April 17th

Hollerith Competes

April 17, 1889

Prev: [Jan 8] Next: [Aug 16]

On this day, Robert P. Porter was appointed Superintendent for the 11th US Census that was scheduled for 1890. The previous census in 1880 had taken seven years to be processed and, due to much-increased immigration, it was projected that 1890's would take 13 years to complete. A faster tabulation method was urgently required.

In June, Porter organized a competition to find the best census tabulating system, and received three entries. William C. Hunt's design used colored paper slips, Charles F. Pidgin employed color-coded paper chips, and Herman Hollerith's [Feb 29] solution was an electric tabulating machine using punch cards [Jan 8].

Each contestant was asked to tabulate information about 10,491 St. Louis residents that had been gathered during the 1880 census. Hollerith was the clear winner, with the advantage of cards becoming very apparent during the tabulation phase: cards were ten times faster than slips, and eight times faster than chips.

David J. Farber

Born: April 17, 1934;

USA

Farber was involved in the design of the first electronic switching system (1ESS), the SNOBOL language [May 19], and the first distributed computer system. He helped set up several American research networks, including CSNET [May 00], NSFNet [July 16], the National Research and Education Network (NREN), and the Gigabit Network Test bed Initiative.

For many years he ran a large (25,000+ readership) mailing list called "Interesting-People", which developed out of his MSGGROUP list, which many consider to be the first one on the ARPANET [June 7].

Dave Farber (2008). Photo by Daderot.

Farber is also renowned for his "Farberisms", such as "He's cornered on all sides" and "Don't roll up your nostrils at me."

ASCC Operating

April 17, 1944

Prev: [March 31] Next: [Aug 7]

Harvard President James Conant wrote to IBM founder Thomas J. Watson [Feb 17] to let him know that the Automatic Sequence Controlled Calculator (ASCC), later known as the Harvard Mark I [Aug 7], was operating smoothly.

The machine had been shipped to Harvard in Feb. after work on it had finished at IBM's North Street Lab in Endicott, New York

The ASCC was 51 feet long, eight feet high, and weighed five tons. It had 750,000 parts, including 3,304 relays, and over 500 miles of wire. Computations were carried out on 72 banks of rotary switches.

It was the second program-controlled machine, preceded only by Konrad Zuse's Z3 [May 12]. However it wasn't a stored program computer; the first of those was the Manchester Baby ([June 21], 1948).

Unlike Zuse's binary machine, the ASCC utilized decimal values and fixed-point arithmetic with a plugboard setting determining the number of decimal places (up to 23 dp). A single multiplication took about five seconds.

ASCC instructions were typed onto tape, and data entered by plugboard settings. The tape reader had no provision for rewinding or for skipping over instruction, but a common 'hack' was to stick the two ends of a tape together to form a loop.

In his letter to Watson, Conant noted that the Mark I was "being used for special problems in connection with the war effort." He may have been referring to John von Neumann's [Dec 28] work for the Manhattan project on determining whether implosion was a viable way to detonate an atomic bomb. However, most of its war work was concerned with calculating ballistics tables for the Navy.

AARD

April 17, 1992

The AARD code was discovered by Geoff Chappell and Andrew Schulman in a beta version of Windows 3.1 [April 6]. It was designed to return a non-fatal error message if Windows detected it was running on top of something other than MS-DOS [Aug 12]. However, subsequent tests of the official Windows 3.1. release showed that AARD had been disabled.

It was called AARD because the string "AARD" appeared in the machine code. This word was often used by Microsoft programmer Aaron R. Reynolds as a label or variable name, as a way to informally sign his work.

Even though Windows 3.1. never exploited AARD, its presence in the OS became an important part of Caldera's later antitrust lawsuit against Microsoft. Caldera acquired DR-DOS, an

MS-DOS alternative, from Novell in 1996, and so could argue that Microsoft was competiting unfairly against it. The suit ended in 2000 with Microsoft handing over $275 million.

DR-DOS had been developed by Gary Kildall's [May 19] Digital Research as a successor to CP/M-86 [June 22].

Toshiba Libretto Released

April 17, 1997

The Libretto was a line of Toshiba notebooks that squeezed a full Windows PC into a device the size of a paperback book, making it the world's smallest commercially available PC at the time.

A Toshiba Libretto 100CT on top of a normal-sized laptop. Photo by Freakedenough. CC0

Although its size was a great selling point, it also caused a few problems, including a 6.1-inch display that was hard to read, and keys that were nearly impossible to hit accurately. Also, the usual mouse had been replaced by a tiny rubbery pad on the right of the screen with its buttons moved to the back. It turned out to be quite tiring to use for long periods.

Area 51: The Truth is Out There

April 17, 2000

Five aerial images of Area 51 in Nevada were posted to the Terraserver satellite image website by John Hoffman, president of Aerial Images Inc. The photographs showed long runways and rows of nondescript buildings which pretty much confirmed that the top-secret military base's primary purpose was the development of experimental aircraft.

However, Area 51 is better known to swathes of conspiracy nuts as the home of crashed alien spacecraft, and their imprisoned alien pilots. The documentary, "Independence Day" [July 2], confirms all of these cold-hard facts.

The images also revealed a baseball diamond, a swimming pool, and tennis courts, probably to give the captive alien's something to do during recreation.

The images came from Aerial's work with the Russian agency Sovinformsputnik, specifically from a Kometa satellite launched from Kazakhstan in 1998 to map the Earth's surface. The satellite could fly over Area 51 because of an open-skies agreement signed by 24 nations, including the US and Russia, in 1992.