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The First Gathering

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THE FIRST GATHERING

By Jeremiah Farrell

The following is a photocopy of a letter I sent to my good friend James P. Fink shortly after the first Gathering in 1993. It is not rewritten or edited in any way in hopes of conveying to you some sense of my awe at how very special this event really was. My son David, then a student in Boston, was also privileged to be invited by Tom Rodgers and David and I still feel overwhelmed by the experience.

There are so many memories – and so many friends. After you have read the letter, I will remark on some of them.

James P. Fink
Department of Mathematics
Gettysburg College
Gettysburg, PA 17325

Jan. 20, 1993

Dear JPF < :

I can now report on that meeting I was so vague about before. It was a secret get-together to honor Martin Gardner and took place in Atlanta over the weekend. It is being called the "Gathering for Gardner" and only people who had had some connection with MG in the past were invited to participate. There were finally about 70 persons in attendance. One requirement for an invitation was to write an article and/or a letter of appreciation. The articles were quickly assembled into a spiral bound book (400+ pages) to be handed out at the private dinner on Saturday night and the letters were bound in leather and given to MG. It is almost certain that the book of articles will be commercially published. My own contribution to this book and a copy of my appreciation letter are enclosed. The table of contents of the book is enclosed as well.

Atlanta was chosen for the event since "Puzzles: Beyond the Borders of the Mind" was opening that weekend at the Atlanta International Museum of Art and Design (see the newspaper clipping.) Several of the expert puzzlers (or metagrabologists) were also participating in the Gardner fete. Virtually all puzzle designers owe something to Martin Gardner; either from his writings or by sending him a puzzle for his critique. When it was discovered that MG would be honored, they all wanted to attend the Saturday dinner, but the location for it was kept secret until a few hours before the affair.

Gardner has always had a keen interest in magic so several of his oldest friends who have been table magicians for years (some over 50 years) were invited to attend the gathering and they all performed their miracles for the rest of us at various times. Most of these magicians are quite well-known. David was invited to all but the Gardner dinner and flew in from Boston on Wednesday afternoon. One of our favorites among the magicians was James Randi--the Amazing Randi. I know that you recall Randi's work in exposing the paranormal (remember his TV show offering 100,000 dollars for any true demonstration of pseudo-science?). No matter how menacing Randi looks in his photographs on his book covers, David and I can attest to the fact that he is really a gentle, generous person with an engaging sense of humor. He has been a friend of MG for many years and told us that he was somewhat surprised that Gardner would consent to appear at such an affair. Randi said that many people have asked him to offer Gardner appearance money to attend their conference but Gardner has always refused.

We were invited, along with about 40 others, to a supper on the evening of the 13th. This was at the home of Tom Rodgers, the primary host of the week-end's activities. Tom told me that night that he still feared that MG would have second thoughts about appearing. However, Gardner was on his way (by car) and would arrive at the Atlanta Marriott Marquis on Thursday. Meanwhile, many of the notables were arriving at Rodgers' house on Wednesday evening.

For instance, Persi Diaconis showed up in a pink and mauve shirt with his trademark baggy pants and was one of the delights of the party. He is interested in everything and anything. We talked about magic and Eric Partridge and, oh yes, occasionally mathematics. He would have to leave on Friday so he missed the McG Fete. Donald Knuth was there and signed his book Concrete Mathematics for me. (Ronald Graham^a would leave the Texas meetings early to attend the Saturday affair and also signed the book as co-author. By the way, I told Graham that the book was too hard for us to use at Butler and he admitted that it was hard for the Princeton students too!) Will Shortz, editor of "Games" magazine and Scot Morris of "Omni" attended all events and if there is a write-up about the gathering I will let you know.

Thursday and Friday were reserved for exploration of the puzzles at the museum display. The museum was not ^{YET} open to the public so there was ample time to ask questions and play around with actual puzzles. Some of the "Impossible Object" puzzles were amazing. Harry Eng of California is an expert at these. He can take a bottle, say a cider bottle with a one inch diameter neck, and put inside a full deck of cards--in the case-- with a hole drilled through it with a bolt and nut through the hole. But wait, he's not done yet! Into the same bottle will go a pair of shears and a half-inch rope with a very secure looking two-inch knot tied in it. All of this is done with special tools without cutting the bottle. When the museum was finally open to the public, Eng's display was one of the most popular. Puzzlers from 12 countries were there and some could not speak English. David was able to talk to some Chinese speakers but most of these people could speak English, so he wasn't needed as translator. However there were several Germans who had no English that he was able to translate for.

we finally met Martin Gardner Thursday morning. He and his gracious wife Charlotte mingled with the puzzle group at the museum (which, by the way, was attached to the hotel.) He had seen our article in WordWays about our game Pygmalion and had kind words about it. All at once, he pulled out a piece of rope and showed David and Me a ~~trick~~ topological knot trick. Even at nearly 80 years old, he retains a very active mind. (In fact, he is probably more prolific in his writings now than ever. Dana Richards' 60 page Gardner Bibliography requires an additional 20 to 30 items each year!)

Charlotte Gardner seemed impressed that a father-son combination was at the gathering. She raved about David's Boston address but had little good to say about Indianapolis. It turns out that she is interested in antiques and had attended a show at the Fairgrounds. Naturally, she found that neighborhood less than awe-inspiring.

I talked to Gardner about six times during the meeting, but everyone was trying very hard not to be obtrusive. It is my impression that he really enjoyed himself. I know that he was apprehensive about being honored at evening meetings. The puzzlists had a formal dinner Friday night (David was invited to this one) and had Gardner as guest of honor. A magic^{show} was presented that included puppets, stage magic and the mentalist Max Maven. Maven, who had never met Gardner before, did ask him to say a few words but Gardner declined, merely thanking everyone for showing up. After the show the magicians went table hopping to give close-up demonstrations. Randi came to our table to do some sleight of hand, and a few tricks. One of the tricks was one that David and I knew very well and had previously discussed with Randi. I think Randi wanted David to see how the patter went. (My table at Saturday's fete was mostly magicians and one of them repeated the same trick. Everyone knew the trick and everyone knew that everyone knew the trick, but no one let on. Each magician puts his own little nuance into the trick and nobody crassly says "oh, I know how that's done." It just occurs to me that you once gave me, from a cereal box, this same trick! Remember? I am sending it along for you to impress your friend(s)).

Oops! After looking at the trick you gave me I realize it was a different one. You will have to buy Randi's book The Magic World of the Amazing Randi in order to learn the trick. It is the one about the vanishing nickel. I also recommend Randi's new book Conjuring; it is very fine.

This reminds me of another episode. On Wednesday, Knuth showed me the old trick about picking a number from 1-2-3-4. (A card similar to one Knuth always carries is enclosed). I showed him my own variation and he seemed to like it. Encouraged, I sought out Randi to show him. Randi hated it. So I improved it and showed it to him again the next day. He still hated it. Undaunted, I kept on improving it. A day later and Randi still hated it. Well Randi never did like it, but I did give it to the magician Mike Weber and he is going to try to use it. I therefore cannot reveal it to you but if it ever appears in a cereal box, you will be the first to know.

On Saturday afternoon, several talks were given, on a marvelous variety of topics. For instance, the illusionist Jerry Andrus ^{led} led off with his optical illusions. One of them was a display that looked for all the world ^{like} two giant hex-nuts, turning independently before our eyes. He switched off the light and we could see that in reality it was a single sheet of heavy cardboard simply bent and painted in a clever way. No one slept through Jerry's performance. Others gave talks on Lewis Carroll, Mathematics, paper folding, rope tricks and mathematical magic. Mike Weber gave an excellent talk on how he developed a fine trick from Gardner's write-up of the magical properties of the repeating part of the decimal expansion of $1/7$ th. I assume you know this trick. If not, I can give you a reference to it.

The tribute to Martin Gardner on Saturday ran from about 5pm to after midnight. It was at the posh 191 Club at 191 Peachtree Street. This private club is among the finest in the nation. It was about two blocks from the hotel and I think it is always locked. Once you get in, an impressive five story foyer greets you. Our dinner was on an upper floor overlooking the foyer. We mingled for two hours and then had dinner at

too late to get in the book. Some thought their articles so fine that they read them even though they were in the book. After the tributes, some more magic closed the program.

Two tributes may interest you. Penrose presented a new tiling of his design to Gardner. I saw it and it is special. Also, Frank Harary read a paper on his achievement games which he dedicated to Gardner since Gardner had written many articles about these games. It was very emotional because Harary broke into tears. Dr. Harary spoke to me later and I learned some more pathos. He has been asked to retire from teaching at New Mexico State and this is very much against his wishes. He asked about the possibility of obtaining work at IUPUI! I fear that he is too old to take part ~~in~~ in the classroom any more, however; the students would be too unkind.

There are many other stories of course, and as I think of them I will jot them down and send them along. I am sending you a puzzle for you to try that relates to my paper.

When you unwrap it, set the extra two little ^{pieces} aside until you read the paper. The object of the puzzle is to reassemble the cube so that opposite faces have the same color. There are two solutions. See if you can do it before completely reading the paper.

I talked at length with Knuth about this puzzle and its generalization. The extension I have in mind is: take 216 cubes of size $axaxa$. Set $b = 2a$ and $c = 3a$. Expand $(a + b + c)^3$ and construct the 27 pieces of ^{VARIOUS} ~~varying~~ sizes. What interests Knuth and me is how many ways can the $a + b + c$ cube be constructed from the 27 pieces? This is probably a computer project and I would like to offer it to you or your students to solve. There are some intriguing puzzle possibilities that I will tell you about later. Let me know if you are interested.

So, James--- How was your weekend?

Yours,

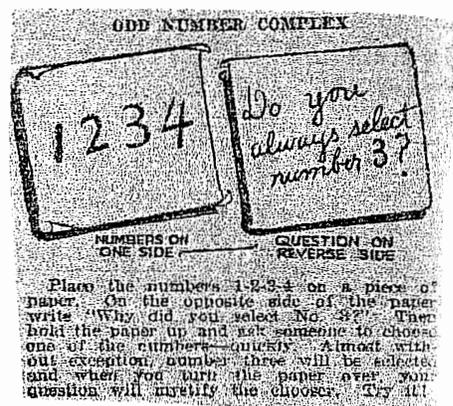
JPF >
JPF >

Sadly, Charlotte Gardner, Harry Eng, Frank Harary, Nob Yoshigahara and Jerry Andrus are no longer with us. We all dearly miss their conviviality and counsel.

James Fink was my former math chairman at Butler University and was able to attend G4G7. At that Gathering I remember him excitedly coming up to me asking "Is that Raymond Smullyan over there?" When I answered in the affirmative, he ran after Smullyan like a teeny-bopper chasing a rock star. (It's nice to know that I am not the only starstruck one at these Gatherings!)

My articles referred to in Fink's letter, "Cube Puzzles" and "Martin Gardner=Mint! Grand! Rare!" are reprinted in *The Mathemagician and Pied Puzzler*, ed. by E. Berlekamp and T. Rodgers, 1999, A K Peters, Natick, MA.

The effect Donald Knuth showed me was an old magic prediction trick. This representation is taken from a 1940s pamphlet "250 Parlor Tricks" published by Johnson Smith & Co., Detroit, Mich.



I am not at liberty to disclose the other magic tricks.