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ON MAKING OURSELVES USEFUL IN OUR COMMUNITIES

If our profession's customary self-portrait is a true likeness, we actuaries are the fortunate possessors of talents that can be extremely useful in helping to solve baffling community problems. Thirty years ago Edmund M. McConney, first President of our present Society, described the actuary as "a sound, practical—rather than too theoretical—mathematician applying simple principles of probabilities to human affairs." Much more recently, as reported by George Dinney in these columns last March, an actuarial committee in Canada dubbed us "disciplined problem-solvers."

With this in mind, let us consider what contribution actuaries can make in dealing with a pervasive problem of today and the future—the gasoline supply question. Can actuaries reasonably be expected to contribute solutions worthy of our particular brand of virtuosity? If we can, ought we perhaps to exert ourselves to place our suggestions before our fellow citizens and to stimulate discussion in a search for practical answers? If so, a good way to begin is to look at some premises. Whether or not the quartet stated here appeals to our readers, its components may serve as stepping-stones to a workable plan.

Premise #1. The urgency of the case for gasoline conservation does not depend upon whether available supplies are now being distributed with sufficient fairness and rapidity, nor upon who is at fault, nor upon whether enough automobile fuel can somehow be found to permit us to continue the transportation habits to which we have become accustomed. Frugality in usage is made imperative by the unacceptable risks of heavy dependence upon foreign petroleum in a disturbed and divided world. We must not unnecessarily leave ourselves at the mercy of those who have no special reason to be sympathetic with the energy demands that we happen to identify with The American Way of Life.

Premise #2. Conservation can be accomplished more successfully by voluntary action than by imposed allocation systems. Our appraisal of the wisdom and competence of our lawmakers has caused their edicts to command less than our whole-hearted allegiance. It seems that laws, like records, are made to be broken.

Premise #3. But voluntary conservation will not work any better than rationing unless we can build citizen pride in community-wide effort. To generate a flash of excitement is not, however, the large difficulty. There is the problem of maintaining fervor week after week, month after month, until our habits of the past quarter-century have materially changed. The copybook maxim, "Well begun is half done", does not apply here.

Premise #4. "Keeping score" is as essential for maintaining a gasoline conservation effort as it is for maintaining interest in, say, golf or bridge. If we are to be kept trying, somebody, presumably our newspapers and television, must regularly give us figures showing how well or how poorly we are making out.

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As this newsletter sinks into its customary two months of aestivation, our readers are invited to give some of their summer to reflecting upon whether the gasoline problem warrants actuarial attention, and to what extent the premises outlined here give a worthy formula for dealing with it.

E.J.M.

THE ACTUARY IN FACT AND FABLE

"I'll tell you what an actuary was. The name comes from Latin; an actuarius was a slave, and might have acted as a sort of record keeper (*actuarii* took down Julius Caesar's speeches in shorthand, and their honorable profession was represented at the notorious Trimalchio's dinner party in Petronius' *Satyricon*). In 18th century England, the actuary was something of a court stenographer. The line between secretary and accountant was crossed by the end of that century. In the middle of the 19th century, no less an authority than Thomas Babington Macaulay described the forerunner of the actuary that we know today: 'An actuary of eminent skill subjected the ancient parochial registers of baptisms, marriages and burials to all the tests which the modern improvements in statistical science enabled him to apply'."

These words open a delightful article entitled, *A Matter of Policies: Behind the price of your insurance lurks an unexpectedly human being*, written by Maureen Fant, a Boston journalist, published in *The Boston Phoenix*, March 13, 1979. Ms. Fant kindly identified for us the Petronius reference. It's in *Satyricon* 53, and starts thus:

"But a clerk (*actuarius*) quite interrupted his (Trimalchio's) passion for the dance by reading as though from the gazette: 'July the 26th. Thirty boys and forty girls were born on Trimalchio's estate at Cumae. Five hundred thousand pecks of wheat were taken up from the threshing-floor into the barn. Five hundred oxen were broken in'."

and so on through a recital not untypical of actuarial presentations twenty centuries later, until "at last the acrobats came in."

We unhesitatingly recommend to our Public Relations Committee that they hoard some copies of the Fant article for use the next time our official descriptions of actuaries are to be rewritten. The essay is cheerily embellished with several rhymes by our profession's rising versifier, Deborah Adler, whose *Ode To A Part Three Student* appeared in our April issue. For example,

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