Jerry Slocum
2006
Sam Loyd Award

The AGPC presented Jerry Slocum with the Sam Loyd Award for lifetime achievement in mechanical puzzles at the 2006 Cambridge convention. Anne Williams introduced Jerry and made the presentation:

It is a great pleasure and honor to introduce Jerry Slocum, this year's recipient of the Sam Loyd award. Jerry is one of the true greats of the puzzle world. His contributions to mechanical puzzles are so immense that I could spend hours recounting them. Here I will only be able to give the highlights.

First, for those who don’t know Jerry well, I should warn you that he can sniff out a puzzle faster than an ant can find a picnic. I learned this first hand in 1983, when I had my first small jigsaw puzzle exhibit in Ohio. I had scarcely arrived home when I got a letter from Jerry. Somehow, far off in California he’d picked up on this obscure event, so he was writing to introduce himself. He has an incredible amount of patience, persistence, and tenacity - more than most puzzlers - and he almost always finds what he’s looking for. Indeed, I think he could give Homeland Security a few lessons in how to solve their current puzzles.

Jerry has been immersed in puzzles for almost seventy years, since he was a young boy. He spent much of his childhood in the Chicago area, discovering tangrams, Chinese rings, 3-dimensional barrels, and the like. Jerry matured into an avid collector, with a steadily growing pile of puzzles. By the time I first visited him in Los Angeles, some twenty years ago, his collection had outgrown his house. Some might decide to stop collecting at that point - but not Jerry!

He built a small museum in his back yard to hold everything. The museum itself is a puzzle - to enter you must solve a trick door made especially for Jerry by Akio Kamei. His collection now includes 30,000 puzzles, and heaven only knows how many pieces. Jerry is not one of those collectors who just amasses things and puts them on the shelf. He plays with every puzzle he gets, and delights in discovering new tricks and mechanisms in contemporary puzzles.

Jerry's awesome collecting achievement is just a small part of the reason for the Loyd award. Most importantly, we are recognizing Jerry for a lifetime of sharing his puzzles. Even though he never worked in a school, he's a true educator. His mission is to show people the beauty, the logic (or illogic), the creativity, the ingenuity, and the craftsmanship of puzzles.

If you look at Jerry's many projects, you'll discover that all the pieces fit into this bigger pattern of sharing his enthusiasm and his puzzles. Let me give a few examples:

Jerry loves to entertain, challenge, and exchange ideas with puzzlers. He always has a teaser in his pocket to pass around at the dinner table. But he also wants to recruit novices to mechanical puzzling and knows how to draw them in without intimidating them.

His puzzle collection has been featured in museum exhibitions all over the world, including MIT's museum here in 1987. At Jerry's insistence, each exhibition has had a large hands-on section where visitors can solve examples of every type of puzzle on display.

He writes extensively on mechanical puzzles and their history. When Jerry was only 24, Science and Mechanics published his article on "Making and Solving Puzzles." Since then he’s become the author of many books. Puzzles Old and New 1986, introduced many Americans to the topic. The Puzzle Arcade and Swipe This Pencil are two books he wrote to turn children on to mechanical puzzles. His definitive book on the tangram came out in 2003, and his new book on The 15 Puzzle hits the bookstores next month.

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Jerry goes to great lengths in to research his books. His persistent detective work has tracked down facts and shattered myths about the origins of the tangram and other puzzles. His enthusiasm is so contagious that he's managed to enlist friends and strangers all over the world to help him search libraries, museums and private collections for hidden puzzles and historical tidbits.

I can't begin to count the number of times that Jerry has been featured in magazines or newspapers, or on television. One of the most memorable was his April Fool's Day appearance on Martha Stewart's show. We learned then about her talent for mechanical puzzles, despite her apparent problems with stock market ones.

Jerry began hosting his own puzzle parties in 1978, when a dozen puzzlers gathered at his home. These have now morphed into international events with hundreds of participants, held in places like Chicago, Tokyo, Helsinki, and even Mongolia.

Jerry joined the AGPC in its first year in 1985, bringing a new dimension to the original focus on games. He has served as a Board Member since 1997, has written articles for AGPC publications, and has been very involved with conventions and convention planning.

Jerry is a leader in generosity. He supports puzzle designers and makers by commissioning puzzles from them, and spreading the word about their talents. He has set up the Slocum Puzzle Foundation to benefit puzzle projects. He is currently in the process of donating his collection to the Lilly Library at Indiana University. The grand opening of the Slocum puzzle room will take place there in August.

Despite his preoccupation with puzzles, Jerry has found some time for other pursuits. He got his bachelors and masters degrees in engineering at the University of Illinois and UCLA, and then went on to a career as an aerospace engineer at Hughes Aircraft. Along the way he found and married his lovely wife Margot. They've been married for more than fifty years. And of course they've produced some enthusiastic puzzlers among their two sons and four grandchildren.

Finally, I would like to mention how generous Jerry has been to puzzlers in general, and to me in particular. Jigsaws are a very minor interest of his. Yet he is always keeping an eye out and sending me jigsaw related items that he comes across: newspaper clippings, photocopies of patents, tips on what movies have jigsaw puzzles in them, and of course puzzle themselves. It was a real pleasure for me to work with him on the Katonah Museum of Art puzzle exhibition in 2000. Later, he was the one who suggested me as a guest for the Martha Stewart show, an appearance that helped me get a book contract. And it's not just me - amazingly, Jerry finds the time to lavish this kind of attention on hundreds of individual puzzlers.

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