

Freebie Issue 72

October 2009

Mathematico

Several months ago, I received a forwarded email titled “Mathematico” that contained a puzzle. I often flush such things quickly to the recycle can. This one was different because it said,

It is said that engineers take 3 minutes to resolve this, architects 3 hours, doctors 6 hours and salesmen about 5 to 6 weeks. If you guess which the 6th number is, you'll be able to open the excel file. The answer is the password to open the attached Excel Spreadsheet. Once you discover it, put your name on it, save it and send it on to people you know, including me.

Question:

Which is the 6th number in this series?

1, 2, 6, 42, 1806, ___???

That, of course, was a challenge.

When I was an undergrad at Berkeley, living in Cloyne Court, a cooperative house on the north side of campus, we had a kind of ritual during “dead week”, the last week before finals in any semester. Someone would wheel a large chalkboard into the dining room and various people would write series puzzles on it for others to solve when they came down from their rooms to get a cup of coffee or whatever. None of the series were as simple as 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 or 1, 4, 9, 16, 25, etc. The hardest were those that were NOT mathematical, such as the house phone number backwards (almost none of us got that one.) The vast majority of the guys in the house were engineering and science majors, since we were located a block from the engineering complex. Most of the engineers were electrical engineers, and those guys were REALLY good at math; the puzzles were typically tough and aimed at them.

But I digress... Give this one a try. It is non-obvious, making it fairly tough. Each entry depends directly on the one before. If you are a salesman (or it has just been too long since your last math class), send me an email and I will help you solve the series.

He means “All Hat and No Cattle”

You never know who's swimming naked until the tide goes out.

Warren Buffet

Thinking outside the box

Pianist Victor Borge used to tell the story of his uncle, the inventor. The uncle, he said, invented a drink called 1-Up, which did not do well. Uncle went on to invent 2-Up, 3-Up and so on, unfortunately giving up at 6-Up and failing to strike it big in the soft drink market. I think it was also Borge who talked about inventing a hollow bar of soap that would eliminate the little chip of soap you throw away when you get down to the end.

The logic (or lack of logic) in this invention always generated a big laugh.

I thought of the hollow soap bar this summer when Cathy and I stayed several nights in Yellowstone National Park at the venerable Old Faithful Inn. There we found the latter-day equivalent of the hollow soap bar, an oval loop with an empty center. This gave a hefty piece of soap that was comfortably large enough to fit in the hand but with the total mass closer to the little soap bars usually found in hotels. After a little thought, I realized that this fits the Inn's needs perfectly, giving guests a useful bar of soap while reducing waste when the bar is chucked-out after the guest leaves in a few days.

I think Victor Borge would have been pleased.

Not necessarily a restaurant review

Nestled in the hills behind Stanford University is the little [Town of Woodside](#). (Yes, Town is capitalized because Woodside insists on that label.) At first blush, this is a tiny village at a crossroads, a gas station, a grocery, a few shops, a nursery, a couple of restaurants, and some real estate and other offices. But this is not your ordinary crossroads town (or Town), as shown by the fact that the grocery stocks first growth Bordeaux wines and foodstuffs most of us cannot afford. Woodside, though a town, is decidedly uppercut. The homes tucked into wooded lots on the hillsides are typically invisible from ordinary vantage points. Woodside is filled with very wealthy people, many of them entrepreneurs in the best sense of the word, making their money from growing new technology businesses. I am told the town also has a number of wealthy personalities.

One of restaurants is the decidedly eclectic Buck's, run by the decidedly eclectic [Jamis MacNiven](#). The menu ranges from ordinary sounding stuff (pancakes and waffles at breakfast, soups, salads and sandwiches at lunch) to some unusual items. I find it excellent and decidedly not ordinary. My favorite breakfast is Huevos Rancheros, and for lunch the Spinach Salad is superb. Buck's does not claim to serve dinner, although they sell "plates of stuff" after 3 pm. As good as the food is, the prices are closer to ordinary.

The menu can be found on the website. It changes from time to time because Jamis is a writer with a decided sense of humor, and he incorporates the menu into his quarterly newsletter of sorts. Jamis manages to get himself involved with all manner of activities

and writes about them on the front and back of the menu. An example is the report on the [TED conference](#) in this Summer's menu.

Another attraction is the extensive collection of stuff on the walls and ceilings. The pictures on the website only scratch the surface. Years ago, when we lived in Maryland, Cathy and I would have dinner at Hausner's in Baltimore. The collection there centered on kitschy statues and paintings, with dozens of Danish Christmas plates thrown in to fill spare corners along the ceiling. At Buck's the collection ranges from model planes to a complete stuffed shark. There are old musical instruments, pioneering photos, some mediocre oil paintings, the skin of a huge snake, and even a double ended buck saw for cutting down serious trees. In the parking lot, Buck's has a 20 foot wooden carving of a trout.

There are also myriad souvenirs of the IT revolution of the last few decades. An example I noted last trip: we have all seen the little shadow box with samples of various breakfast cereals (Cheerios, Kix, Wheat Chex, etc.) Buck's has one of those. It hangs next to a shadow box with a collection of computer memory chips from Advanced Micro Devices, each about the same size as a cereal bit.



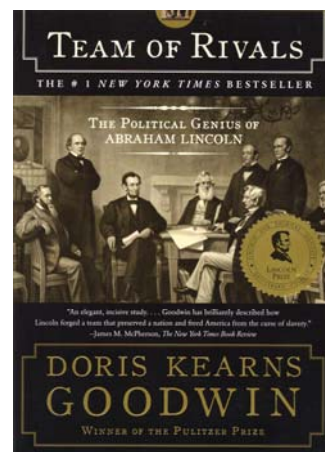
And the chips are appropriate because Buck's is reputed to be the place that many Silicon Valley startups have been hatched over lunch in meetings between technologists and VCs. There is no list available to thee and me, but it has that reputation. In support of that reputation, I note that when we were there in 2008, a genuine Tesla electric sports car was parked in front; I assume one of the founders was in the building, because the things were not really for sale yet. That aura is part of the attraction, the third leg on the stool (with food and the stuff on the wall.)

Definitely interesting, and worth the trip if you are in the area.

Book of the Month

Biographies of Abraham Lincoln are plentiful – Amazon lists almost 75,000 entries – and we all learned some of the essentials of this great man on our way through school. I read *Team of Rivals* for several reasons, not the least of which is my respect for author Doris Kearns Goodwin. The effort turned out to be time well spent because the author succeeded in her major effort to help us discover what it was about Lincoln that was so special. He was, in short, a masterful politician based on both high and well-developed intelligence and his exceptional empathy, the ability to see things from the other person's perspective.

The outlines of Lincoln's birth and upbringing are pretty



common knowledge – his self-education, the years as a prairie lawyer, his penchant for story telling, and his marriage to Mary Todd. Among things I did not know was his voracious appetite for classical literature, from the Greeks to Shakespeare's plays and beyond; Lincoln could quote passages from hundreds of books. This reading gave him an understanding of how the real world works and how people think. He was consumed by ambition to do something that people would remember after he was gone, although he had no idea how prescient that desire would turn out to be.

Another thing I had forgotten from school days (it has been a couple of years...) is that states in the old South had been spoiling for a reason to secede since the 1820s, the time of the Missouri compromise. The 1850s were a time of intense turmoil on the topic of slavery, bringing to an end the existence of the Whig party and leading to the formation of the Republicans from elements of that party and northern Democrats. It is an upheaval unmatched in our times, although History may regard the changes resulting from Goldwater's and Nixon's "Southern Strategy" in remaking the Republican Party in the 1960s as almost as important.

Goodwin also reminds us that intense racism was pervasive in the north up to and through the civil war. Many people believed that slavery should end and that freed slaves should be returned to Africa.

The chapter on the assassination went well beyond what I learned in school – to the fact that the plot targeted the vice president and the secretary of state as well. Seward nearly died from his injuries, while the man assigned to kill the VP changed his mind at the last minute.

The title of the book, and the thread tying it together, comes from the fact that three other men of the time (Salmon P. Chase, William H. Seward, and Edward Bates) sought the 1860 nomination as well, and Lincoln later convinced all three to join his administration. It was a masterful stroke, providing him with superbly qualified advisors who were surprisingly useful to him during his time in the White House. None of it was easy, for these truly were rivals, and Chase especially was continually angling to be ready to replace Lincoln in the 1864 elections. The story taught me that Obama should be wary of his rivals in the cabinet, such as Hillary Clinton.

This marvelously well written book tells its story with a superabundance of details and examples. While there are no footnotes to mar the narrative, the list of notes and references in the back of the book runs to about 120 pages. Goodwin also credits major sources as she goes along, giving strength to the discussion.