Jerry Slocum of Beverly Hills tomorrow will host an L.A. meeting of puzzle collectors and enthusiasts from all over the world.
He's never met a puzzle he could not solve

Collection of his stumpers are in L.A. museum exhibit

By Eric Mankin

Jerry Slocum of Beverly Hills understood perfectly that as exasperated as I was at trying to solve a puzzle I'd come across, involving five pieces of plastic, it had also made me happy in equal measure.

Slocum, a 55-year-old Hughes Electronics engineer who lives in Beverly Hills, is probably the world's leading authority and almost certainly the world's leading collector of mechanical puzzles.

He just published (with a Dutch collaborator) a book on them; his collection provides the lion's share of a special show now on exhibition at the Craft and Folk Art Museum (5814 Wilshire, L.A.) that soon will be on tour around the world. Slocum has designed puzzles and solved them, demonstrated them on Johnny Carson's TV show, testified as an expert witness at a multimillion-dollar puzzle trial, and tomorrow he will host the world's premiere gathering of puzzle people, which is likely to attract participants from all over the world.

Slocum is a tall, slightly stooped man with an appropriate expression of slight distraction. Except for the sprinkling of gray in his straight black hair, he looks a lot younger than his age. He looked a lot younger still when I showed him my fiendish little plastic puzzle; his eyes lit up with delight like an 8-year-old with a new batch of Lego blocks.

"A very good puzzle," Slocum said approvingly. "Very good." And he expertly put it through his paces. The five pieces fit together to form a perfect square. "Actually, the nice thing is that four of them fit to form a square, too," said Slocum, demonstrating as he spoke. I groaned internally at the memory of staring imbicilically at just that smaller square for what seemed like hours, holding the extra piece and wondering if the whole world had been given an extra set of brains while I was out somewhere buying lunch.

Slocum hesitated for a just a moment, then fit the five pieces smoothly together into the required square. His movement recalled my delight at seeing how elegantly it finally fit into place, and my self-congratulation at figuring it out at last.

"Yes, good puzzle. Nice and simple," he said, referring not the difficulty of doing it, but to the small number of parts and the simplicity of what had to be done. "Good 'aha!' factor."

Slocum now has between 10,000 and 12,000 creatures like my five-piece square neatly packaged, numbered, cataloged and stored in a building that he constructed just for them behind his house.

He got the bug when he was a child: "I can clearly remember my parents giving me a puzzle they bought at the 1939 World's Fair." But the real hook came when, as a teenager, he came upon a copy of one of the classic puzzles of all times — the Chinese Rings, a contrivance that is probably more than 1,700 years old — at least, there's an apparent reference to it — under the intriguing but appropriate name of the Delaying Guess Instrument — in a Chinese document dated 181 A.D.

Slocum dived into one of the drawers in gray steel filing cabinet — the kind used to store blueprints — and came back with a beautiful hand-worked structure of ivory and black cord — a set of ivory rings attached by a continuous cord to a slotted stick. Object: Remove the rings.

If you are very patient and quite clever, you can discover a beautiful pattern that allows the rings to come off. The pattern of the Chinese puzzle, according to Slocum, was recognized two millenia ago as mathematically the same as a computer code. The young Slocum knew nothing of any of this: He just remembers his initial delight at solving it and knew that he was hooked for life on puzzles.

Slocum's collecting came in two spurts. It peaked when he was young and haunted swap meets, garage sales and antique stores ("I think I went to swap meets every weekend for years."). Then he got involved in a career with Hughes (his engineering specialty is designing the electronics for the displays in airplane cockpits) building a career, married and raised two sons with his wife, Margot. When the sons left home, and the career was established he returned to puzzles with renewed enthusiasm — and increased cash, though puzzles are not really expensive, as magnificent obsessions go. The most Slocum has ever paid for a puzzle is about $500 — and his collection includes numerous beautifully finished hand-made one-of-a-kind wood creations, as well as 200-year-old antiques.
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From file cabinets and glass cases other examples come out:

■ An intriguing set of horse hobbles, from the American West. Without a lock, they only fit together by an ingenious loop and twist maneuver. They were designed — Slocum doesn’t know by whom — to frustrate horse thieves. They were never patented, just made by a number of frontier blacksmiths.

■ An impossible object — a Coke bottle with an arrow carved from a single piece of wood running right through two small holes drilled on either side of the bottle. The arrow is too big on each end to go through the holes — so how was it made? I’ve promised the person who made it not to tell,” Slocum said with a proud smile.

■ A sealed glass vial, pointed at each end, containing a large air bubble. Your mission — to get the air bubble to settle, all of it, in a depression in the middle of the vial.

Completely impossible — unless you figure out the very simple trick.

■ More history, in the form of a 1915 patent English dexterity puzzle. The manufacturer, Slocum explains, made special versions of the puzzle, which were given to the Red Cross for delivery to English prisoners-of-war being held in German camps. In addition to offering a POW a way to while away the idle hours, it contained, cleverly bound into its frame, a compass, a file or a map to aid escape attempts.

A constant in the assembly of the collection has been a patient wife, Margot, who is “not enthusiastic about puzzles at all.” Which is, in fact, not an uncommon trait: “Some people like them, but many people really hate them: They are threatened by them, and don’t like them at all.”

It was, nevertheless, Margot who set in motion the process that led to the show at the Craft and Folk Arts Museum. Working there as a volunteer, she told museum staff about her husband’s collection. The description led to a visit, the visit to the idea for the exhibition.

The exhibition, which will travel to Minneapolis/St. Paul, New York, Cambridge, Mass., and Toronto, and then on to Europe and Japan — contains examples of all of the different types into which Slocum has categorized his collection — and the field of puzzles in general.

These are: Disentangling; Interlocking; Sequential Move (as in Rubik’s Cube); Impossible Objects, Enigmatic Vessels, Take Apart, Put Together, Folding, and finally, Tests of Manual Dexterity.

At Slocum’s insistence, the show is hands-on — there are eight puzzles put out for the public visiting the show to try to solve.

Rubik’s Cube, the most popular puzzle of recent times, is represented in dozens of variants and mutants in Slocum’s collection. Slocum is intimately familiar with the device, of which millions of copies have now been sold. Recently, he was in Delaware, serving as an expert witness for Larry Nichols, a Cambridge inventor who patented a puzzle involving a cube with six sides in six colors, made up of smaller cubes. Nichols’ version was held together by magnets; otherwise it was similar to the Hungarian mathematician Rubik’s creation, Nichols argued — and a Delaware court, after listening to Slocum and another testimony, has tentatively agreed to order the U.S. distributor of Rubik’s to pay copyright infringement damages.

(It was never argued in the suit, nor is there any evidence to suggest that Rubik did not invent his cube completely independently of Nichols’ ideas.)

While Rubik’s Cube is by far the most popular puzzle of recent times, at least two others, says Slocum, have produced comparable fads and crazes in America, judging by newspaper accounts of the time, parodies among the likes. In the 1880s, “Pigs in Clover,” a simple manual dexterity puzzle, had people across the country sitting in their parlors delicately trying to coax a group of steel balls to sit together at the center of a maze.

A decade earlier, the extraordinary American puzzle-and-game inventor Sam Loyd brought out his “14-15” puzzle, a baffler that asked the question: “In this case, victim might be a better word” to move numbered tiles in a grid according to rules. Loyd offered a reward of $1,000 — a substantial sum at the time — to anyone who could solve it. In 1879, after the whole country had been wracking its brains for nearly a decade, a mathematician announced that the puzzle was impossible — a fact that Loyd, according to Slocum, had almost certainly known when he introduced the puzzle and the prize.

The “14-15” was only the best selling of Loyd’s numerous puzzle inventions. Nevertheless, Loyd, who also wrote a highly popular syndicated newspaper column at the time, left an estate of only a few thousand dollars when he died in 1910 — “and I haven’t really been able,” says Slocum, “to figure out what he did with the money.”

A biography of Loyd is one of the next books Slocum wants to write. He hopes it will be an easier sale than his current volume, “Puzzles Old and New: How to Make Them and Solve Them,” which made the rounds of publisher after publisher before the University of Washington Press finally brought it out. The businesspeople just didn’t think there was a market anywhere for it,” said Slocum, particularly in the lavishly illustrated form that Slocum and his collaborator insisted was the only way the subject could be handled.

The book was finally published only after a curious hedge was arranged: The book was designed to be printed in two languages, with at least two and possibly others to follow soon after. A rave review in the Scientific American — “One wonders whether any library that serves a population of teen-agers can afford to be without a copy” — gave it a good push.

In the meantime, the puzzle collection just keeps getting bigger. Slocum doesn’t go to swap meets any more; antique dealers all over the country call him, knowing what he’s after. And he has his party — Dec. 29 — the major event in the puzzle world year — which functions as the main place where state-of-the-art puzzle people gather to show and swap the latest and best. For this event Slocum has gotten RSVPs for puzzle addicts from France, Finland, Japan (not surprisingly, the place where some of the best new puzzles are being thought up and built), England . . . you name it. Very social, and lots of fun. Also: “I expect to get about 200 new pieces out of the party,” says Slocum.

Make it 201. I gave him my puzzle with the five pieces of plastic. It had already tormented enough of my friends.

Eric Mankin is an L.A. writer.