

*The Compassman,
The Nun,
and the
Steakhouse Statistician.*



The “half-title” page once served a useful purpose. Books were once sold as loose sheets without a binding, because your estate’s bookbinder would want to match the covers of all the other books in your library. The first page (the title page) would often get dirty because it was on top of the loose sheets. Therefore, the title was duplicated on this extra page which could later be discarded after it had protected the original text from soiling.

These days, it often serves as a place to write an inscription when the title page lacks sufficient room (as the best ones often do).

The Players Appear

In which ...

*the gentle reader is introduced to the
main characters ...*

Perhaps “all the world” is a stage – but is it necessary for statistics and sampling to be *such* a drama? Angst, pain, suffering, confusion ... or did *you* have a different experience? There are, of course, people who actually like this kind of thing but they are a twisted and difficult bunch in general. You know this. Many of you have met them. Those who study statistics out of necessity can at least plead that they were forced into this perversion for a good reason. **There is, indeed, a good reason.** Few areas of mathematics apply so frequently and usefully to everyday life, let alone the expensive and sometimes important work that requires the measurement of things that naturally vary².

In this book, there are 3 major characters. They are augmented by a scattering of other actors when necessary, but these 3 do the heavy lifting. I didn't want to burden you with too large a cast, or ones with complicated names. Therefore, we have :

The Compassman (Lem)
The Nun (Vi)
 and
The Steakhouse Statistician (OH)

One of the astronomer Galileo's most famous books (*Dialogue on the Two Chief World Systems*, 1632) was written with a cast of 3 characters. One character served to ask honest questions, and was in a sincere search for understanding. Another (Simplico) put forward the politically correct dogma of the times and the church. His final character brought out the logic that Galileo wished to present to the readers of his book. I leave it to the gentle reader to assign the proper roles to our 3 characters.

² OK – addition and subtraction – I admit it. Unlike statistics, however, the *philosophy* of these is not important. Statistics is about logic rather than mathematics. This is why, at some point, it really helps to understand some of that logic - whereas you can just DO addition quite mechanically.



The Compassman

Known around the company as “The Kid”, this young man was only recently hired by the firm. He was being groomed to run the Forest Inventory department by a Vice-President who had an eye for talent. His acceptance of the job had some odd provisions. The Kid insisted that he be hired as a compassman to work on a typical field crew 3 days a week, with no special treatment. The rest of the time he would work with a mentor to learn the business. This was in spite of his being nearly finished with a Masters Degree in Forest Biometrics at a good university. He also requested that his education be kept quiet during this time. His previous experience in life convinced him that there was much to learn from people “on the ground”, and that future credibility, competence and respect would require spending some time there. He knew “what he didn’t know”.

The Kid’s final requirement was that a former associate be brought out of retirement for at least the same 12 months, as a resource for both the company and for himself. The Kid set up his office in the “bull pen” with the other timber cruisers working for the company.

He went by the nickname “Lem”, for reasons he never revealed to anyone. He had a name, but for the first year nobody outside the personnel department ever knew what it was.



The Nun

She had actually been studying to be a Catholic nun several years ago. She had a deep natural affinity for authority, discipline, and the infallibility of her causes (and of her “elders” in the chain of command). She had a love for authoritative books. She instinctively and rather shallowly accepted the official version of everything, no matter what the situation. She bore suffering well. *She was a natural.* She did, however, have a fatal flaw. She flunked the humility requirements. She just couldn’t do it, no matter how hard she tried. The Mother Superior finally threw her out of the convent for the good of everyone involved. It was the right decision.

Consequently, she cloistered herself in the math department at a nearby university. They had it all too – complex arguments, dogma, great books, and *certainty* above all else. *She was a natural*. Unfortunately, she did not have any instinct for abstract mathematics. She was just as smart as the other students, but she lacked the odd wiring that made a natural mathematician (although her lack of humility fit right in). So, she stepped onto the statistics track, which had better job prospects and paid better too. One could easily imagine the Nun standing before a mirror prior to her Masters Degree oral exam, repeating “Mirror, mirror on the wall ...”

She graduated with a Masters degree, overseen by the locally famous (but otherwise unknown) Professor Smiley of that department. Professor Smiley arranged for The Nun to be hired by a lackluster Vice-President who was not involved with forest inventory, and she was duly installed in a paneled office several floors above the undisciplined practicality of the field crews. She brought to the company her previous commitment toward righteousness and toward any form of written authority that was handed into her keeping. She *didn't* know “what she didn't know”.

Her real name was “Vernonia” - apparently for a town in Oregon where her mother had grown up. That sounded good as “Sister Vernonia” but in her secular life she chose to be called “Vi”. It also sounded a bit like the Greek letters used in statistics, which she enjoyed. She adopted the title “Statistical Officer”³ for herself, and began to send “discussion papers” around the company to straighten out procedural heresy and misguided beliefs. She was also writing several statistical articles that she planned to publish. She was in the *very* early stages of that life-long journey from cocksure ignorance to thoughtful uncertainty.

She had actually attained her original goal (although she was perhaps the only one who did not realize it). She was, indeed, *a novice*⁴.

³ There never seems to be a “Statistical Lance-Corporal” in the world. They are all *officers* – and typically get exactly the respect they deserve from the troops. Lem posted the title “technical expert, third class - probationary” over his own desk.

⁴ Let me assure the few Catholic readers of this book that I mean no disrespect to their religion. The thing is ... the Catholics just *have it all*. Divine guidance, sin (original sin, no less), devils advocates (now dismissed), doctrine, dogma, scholarship, saints, holy scripture, infallibility, it just goes on and on – not to mention the inquisition and the scrap with Galileo (oh – that brings to mind heresy, persecution and redemption). If there is a natural religion for most statisticians, it *has* to be the Catholic model. I must admit that my knowledge of religion is not scholarly, so perhaps I have missed something here. At any rate, it seemed natural for Vi to be Catholic, so I decided she might as well be *very* Catholic.



The Steakhouse Statistician

He was called “OH”⁵, and like The Kid he had another name but it didn’t really matter. He might be the nearest thing to our hero in the story.

Little was known in the company about his past, but he seemed to have one. Apparently he had an advanced degree in Biometrics (perhaps a Ph.D., but there was nothing hanging on his walls, so one could never be sure). It was, however, clearly not from a math department. Apparently he had worked in the woods enough to know his way around a bit, and appeared to actually enjoy the somewhat unruly and Lutheran kind of company provided by timber cruisers and other working folk.

The rumor was that he had once been pensioned off from a larger forestry company because of some kind of hassle with a “senior person”⁶. Small items in his office hinted that perhaps he had traveled in Tibet. Recently, he had been running a steakhouse nestled into a sunny California vineyard⁷ and had been living reasonably well from the proceeds of his small private forest. Nobody knew why he had accepted this job.

Although he made some practical suggestions to the working classes and seemed busy enough, nobody knew exactly what he did. He set up his cubical in the middle of the timber cruisers area, and seemed content with the same lack of space and non-privacy that they enjoyed. Later, some would say that this was just a ploy to overhear interesting issues whenever they popped up, and perhaps to let the cruisers eavesdrop on his thoughts whenever OH wanted to introduce changes to their field procedures.

Note to JBA readers ... the next chapter is about sample size.

⁵ “OH” was pronounced as though it was a pair of initials (O.H.) but he preferred to write it without these periods (“full stops” to you Canadians, eh). Out of respect for his wishes, I have done the same.

⁶ Readers of an earlier and more technical book might recognize OH. In “chapter last” of that book OH had a very “Sherlockian” encounter with Professor Smiley and subsequently vanished. Like Holmes, he had apparently reappeared after a decent interval. It is possible there might be two people with the same name, but hard to believe there would be two with the same philosophy.

⁷ It pains me, this part of OH’s past. I would so much rather that he drank fine German white wines. Perhaps every character is better off having a minor fault.