JUST ASK!

Editors: In the November 1992 *MUMPS Computing (22:5)*, we published the question, Why does $HOROLOG start on December 31, 1840? Theories abound, but we were looking for the actual documentation. Fortunately, a long-time member and journal reader has solved the mystery for everyone. Thank you, Jim Poitras.

Response: In the beginning there was chaos. And then there was MUMPS, but there was still chaos. For a while. At first, programmers could only access a date string in the computer stored as YYMMDD. The rest was up to them.

Starting in early 1969, our group created the Chemistry Lab application at Massachusetts General Hospital (MGH), which was the first package in the MGH MUMPS with Global Data Storage and many of the features of the language today. (For you historians, about a year earlier a prototype version of a very different MUMPS that only had linear files supported a stripped-down Chemistry Lab system.)

When we started programming, there were no utility programs of any type. We had to write them all: time, date, verify database, global tally, print routine, etc. I ended up writing initial versions of most of these.

When I decided on specifications for the date routine, I remembered reading of the oldest (one of the oldest?) U.S. citizen, a Civil War veteran, who was 121 years old at the time. Since I wanted to represent dates in a Julian-type form so that age could be easily calculated and to be able to represent any birth date in the numeric range selected, I decided that a starting date in the early 1840s would be "safe." Since my algorithm worked most logically when every fourth year was a leap year, the first year was taken as 1841. The zero point was then December 31, 1840. (OK—agreed, every fourth year is a leap year, except centuries, and then only every fourth one. My algorithm made a specific check for that.)

Now about your theories. Yes, the assumption that it came from MGH is correct. No, there's nothing to do with Ether Day. Yes, it was arbitrary and kept the number of days within 16 bits. Remember, we ran the MGH Chemistry and Bacteriology laboratories on a machine with 1 M of 18-bit hard disk storage, 32 K of 18-bit random access memory, and the MUMPS operating system supported twenty users. Very small! To store as the YYMMDD string would have taken 3 x 18 bit words instead of 1.

We wanted to handle every record stored, but we did not do a survey (we just read *Life*). There was no relationship to the Civil War and medical records (as one theory suggested), there was just the article about a veteran. And there's no connection with the Veterans Administration.

That's the origin of December 31, 1840, or January 1, 1841. I wasn't party to the MDC negotiations, but I did explain the logic of my choice to members of the Committee.

James W. Poitras
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Question: I notice that you give prominence to a group of members you call Distinguished Members on the last page of the magazine. Who are they and what makes them distinguished? What influence do they have on the Association and *M Computing*?

Editors: Thank you for noticing our Distinguished Members! They make up a special group of M users and vendors working together to promote awareness and the use of M. What distinguishes these members is that they put aside their individual needs to support a program benefitting the M community at large. We established this membership category in response to members who wanted MTA to undertake a proactive public relations program about M. Distinguished Members pay from $1,000 to $10,000 annually to support our industry program. Their dollars fund media relations and activities such as the Gartner Group market research and COMDEX projects (see "Briefings," p. 56). Their support expands the market and ensures its viability for every MTA member.

In return, each Distinguished Member receives the basic corporate membership benefits plus important services, such as the recognition in this journal. They do not, however, have any distinct influence on the Association or *M Computing*. Join these Distinguished Members by calling Peggy Hoffman at MTA, 301-431-4070, for more information. M

Send *Just Ask!* questions or requests to the managing editor at *M Computing*.