

A Tribute To Norm Bennett
By Arthur J. Schwartz

On April 20th, the actuarial community lost a good friend as Norm Bennett, FCAS, passed. Paul Lacko, our Managing Editor, gave me the privilege of collecting some reminiscences of his friends and colleagues and adding a few excerpts from Norm's column from the Actuarial Review, a column he called Maunderings. As the name implies, it was full of the rambling though brilliant insights of an actuary who had an unusual knack for seeing the humorous side of things. Although most of the columns focused on a single topic, they freely ranged, and with sometimes no return to the starting gate!

I'll intersperse recollections of some of the people who knew Norm with excerpts from a few of Norm's Maunderings.

Dominick Elia: "What I remember most was that he was a very literate man, and he wrote Maunderings with a twinkle in his eye."

At a CAGNY meeting, a survey was distributed asking about each person's future and the future of the profession. Responses were interestingly mixed, seeming to show that actuarial training would lead to big things personally, yet at the same time, there were worries about whether the profession offered significant future promotional opportunities. Norm quipped "**of course these students may be supremely confident for themselves but worried about their friend's promotional opportunities**" [November 1982]

In November 1981, Norm mused "**Yet somewhere I sense there are actuaries who must be having fun. The New York Insurance Department reported recently in its starchy fashion that a company of the American International Group had reduced its professional liability rates for sex therapists by 30%. Old Pareto and Poisson would be aghast. [Looking into] a practical and serious subject like the number of Prussians kicked to death by horses was one thing. A practical and sensual subject like the number of Americans brought down by libidinous liability would not have been dreamt a subject for pure mathematics. Yet I repeat. Some actuaries today must be having fun. But who? Who at AIG is enjoying the research and fitting the trends? With minus 30% indicated, someone [at AIG] knows something. My calls over there go unreturned.**"

Charlie Niles remembers being hired by Norm as a new actuarial student. “Norm heard that the accountants were tossing around a new acronym, GAAP, which stood for Generally Accepted Accounting Principles”. For actuaries, Norm coined CRAP (Commonly Recognized Actuarial Principles.) Norm freely mentored Charlie and even had a suggestion for newly minted Fellows: **“the first thing new Fellows should do is get their teeth capped and go to Dale Carnegie.”** [October 1978]

Charlie Potok: My recollection was of going with Norm to ISO committee meetings in the Seventies. Smoking was very much the “in” thing and Norm was fond of cigars. So many of the other actuaries attending were smoking, in a few minutes the smoke got so thick that we could not even see the table that we were sitting at, or the chairs, or the charts. Everything visible was obliterated. From time to time, we’d hear a friendly voice chime in from various parts of the room ...”

ISO was first formed in the 1970’s. In those early days of ISO committees were the very first ISO circulars, and one provoked this comment from Norm:

From the first I was quite sure Shelly Rosenberg was very cleverly letting off a little steam. You know how it must be at ISO when the pressures begin to build. Even the sincerest and soberest of staffers has to feel desperate moments of urging to do something unreasonable or irrational. The methods vary of course. The legend still persists there of an actuarial student gone berserk and what he did with a full bottle of Heinz catsup to some freshly calculated New Jersey automobile rate indications.

There are others though – the truly clever ones – who also refuse to countenance their frustrations. They don’t shout for relief and wave catsup bottles; they whisper their cares away in subtle and ingenious style.

I caught...Shelly’s ingenious style ...in an obscure little ISO bulletin that he prepared for an actuarial subcommittee on medical malpractice...The bulletin required [to be addressed to] five [actuaries]...four men and one woman. ...A flip of the coin and he handed the bulletin to his secretary with his neatly penciled greeting to

the five – Gentlepersons. And the complex machinery of ISO ground it out without a murmur. [October 1976]

Bill Bartlett recalls Norm as having an exceptionally keen intellect, with a passion for puzzles. One day Norm waltzed into the office, proud of having finished the New York Times crossword puzzles in twenty-two minutes. He would often devise a special challenge for himself, like completing all the four outside borders first. In July 76, Matt Rodermund, then editor of the Actuarial Review, asked Norm why more prominent CAS members were not submitting solutions to the Actuarial Review's puzzle page:

“Where were [the solutions from] the Ed Budds, the Gordon Barkers, the Charlie Nileses? I didn't know how Ed was on puzzles and I'd heard that Gordon was overwhelmed with all those prescriptions to fill, but as for Charlie, I ...guessed that if I were to ask him why he wasn't working on problems of monkeys counting coconuts and dogs chasing their tails around rectangular fields, I'd get a predictably thought-provoking answer.

He [Matt Rodermund] seemed to forget I was there and I left him muttering to himself in front of a portrait of a solemn Henry Flagler. Maybe the casualty actuary is fundamentally different. Maybe he fancies himself a man of words, not of numbers, dialogues instead of diophantines...

The next day Paul Singer mulled over this speculation for me. Two cups of coffee later he announced that maybe I was right but then again maybe I was wrong. While I was jotting down this conclusion in my notebooks...

In January 1976, Norm was musing about the significant numbers of new women actuaries, and what that portended for the profession:

I think we can finally forget that outrageous example of sexism which developed out of a Kentucky rate hearing – the notorious day of the mini-skirted actuary. The [Kentucky] Colonels never really understood the filing but the local newspaper [photo] featured junoesque Mavis Walters while they completely ignored the Knobby Knees of [John] Muetterties”

Norm gave us a cross-cultural lesson, and possibly the first incursion of French into the pages of the Actuarial Review, in October 1975:

“Cet article doit etre ecrit en francais entierement. J’espere que mes collegues franco-Canadiens comprendront et m’excuseront de ne pas le faire de ne pas le faire.” For our monolingual readers, the above sentences mean that we are going to talk about Canada and its intrepid little band of casualty actuaries.

Actuaries in Canada until recent days fell into two classifications: transplanted English life [actuaries] with hyphenated names or two middle initials, or Carl Wilcken who reportedly suffered the loneliness and anxieties of a Maytag repairman.

It has been my pleasure this past year to work with most of these men in Toronto at the newly formed Insurer’s Advisory Organization of Canada.... IAO ...with a name purposely resembling that of another well-known organization ...[they set up an actuarial committee meeting.]

Originally the committee seated itself by apparent vested interest, French-speaking Canadians to the left, English-speaking Canadians to the right, Americans huddled between. There were brief moments of anxiety and embarrassment during our first days. A somewhat heated exchange in rapid-fire French between Yves Brouillette and the bearded scholarly Camille Dupuis, turned Charman Hugh White pale until he learned it was only a question of which wine should be ordered for lunch. With the initial novelty worn off I find the group...pretty much resembles any other group of young actuaries.

I’ve improved too. I’m [no longer] startled to read “programme” for “program”; I understand temperatures on the Celsius scale; and I’m pleased to inform Mr. White that I find pronouncing “out” as “oot” is not so bad after all.”

And from the November, 1979 issue of Actuarial Review: It’s very likely that the CAS will install its first president to publicly admit and defend the practice of pogonotrophy. Normally, it seems, any experimentation with a subject as delicately controversial as this starts simply as innocent curiosity, and is carried out stealthily and privately... Our president-select has chosen to come out. His life has changed. In fact, his whole appearance has changed.

I enjoy jabbing at ISO occasionally with a long-barbed spear. A simple needle wouldn't do because that's a pretty savvy crowd over there, and it doesn't exactly have a reputation for helplessness. The spear, however, will no longer suffice. ISO has moved into the nuclear age in the arms business and I'm out of my depth.

Recently, a slick new catalog...On page 90, a full-page photo of a solemn businesslike trio of ISO regulars symbolizes the organization's quiet and grim determination...there's a blackboard on which appears very clearly the right half of Einstein's devastating statement that $E=mc^2$.

For one who's barely comfortable with exponential trending, that's a sobering sight...Given the big-bang option, are we sure there are more than a scant half-dozen insurance names we'd *want* converted to energy?

For heaven's sake, let's give our non-nuke econometric people one more chance to try to come up with a safer option. Anyhow, ISO, no more kidding around from me – promise.

Thanks, Norm, for the memories and for your wonderful columns. If you don't mind, we'll keep your Maunderings and Random Samplers with us on the CAS Web site in their original 1970's and 1980's *Actuarial Review* wrappers.