Charles Proteus (Karl August Rudolph) Steinmetz

Born: April 9, 1865;

Breslau, Prussia
Died: Oct. 26, 1923

Steinmetz's law of hysteresis was the basis for the physics behind ferrite cores used in core memory [May 11], and his use of complex arithmetic to analyze alternating current was central to George R. Stibitz's [April 30] CNC [Jan 8] (which stood for Complex Number Calculator), an early form of relay computer.

Steinmetz's experiments with "man-made lightning", 'conducted' in a football field-sized lab at General Electric, using 120,000 volt generators, earning him the nickname the "Forger of Thunderbolts". Another nickname was "The Wizard of Schenectady, where he lived and had his research lab.

When he emigrated to the US in 1889, he changed his first name to "Charles" and added "Proteus", the name of a wise hunchbacked character from the Odyssey. Steinmetz was himself just four feet tall, and had a curved spine.

US author, John Dos Passos, wrote in "The 42nd Parallel": "Steinmetz was the most valuable piece of apparatus General Electric had – until he wore out and died".

John Adam Presper "Pres" Eckert, Jr.

Born: April 9, 1919;

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
Died: June 3, 1995

Eckert and John Mauchly [Aug 30] proposed [April 8], designed and built the first general-purpose electronic digital computer, the ENIAC [Feb 15]. They had met a few years earlier at the Moore School of Electrical Engineering in [June 23] 1941.

He and Mauchly also designed the EDVAC [April 12], and founded the Eckert-Mauchly Computer Corporation (EMCC [Dec 22]). At EMCC, the duo built the BINAC [Oct 9], and the first commercial computer in the US, the UNIVAC [March 31]. All of these machines used Eckert's mercury delay line memory [Oct 31].

J. Presper Eckert. (mid 1960s) (c) history-computer.com

Art Gehring (logic designer for the UNIVAC) called Eckert: "a genius when it came to designing circuits. There were a lot of people who said that you can't get that many vacuum tubes to operate at the same time without making an error, you just can't do it. But he did it, his design was so reliable it was one of the big things that made the ENIAC work. He was able to design it so it would tolerate quite a bit of variability in the power input and the vacuum tubes and it would still work."

Eckert would rarely sit in a chair or stand still while thinking.

Often he'd crouch on top of a desk or pace back and forth.

Eckert also built a kiss-measuring machine, known as the Osculometer. Couples would grab handles wired to the device, and an array of ten light bulbs would progressively lit up while the pair kissed.

Jacek Karpiński

Born: 9 April 1927;

Turin, Italy, but actually a Polish citizen;
Died: Feb. 21, 2010

Karpiński parents were mountaineers who were in Italy at the time of his birth, planning to climb Mont Blanc.

In 1959, he and Janusz Tomaszewski developed the AKAT-1, the first differential analyzer to use transistors, and an amazing-looking device. It was rumored to have been used by "The Beatles" [Oct 8], which is sadly highly unlikely since they favored Moog synthesizers [May 23] at the end of the 1960s.

The AKAT-1. Photo by Topory. CC BY-SA 3.0.

Between 1970-1973, a team led by Karpiński, in cooperation with two British companies, built the 16-bit K-202 minicomputer. It was inexpensive, fast, and small enough to fit on a desk, and when Karpiński showed off the K-202 at the Poznań International Fair in 1971, it was much more popular than its main Polish competitor, the slow and bulky Odra, built by Elwro, a government-backed competitor.

Subsequently, the production of the K-202 was mysteriously blocked, and Karpiński was thrown out of his company under allegations of sabotage and embezzlement.

During WWII, Karpiński was awarded the Polish Cross of Valor three times.

SPARCstation 1 Released
April 9, 1989

The SPARCstation 1, or Sun 4/60, was the first SPARC-based [July 00] workstation sold by Sun Microsystems [Feb 24].

Its case was a distinctively slim 3-inch high square, often referred to as a "pizza box", along with dot-patterned cooling vents on the side, a "dimple" pattern on the front face, and "Sun purple" feet.

It wasn't the first system to use Sun's SPARC chip; its real claim to fame was an amazing price/performance ratio – 12.5 MIPS at a price similar to a high-end Apple Macintosh. It sold like hot cakes (or perhaps that should be hot pizzas.)

A SPARCstation 5. Photo by Kevinlipe.

The SPARCstation's distinctive design was due to Andy Bechtolsheim [Sept 30], who specified that the motherboard should be the size of a sheet of paper, and expansion cards should be the size of index cards.

PenPoint Announced
April 9, 1990

GO Corporation's PenPoint was one of the earliest OSes specifically designed for tablets and PDAs, in particular AT&T's EO Personal Communicator [Nov 16]. Its novel features, which later became standard for this type of device, included:

- support for gestures, such as a circling motion to edit, 'X' to delete, and a caret to insert;
- the use of "press and hold" to move a selected item;
- a user interface based around the metaphor of pages in a tabbed notebook.

The UI was so good in fact that in April 2008, a federal court found that parts of the OS for the Microsoft Tablet PC [Nov 12] infringed on PenPoint's patents.

GO was founded by Jerry Kaplan, formerly of Lotus Development Corp [Jan 26].

The Scunthorpe Problem
April 9, 1996

Doug Blackie was unable to complete his registration with AOL [Oct 2] when he typed in his home town of "Scunthorpe", a town in Lincolnshire, England. AOL's indecency-filtering software decided that it wouldn't accept the name. After various discussions with the AOL helpline, he entered the name as "Sconthorpe".

Years later, Google's SafeSearch made a similar decision, blocking the popular Scunthorpe news site ThisIsScunthorpe.co.uk and also Scunthorpe's premiere housecat-adoption site, ScunthorpeDistrictCatsProtection.co.uk. Other online sites dealt with the issue by displaying the name as "Scumthorpe" or "Scoonthorpe".

As a consequence, this form of filter-based overreach is now known as the "Scunthorpe Problem".

The town first appeared in the Domesday Book (1086) as Escumesthorpe, which is Old Norse for "Skuma's homestead". Clearly, the solution is for the town to revert to that name.

For more filtering problems, see [Jan 24; Jan 27; June 30].

Turing Test Long Bet
April 9, 02002 (all years are written in this way at the site)

The "Long Bet Project" (http://longbets.org/) was launched by the "Long Now Foundation" to manage wagers on interesting long-term events that would also stimulate discussions about the future.

The first bet uploaded to the site on this day was a wager of $20,000 on whether a computer would pass a suitably complex Turing Test [Oct 00] by the year 2029. It pitted Mitch Kapor [Nov 1] (the pessimist) against Ray Kurzweil [Feb 12] (the optimist). The arguments for and against their positions can be found at http://longbets.org/1/.

As of 2020, there were 780 bets and predictions (bets with no money stake) hosted at the site.

Perhaps the most famous project of the "Long Now Foundation" is its "Clock of the Long Now", a mechanical timepiece that will operate with minimum human intervention for 10,000 years. It is currently being built inside a mountain near Van Horn, Texas. The project was first proposed by Danny Hillis [Sept 25] back in 1986.