THE BIGGEST HOAX

CHRIS COLE
Newport News, California

The biggest (i.e., longest) word that appears in the Merriam-Webster dictionaries and the Oxford English Dictionary is the 45-letter PNEUMONOULTRAMICROSCOPICSILICOVOLCANOCONIOSIS. It now appears that this word occurs due to a hoax perpetrated by members of the National Puzzlers League. If true, this is surely one of the greatest ironies in the history of logology.

As long-time readers of Word Ways know [May 1985, pp. 95-96; November 1986, pp. 205-206; May 1987, p. 82], the first citation to p45 in the OED Supplement is incorrect in two ways. The citation reads:

> 1936 F. Scully "Bedside Manna" 87
> Pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanokoniosis [sic], a disease caused by ultra-microscopic particles of sandy volcanic dust, might even give him laryngitis.

The first error is that in the actual book Bedside Manna, p45 is spelled without the C in -SCOPIC-. The second error is that this is not the first time p45 occurred in print. Its first citation was in an article in the New York Herald Tribune dated February 23, 1935. Eric Albert kindly supplied me with a copy:

PUZZLERS OPEN 103RD SESSION HERE
BY RECOGNIZING 45-LETTER WORD

Pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanokoniosis
Gains Approval of Brain Teasers' League as
Alphagrams, Charades, Pyramids Run Riot

Pneumonoultramicroscopicsilicovolcanokoniosis succeeded electrophotomicrographically as the longest word in the English language recognized by the National Puzzlers' League at the opening session of the organization's 103d semi-annual meeting held yesterday at the Hotel New Yorker.

The puzzlers explained that the forty-five-letter word is the name of a special form of silicosis caused by ultra-microscopic particles of silica volcanic dust...

According to long-time NPL member David Shulman, p45 was used by Everett M. Smith, president of the NPL and news editor of the Christian Science Monitor. Smith edited a puzzle column and was one of the more brilliant members at that time. It is possible that he gave the word as an example of medical "word inflation". This inflation has recently led to such monstrosities as the 207,000+

letter name of human mitochondrial DNA mentioned in Guinness.

However, it appears that Smith did not cite the word, he coined it. Searches of the medical literature prior to 1935 have failed to reveal any use of p45. If this is true, and readers are invited to provide evidence to the contrary, then this is a rich irony. P45 is a word by, of and for logologists!

JOTTO BY COMPUTER

In the two-person game of Jotto, each person selects a target five-letter word; the object of the game is to identify your opponent's target word before he identifies yours. To identify his word, you offer a sequence of five-letter guess words, and are told by your opponent how many letters of each guess match the target (if the target is PIVOT, THOSE scores 2, and MUNCH, 0). The discovery of an optimal strategy is difficult, and it is a non-trivial task even to formulate a set of rules telling you what you have learned from the numerical scores.

This game is ideally suited for computer implementation. Recreational Mathemagical Software (RMS), 129 Carol Drive, Clarks Summit PA 18411, offers for $18.45 a floppy disk (either $5\frac{1}{4}$ or $3\frac{1}{2}$) which contains a program enabling the IBM-PC (or IBM-compatible PC) owner to match his skill against the computer. (You must have DOS 2.0 or higher, and 220K of available memory.) Be forewarned that it is not easy to beat the computer, even when it is programmed to perform at the lower of two levels of play! The beginner, however, can call upon a number of optional aids, including at each turn a summary of what can be inferred about letters certainly in or certainly out of the computer's target word, or even a list of all words in the computer's memory satisfying these constraints. (I don't know what dictionary it uses, but it seems to be at least Collegiate in size.)

Even a computer neophyte should find the program easy to use and fun to play. Numerous help screens are provided, including full instructions and a tutorial on the ten rules of inference used to say what letters have been identified or eliminated. RMS offers to refund all but the shipping cost (i.e., refund $16.95) if you are dissatisfied, provided you return the disk to them in its original condition within a month.