

## Loving Those Zeros

*By Dennis Payton Knight*

That two fingers plus two fingers makes four fingers seems obvious to those of us with at least ten digits, not counting toes. The rule carries through to five plus four equaling nine, but when you get to five plus five, you must ironically re-use digit number one and carry it to get to ten. That is because digit number ten in our numerical scheme is a zero, and you know how worthless that is.

But the zero that stands for zilch, nada, zippo and diddly squat isn't worthless at all, because when you plop a zero after any other digit, it enlarges that digit by ten. And the more zeros you plop in, the bigger the value. So, the beautiful irony is that six zeros added after the end of a zero still mean naught, but add those same six zeros after the digit *one* and you get a million. How worthily otherwise worthless zeros grow on a paycheck.

That is all courtesy of the decimal system. Thank the Hindus and Arabs for inventing it, because I can't imagine what my second-grade arithmetic book would have looked like in Roman numerals. And come to think of it, there is no Roman numeral for zero. So how does one get rich in Rome? Their multiplication tables must be impossible. But they still manage to multiply in Rome. The census figures prove it.

It took thousands of years (that is, MM's of years), but in the year 2015 (MMXV to be consistent) the Rome city council decided to phase out Roman numerals as too complicated. So, they adopted Arabic numerals and thus gained the zero, probably so they could plop a few into their budget.

Predating both Arabic and Roman numerals is the abacus, the oldest system for arithmetic calculations: beads on vertical rods in a frame. Different cultures from China to Greece to Russia claim credit for it, and it's still used as a teaching tool around the world. I don't know how the abacus handles its zeros. I had one in high school but didn't get much out of it, probably because I kept erasing the answer when I dropped it in my notebook.

Now for those geniuses who decimated our numbers system and cast off all the digits save the one and the zero, to create the computer. Digital computing is in binary numbers, coming down to a switch, with *on* representing one, and *off* representing zero. So, a million-dollar check would read 11110100001001000000. It's just a matter of turning the switch on four times, then off once, on again, then off-off-off-off, on, off-off, on, and off-off-off-off-off-off. You gotta be fast if you want the job.

I believe, with a few extra zeros landing in the wrong place (or in the right place) on my social security check, I could personally pay off the national debt, maybe even build a beautiful wall – surrounding Washington, D.C.

Oh, how I love those zeros.