



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

Article from:

# The Actuary

September 1999 – volume 33 - Issue 7



## on the lighter side

### One musician's tale, and his Tony Bennett gig

by Jacqueline Bitowt  
SOA Public Relations Manager

What actuary Bill Feldman remembers as his “15 minutes of fame” 30 years ago recently danced to the front of his mind. Learning that Tony Bennett would entertain at the Society's 50th Anniversary Annual Meeting, Feldman felt a sudden burst of nostalgia.

That's because he played baritone saxophone for Tony Bennett in two 1969 concerts. “I occasionally introduce myself as probably the only actuary who has performed professionally with Tony Bennett,” he said.

Feldman plans to be in the audience when Bennett performs at the gala dinner on Tues., Oct. 19. The last time Feldman saw the renowned entertainer in person, Bennett was posing with VIPs after a St. Louis concert in which Feldman was part of his “big band.”

#### The Swingin' Padre, and a college jazz band

The story begins at Notre Dame High School in a Chicago suburb. Feldman was a member of a talented jazz band led by a memorable mentor, Rev. George Wiskirchen, known as the “Swingin' Padre” in jazz circles.

Just how good was the group? “Two band members have become nationally known musicians,” Feldman said. They are pianist Jim

McNeely, recently nominated for a jazz Grammy and a regular at New York's famed Village Vanguard club; and trombonist Jim Pankow, an original member of the '60s rock group Chicago who still performs with them.

So it was no surprise that Feldman continued on his extracurricular musical route while a math student at the University of Illinois at Urbana. Auditions placed him in the best of the school's three jazz bands, the University of Illinois Jazz Band, by sophomore year. “I was the only non-music major in the group,” he said, and he continued playing through his master's degree program.

“We played the Newport Jazz Festival. We backed up Sarah Vaughan at the New Orleans Jazz Festival and Maynard Ferguson at the Prague Jazz Festival.” In 1969, the group became only the second big band and the third jazz group to perform in the Soviet Union. “The first big band was Benny Goodman's, 10 years earlier.”

#### Encountering Tony

Feldman was 22 years old and in a math master's degree program at the University of Illinois. A former band member, then a Los Angeles studio musician, sent word that musicians were needed for part of Tony Bennett's concert tour in Detroit and St. Louis. “It was that old story — I was in the right place at the right time,” Feldman recalled. “The core of the band was from L.A.”

On a spring Saturday in 1969, several young musicians from the Midwest boarded various planes for Detroit. Feldman was one, “and wouldn't you know it, the airline lost my sax.” So in rehearsal — where Tony Bennett listened but did not sing — Feldman played his other instrument, a bass clarinet. “About halfway through rehearsal, someone from the airline showed up backstage with my saxophone,” and Feldman continued more comfortably.

The band — with 16 musicians, standard big band size — was led by Louis Bellson, a legendary jazz

drummer in his own right but also famous as the husband of Pearl Bailey. Also among Feldman's once-in-a-lifetime colleagues were Harry “Sweets” Edison, “a trumpet player who performed with Count Basie for many years,” and Pete Chrislieb, tenor sax player in Doc Severinsen's “Tonight Show” band.

The Detroit audience was enthralled and thrilled by Bennett's performance, Feldman said. “Of course, he sang ‘I Left My Heart in San Francisco.’ That was at the height of its popularity.” The star also sang “In Other Words” (better known as “Fly Me to the Moon”), “The Trolley Song” (“Clang, clang, went the trolley”), and “For Once in My Life.”

After the concert, “the musicians got on a bus for St. Louis, and Tony Bennett got on a plane. You know how that goes,” Feldman laughed.

In St. Louis' Kiel Auditorium, “we were already well-rehearsed, and the concert came off really great,” Feldman recalled. “After it was over, I walked over to Tony Bennett, an extremely nice person. I shook his hand and said it was a real pleasure playing with him. Then the photographer came over — and pushed me out of the way to make room for the VIPs. Tony just rolled his eyes and shrugged his shoulders as if to say, ‘What does my opinion count? I'm just the star, along for the ride.’”



Feldman's promotional photo from the 1960s shows him as he looked backing songster Bennett.

### The Bennett style

If there's one thing Feldman remembers about Bennett as a musician, it's his ability to "hold the audience."

"When he got into a ballad, you could hear a pin drop," Feldman said. "I know they felt, 'He's singing right to me.' It's the way he bows and accepts applause. There's real sincerity and humility."

Behind that is something deeper, Feldman recalled. "People understand that he's a real person, not some kind of Hollywood phony — and it comes through in his music. He sings songs he believes in, that are consistent with what he is and what he feels."

### A new life

Feldman finished his master's program and eventually began seeking a career in earnest. "I was looking to be a teacher, but in 1973, there weren't any teaching jobs available. However, there were actuarial jobs." He already had taken the first two actuarial exams "as a fallback," and the rest is history. He joined Combined Insurance in 1973 and then moved to his current employer, now named PricewaterhouseCoopers, in 1985.

## Music and actuaries

**B**ill Feldman is far from alone in his involvement with both music and actuarial science. David M. Holland, 1996-97 SOA president, is a devoted singer (a classical baritone), and guitarist Doug Smith, ASA, owns a recording studio and heads a nonprofit group supporting music education for children.

*The Actuary* would like to showcase actuaries' musical lives in an upcoming article. If you play an instrument, sing, or are involved with music in any active way (listening doesn't count), let us know. Forward your name and a few comments about your musical history to Kelly Mayo, SOA public relations/marketing coordinator, *The Actuary* (fax: 847/706-3599; e-mail: [kmayo@soa.org](mailto:kmayo@soa.org); mail: Society of Actuaries, 475 N. Martingale Road, Suite 800, Schaumburg, IL 60173).

But through all those years, Feldman kept on playing in bands, although it faded dramatically "as the actuarial exams and family became more important."

Where does Feldman perform today? "I've been known to play at our department's Christmas party," he said. So for Feldman, the 15 minutes of fame continue, at least seasonally.

**Bill Feldman, senior consultant,**

**PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP, Chicago, knows that many actuaries are or have been musicians, and he wonders whether others have played with Tony Bennett "or had other great gigs." He is interested in hearing from them, "so we can compare notes." He can be reached by e-mail at [william.t.feldman@us.pwcglobal.com](mailto:william.t.feldman@us.pwcglobal.com).**

## Spec Fic tells tales both fun and insightful

*Jacqueline Bitowt*  
SOA Public Relations Manager

**T**he third edition of *Actuarial Speculative Fiction* (also fondly known as Spec Fic, version 3.0) is available now, and with it some deep insights and weird, fun stories.

"Spec Fic turns the actuarial stereotype upside down," said editor Carol Marler. "Who would have thought that the 'boring' actuarial mind could harbor such strange ideas? You have to read it to believe it."

As with the first two versions, the third features stories submitted in a

competition sponsored by the SOA's Computer Science Section. The author of the first place story, "Computer Graphics," listed only as C.V., received a \$250 prize. "Computer Graphics" is posted on the SOA's Web site ([www.soa.org](http://www.soa.org), *Special Interest Sections, Computer Science Section*), as is the table of contents.

The remaining eight stories in the 94-page issue were authored by Marilyn Dunstan, Chris Fievoli, G. Lee Giesecke, Walt Herrington, David Kroll, Gary Lange, Marler, and

Jim Toole.

Once again, the stories were judged by Robert Mielke, Ph.D., associate professor of English, Truman State University, Kirksville, Mo.

Copies have been sent to all Computer Science Section members. Others can obtain a copy free of charge from Joe Adduci at the SOA office (phone: 847/706-3548; fax: 847/706-3599; e-mail: [jadduci@soa.org](mailto:jadduci@soa.org)).