at the writing desk, somehow a story came to me. I just have to tell it to you before I can get started:

This is a story of an explorer who traveled in Africa in 18th century.

He traveled in Africa and made good friend with a chieftain. Once the chieftain asked, "what kind of tattoo do you have?"

"Not any."

"Don't be shy. It's Ok to tell me."

"No, I don't have any."

"You really need some tattoo."

"No, I don't think so."

"You don't have to be afraid to get started."

"No, I am not afraid, that is not the problem. I simply do not need any and I do not want any."

"It is easy to get some tattoo. You can start on a small tattoo."

"Honestly, I don't want any."

"If you hold your breath and start on one part at a time, you would not even feel the pain when you are done."

"No, getting started on any thing is not my problem. I just don't need any tattoos."

"I know you are in a denial and are evading the issue, but you don't have to."

"Look, read my lips. I do not need any tattoos."

The November LG was extremely enjoyable. Fourteen people were there. In addition to her presentation, Cherie cooked, prepared the majority of the food and drinks. The contribution from the guests made it even more plentiful.

Her presentation went very well. She first passed around a sheet for people to identify symptoms that may be caused by stress. From the amount of the various symptoms, we could evaluate our stress levels. Most people had about the same level, say, about 30, except Wade who had 2. Lucky him, must be a happy person. She then passed around a questionnaire which could help us to identify what the causes were for the stress. Could it be the traffic, the boss, family members, or some sort of combination? Next, she gave us several sheets of suggestion in how to deal with stress in general as well as suggestions to deal with specific problems. The last sheet was about getting organized and how to reduce stress while getting organized. I raised the question that the urge and desire of getting organized was what causing the problem not the process. Several people tried help me and ask questions or gave suggestions. The following was the Qs and my As.

"What kind of organization method do you have?"

"Not any."

"Don't be shy. It's Ok to tell me."

"No, I don't have any."

"You really need to get organized."

"No, I don't think so."

"You don't have to be afraid to get started."

"No, I am not afraid, that is not the problem. I simply do not need any and I do not want any."

"It is easy to get organized. You can start on a small project."

"Honestly, I don't want any."

"If you hold your breath and start on one part at a time, you would not even feel the pain when you are done."

"No, getting started on any thing is not my problem. I just don't need organized."

"I know you are in a denial and are evading the issue, but you don't have to."

"Look, read my lips. I do not need any organizations."

Important Announcement
by Mblem editor

With the new year we will turn into new pages in many directions. It is definitely a chance for you to consider what you can do, where you can extend your wisdom and your abilities. As JFK might say, "Ask not what MENC can do for you, ask what you can do for MENC."

Please apply for the following appointed MENC officers: Speaker Seeker, Web Master, and Contacts for Durham Dim Sum, Chapel Hill Brunch, or local contact in your area if you have not got one. We are looking for a person (or people) to host Christmas Parties for 2007 and beyond. We are also seeking an assistant for the Scholarship Chair or an active member of the Scholarship Committee.

In addition, if you can dream up some other things you can do, some other activities you can add, or some other way you can contribute to MENC, speak up.

Those who are interested please contact any member of the Executive Committee (ExCom) or this editor. Please see contact information at the inside back cover.

"Job" descriptions:

WebMaster: The minimum requirement is to be able to update the present Website, say, update calendar entries and enter monthly the online newsletter, Mblem. The upper limit is your imagination. Say, create an award winning site, the best in Mensa, the best in the US, the best in the world ... Estimated commitment would be two hours in many months (for possible updates when necessary) or many hours. It is up to you.

Speaker Seeker: Once a month, define a theme for the monthly "Local Gathering". Optionally, you may find a "person of interest" to give a talk, lead a discussion, or some other way on the theme. You would have to find a place for the gathering which can be a public place or a private home. You may use some of the traditional venues or change them. (Please refer to the article in last month.) Estimated commitment is about one hour in planning and contacting people and one hour to write an announcement for Mblem per month.

Contacts: It is usually answering inquiries by phone or by e-mail. So far there has not been many inquiries. Of course, if you would like to drum up the activities, you might want to spend a hour or so a month to actively contact people.

Assistant to Scholarship Chair: There may be a few hours for data entry at the beginning but I would estimate one minute, yes, one minute per year from then on. Of course, again, you may use your imagination and spend more time to expand our program.

Do you realize that this is almost line to line identical to the story I told at the top of this article (of course, except you have to change "tattoo" to "organization" related terms)? I guess, for a modern person, some things, like "getting organized", are taking for granted "must haves" just like the tattoos for an African chieftain two hundred years ago. The people who tried to help me just did not get the point. They tried to help me overcome the difficulty (and related stress) to get organized without realizing the wish to get organized (like the wish to get bigger car, the wish to have a larger house, the wish to have prettier wife, the wish to have better husband …) was the problem itself.

What we should realize is that there are tools to get organized. However, "getting organized" itself is but a tool. Cherie's presentation was so good because she had organized it near perfection. She knows how to use the tool well. In the mean while, organization for the sake of getting organized is waste of time, I maintain. In Taxi driver, he said he wanted "to get organized". She, being superficial, only insist on correcting his spelling but never understood his deeper meaning. Yes, let get organized. ("I only say the word. I don't know what it means." --- One of David Letterman's favorite remarks.)

Horace Williams House
Chapel Hill Preservation Society
(LG news)
by Shiangtai Tuan

Since there is no LG/Speaker meeting arranged, I suggest a visit to Horace Williams House and a walk in the yard. Dr. Williams was quite an eccentric Philosophy professor at UNC. He taught his student to think for themselves instead of memorize the past great philosophers' teachings.

This house is now maintained by the preservation society.

We may invite the president of the preservation society to talk to us. Watch for announcements or contact this editor.

Answers and Explanations

by David Skaar

Several months ago, I posed a few math and logic problems that are almost guaranteed to cause unhappiness, discord, and decreased worker productivity. I then had several delays in finishing the explanations, so they've probably been since forgotten. However, I'd already written this explanation column, so it's not very much work for me to revive it now. I will restate the problems to refresh your memories, so you don't have any excuses for not remembering.

> If you have 30 random people in a room, and someone bets you that at least two people in that room have the same birthday, should you take the bet?

Probably not. With 30 people in the room, the odds are about 70% that at least two people share the same birthday. This is usually counter-intuitive, is commonly called the birthday paradox, and is often referenced in probability classes. Amarillo Slim tells the story of winning money off of Evel Knievel twice at a party with this bet. The first time, Evil was convinced he was set up, that Slim knew two people at the party with the same birthday. Then they used the yellow pages to call 30 taxicabs, and took the drivers' birthdays from their licenses, and Evel lost again.

A typical probability exercise is to determine how many people you need to have the odds be 50/50, that answer is only 23. With only 50 people, the odds go to 97%, and with over 100 people, the odds go to 99.99996%. However, the odds increase only infinitesimally until 367 people are in the room, at which point, it is a certainty that there is a shared birthday. Where the intuitive approach fails is that people don't consider the number of possible pairings of people from the group. With 30 people, there are $C(30,2)$ combinations, or $30!/(28!2!)=29*15=435$ different pairs. With that many combinations, two having the same birthday is less of a surprise.

The true calculation of the odds is done by calculating the odds that everyone has a different birthday, and subtracting that from one, a much simpler calculation than the reverse. This calculation is the product of the odds of each person having a unique birthday, 365/365 for the first person, 364/365 for the second, 363/365, and so on, so that the final calculation is $1-[(365!/336!)/(365^{30})]$. Simple, right?

> The classic Monty Hall puzzle. You are going to play a game that others have played before you, and others will play after you; the game is always played the same way. You will be shown three doors, and must choose one. One door has a prize behind it, the other two, nothing. Before revealing if your choice was correct, one of the two doors you didn't pick will be opened, and shown to be a loser. You will have the option of keeping your original choice, or switching to the other closed door. Are your odds better if you stay with your first choice, switch doors, or does it matter?

This problem makes people even unhappier than the birthday problem. People get extremely defensive about the answer, and violently argue against it. Once convinced, they tend to violently argue in favor of the answer. The "obvious" answer, is of course, that with one door eliminated, the odds are even for the final two doors, each with a 50% chance of being the winner, so switching has no merit. The problem with this answer (besides being wrong), is that it is ignoring the past. In fact, holding the original door has a 1/3 chance of winning, but switching gives you a 2/3 chance. Pause for disbelief, outrage, etc. When I first came across this problem, in Marilyn vos Savant's column in Parade Magazine, I did not believe the answer she gave. She gave a way to demonstrate the results, which supported her claim, and one group of scientist readers used a Cray II to run billions of simulated games to support her answer. I still did not like her answer, in part because I did not like her. Finally, I realized that she was, in fact, right, but she did a lousy job of explaining it. What she did was give an answer, and a way to demonstrate the answer, but did not make sense of the answer.

Now, I have seen calculations of the probabilities, using conditionals, and accounting for each possible scenario. This explanation does make sense, for those who have the background and desire to follow the equations through. I have, what I feel is a pretty good, common sense explanation, and it seems to have worked with a number of people. The problem with the intuitive answer, is that it is ignoring the past. If you are presented with two doors, and asked to pick the winner, yes, the odds are 1/2. But that's not what happened. You were given three doors, and asked to pick one, so of course, your odds of winning are 1/3. The problem is that when that other door is opened, people want to think that this new information influences the decision they made in the past, but It. Does. Not. No matter what contortions, folderol, and shenanigans happen once you've picked that door, the odds of it winning will <u>never</u> change from 1/3. Therefore, switching improves the odds to 2/3, because the total of all probabilities must equal 1.

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Conti. from Page 4, Answer

Do you see what I just did there? I gave another answer, without an explanation. A better explanation for the jump to 2/3 (at least in my own mind), is that by switching, you are in effect, selecting two doors. If I offered you three doors, told you that one was a winner, and asked you to choose two doors, and if either was right, you won, you'd take that option over only choosing one door, right? That's what's actually happening when that door is opened, and then you switch. Really. Trust me.

Trying to explain these puzzles illustrates a point I've become rather fond of lately, i.e., answers without explanations aren't much use, but neither are explanations without answers. Giving the answers to those two problems without helping the listener make sense of them doesn't do any good, and probably just aggravates them, resulting in their refusal to believe that the answer is right. Without a way to make sense of the answer, it's worse than no answer at all. It's pretty aggravating for the explainer too, when the explanation isn't working, as their intent is to convince the audience that they are correct, and thereby inflate their ego. I hate having to repeat myself when trying to explain something, and usually just keep repeating the same explanation, slower and louder. By the third or fourth repetition, I tend to start getting pretty sarcastic. By the fifth time, I start getting downright nasty, and can get vicious with any available props. Not that the failure to understand can't be my fault too; someone once told me that I may be giving a perfectly logical explanation, but if it's not the one that the listener is willing and able to hear, repeating it won't help.

Likewise, explanations without answers don't do much good. In work situations, trying to explain to someone WHY something should be done doesn't do any good if you still haven't made clear WHAT should be done. I think this comes from trying too hard to be sensitive to the needs of others, and getting all touchy-feely. If you are in charge, act like it, give the commands, and once everyone is handling their jobs, explanations can follow. I see it in handling children too. Trying to explain to a toddler why they shouldn't run into the street is an exercise in futility, and just wastes your time and theirs (in my humble opinion). First, you just need to make it clear that they don't do it. Second, you need to make sure that when you tell them to get out of the street they do it. Why? Because that's the rule, and you follow the rules. The mental sophistication to grasp the consequences of their actions is not there yet, and at this point, following instructions doesn't require understanding why. If the child needs an explanation before following directions, they'll get run over before you can finish.

Finally, the third puzzle, which I like the answer to, in that it is both an answer and an explanation. When people figure it out, or hear it given, they know that it's right, and obvious, and esthetically pleasing.

Twenty people are being put in a prison run by a deranged warden. The warden gathers the twenty prisoners together on their first day and explains the rules. After today, all prisoners will be kept in isolated cells, will be allowed no contact with each other, and have no way to send any messages to each other. Each day, one prisoner will be selected and taken to a certain room. The prisoners know nothing about the selection process, and might as well assume that it is random. In this room, there are two switches that don't do anything but go up or down. The prisoner must flip one switch once, and then leave. No one else will touch the switches but the prisoner of the day (so the deranged warden promises). Any day, the prisoner of the day can declare to the escorting guard that every prisoner has now visited the room with the switches. If he is right, all prisoners will be freed, if he is wrong, all prisoners will be executed (the warden is deranged, after all). The prisoners have only this opportunity to meet and determine a winning strategy. Assuming the game will be played by the rules, what strategy will definitely tell them that everyone has visited the room?

When working on a solution, people usually get most of the components, but tend to have difficulty combining them into a solution. The basic answer (which can have a few modifications) is: One switch is to be the official counting switch, and the other is to be the time-wasting switch. The prisoner who is selected on the first day is the counter, and keeps track of the counting switch. When a prisoner enters the room, if the counting switch is up, he flips the time-wasting switch. If the counting switch is down, he flips it up, but only the first time he encounters it down. Once he flips it, he always uses the time-waster, no matter what. When the counting prisoner enters the room, if the counting switch is up, he flips it down, otherwise, he uses the time wasting switch. Once he has flipped the counting switch back down 19 times (one for each other prisoner) he knows that everyone else has been in the room, and he can tell the guard and everyone gets set free. Simple once you know it, right?

Hopefully I've explained things to everyone's satisfaction, and if I haven't, well, you'll have to find me to complain. Anyway, my wish for the new year is that everyone will give and receive the right answers and explanations.

Ko Ko is Gone
At Large Column
by Shiangtai Tuan

My favorite snake died last month.

When I was growing up in the rural area by the Yang Zi River, a neighbor lady was bitten by a venomous snake on the foot. She was out of commission for weeks. I remember going to visit her with my mother. She was sitting in bed, looking miserable. We kids all learned to be very careful then. We were told to avoid tall grass and hit the ground or grass with sticks in front of us. So, I have learned to be afraid of snakes since I was very little.

In Chinese fairy stories, just like the Western fairy stories, snakes are often portrayed as evil characters. In Chinese language, just like Western languages, there are terms using snakes to represent bad or evil. For instance, a person can be "as venomous as a snake or a scorpion." It was fair to say that I was properly educated to be against anything related to snakes. So, when I heard my friend, Abe, said he had a snake in a cage, I thought he was weird.

Once in the NC Museum of Life and Science, I saw a few young men and women walking around each with a snake perched on the arm. They encouraged people of all ages to touch them or to pet them. That was when I started to realize that snakes were just like any other animals. Here was nothing intrinsically good or bad about them. If they grew up being close to people, they can be as good as any other pets. Then, I met Jan's Python, Louise. She was downright friendly, slithering around in the living room, visiting from person to person.

A friend introduced me to a breeder and I bought a pair of Texas Baird Rat snakes from him. They grew up playing around my fingers, very interesting and fascinating. Another friend heard me say that I wanted something more colorful and introduced me to buy a Corn snake, on the day after Chinese New Years Day in 1997. She was two and half years old already and I named her Koko. After a couple of years, I got busy and had less time to "play" with them. The pair of rat snakes became less used to "being handled". They became jittery when being touched. However, Koko remained being friendly. Every time I had a party, my friend Mollie would hold her and walked around with her to introduce her to other guests. Whoever was willing could let her climb around the arms, shoulders … I have many photos of Koke playing with people or climbing through Mollie's hair.

Indeed, snakes are just like other animals. Even dogs and cats can be belligerent if they grew up wild. They can even be trained to become vicious. Some people believe snakes are intrinsically evil. Some even quote Bible for it. I think they missed the point. We Mensans do our best using our brains. Do think about it. Why did the Devil take the shape of the snake to tempt Eve? Would any one disguise as someone ugly when he wants to gain your trust? So, snakes must have been considered the most beautiful creature of the time of Eve. Now, after Eve and Adam eat the apple, instead of blaming themselves, they blame the snake. Shame! That must have been the beginning of shifting blames to others for one's own fault. Now, think again. If someone disguised as one of your relatives to gain entrance to your house and robbed you, would you blame that relative for it? That was what people have been doing for thousands of years, at least according to the Judea-Christian tradition. Come on, wake up. Know your enemy, the devil, first. Then admit ones own fault. Let go of the innocent little animal that has no voice to defend themselves.

However, because of such unreasonable fear and hatred toward them, snakes have escaped from being "used" as cheap labors by human beings. Under the pretty names like "men's best friend" or "faithful workhorse" … people have imported many creatures from the animal kingdom as cheap labor. People have made them work, pull carriages, ride them, paying them lower than minimum wage or no wage at all. There are no health benefits or any benefits to speak of, well, maybe a "treat" or some cat nip once a while. They have been treated worse than undocumented immigrants for thousands of years. Well, that may have been where they got the idea! As I said, snakes have at least avoided this fate.

Koko was never a "good eater." I always fed the three snakes at the same time. Once every two or three times Koko would not eat. I would give her food to one of the others. It had always been like that for the past nine years. That was why I was not too worried when she skipped more meals this year. However, I did take her to a pet store where a man knew how to "force feed" a snake. He tried but Koko struggled and spit out the food in a feisty way. He said it was not uncommon that some snakes may "fast" for as long as a year to the point they got very thin and weak. Since Koko was strong and looked well, he told me not to worry. Unfortunately, on October 31, Koko died lying in her cage (a dried out aquarium) looked just like when she was alive, wrapped around her water bowl.