

The Reactor

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Predictions ... right and wrong

Everyone I know, including me, has tried to predict the future. Business people try to predict what business will be like next year. Gamblers try to predict the winning lottery numbers. Fashion designers try to predict what will please women. School administrators try to predict how many children will apply for admission next fall, and the city staff tries to figure out just how many people will inhabit the community in five years.

If they're right, no one remembers. If they're wrong, no one forgets. Even the most skilled and best intentioned can really blow it from time to time. In March, 1939, the Reader's Digest described the chief problem of the schools in 1960: 10 million empty classroom seats. The title was "Population Going Down." As you know, there was a

slight error in their calculations.

In the mid 1960's there were detailed, plausible predictions that by 1990 there would be 96,000 people in Pacifica, including 4,000 people living on Sweeney Ridge and 6,000 on Milagra Ridge.

Pedro Mountain was to have 5,000. The Maestri Ranch, now a part of San Pedro Valley Park, would have had 4,000 people living on it right now if population projections were foolproof.

Such projections aren't harmless. Those who object to more neighbors find ways to derail development. If the projections were over-optimistic in the first place, the counter-moves can over-compensate and reverse growth completely, something most find undesirable.

What is now Pacifica had a population of 4,500 in 1950, mostly in Sharp Park and Pacific Manor. By 1958 there were 21,000 people in the area. Little wonder the prediction in August 1959 was 80,000 by 1990.

Ironically, elementary school population, which had been 82 in 1939 and 461 in 1949, had jumped to 4,584 in 1958, somewhat higher than it is today, when the total population is roughly twice what it was that first full year after incorporation.

The personal computer on which I type this column was predictable 40 years ago, if the predictor had realized that extreme miniaturization was a possibility. As far as I know, the only one who came anywhere near doing so was Chester Gould, who brought us Dick Tracy's wrist radio transmitter. Ironically, wrist radio transmitters don't seem to be much in demand. They suffered the fate of many inventions. They're really impractical.

I'm a Star Trek fan. I love all that fantasy. However, the more I think about it, the more likely it seems that fantasy it will remain. It seems unlikely space warp will happen. Traveling around the galaxy, even to the nearest stars, will likely never become practical. It seems likely we will never exceed lightspeed.

Unless we can surpass lightspeed, this galaxy will remain, for the most part, a closed book to men. Wouldn't it be fun if it turned out I was all wrong in such predictions?

More accurate predictions of Pacifica's population in 1990 could have been made in 1959, if certain facts, known then, but ignored, had instead been taken into account. Is it possible that certain facts we know now will make travel to the stars practical? Probably not.

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