Feb. 8th

Robert (Bob) William Bemer

Born: Feb. 8, 1920;

Sault Sainte Marie, Michigan
Died: June 22, 2004

Bemer is sometimes called the 'father of ASCII' as he served with Hugh Ross [Aug 31] and others on the committee which defined the first ASCII character set on [June 17] 1963; he contributed several symbols including escape, backslash, and the curly brackets. For many years, his car bore the license plate "ASCII".

He was also a member of the committee [April 8] which amalgamated his COMTRAN language (short for Commercial Translator) with Grace Hopper's [Dec 9] FLOW-MATIC [May 2] to produce the COBOL specification [April 8].

In between all these meetings, Bemer also found time to publish an early paper on time-sharing in March 1957, although John Backus [Dec 3] got there first in 1954. However, Bemer was probably the first to write about the Year 2000 problem, in 1971 [Dec 31].

Bemer maintained an extensive collection of archival material on early software, which is still online at `http://www.bobbemer.com`.

Saul Rosen

Born: Feb. 8, 1922;

Port Chester, New York
Died: June 9, 1991

Rosen helped establish the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) on [Sept 15] 1947, and was the first editor of its journal, *The Communications of the ACM* (CACM). In 1979 he co-founded the IEEE journal, *Annals of the History of Computing*, a lodestone for those of us interested in that archaic discipline. On a related theme, he 1967 textbook, "Programming Systems and Languages: a Historical Survey" collected in one handy reference many of the important papers on language design.

He was the chief software designer of one of the first transistor-based computers, the Philco Transac S-2000 [March 23], and developed its TAC (Translator-Assember-Compiler), and ALTAC, a FORTRAN II-like language [Dec 00]. His work on programming language design influenced ALGOL [Jan 11].

First Transatlantic TV Lady

Feb. 8, 1928

John Logie Baird [Aug 13] transmitted a TV image across the Atlantic Ocean for the first time, albeit one crudely formed from a scan of 30 lines and transmitted at a mere twelve frames per second.

The plan was that the first woman to appear on TV would be the popular movie actress Elissa Landi, but the signal failed to arrive in NYC on Feb. 7. The following night the reception was better, and contact was established at midnight, London time, 7 pm in NYC.

In order to give the viewers a chance to adjust their equipment, the image of Baird's favorite doll "Stooky Bill" was sent first. Then Baird sat in front of the transmitter for half an hour, swaying his head to and fro. He was followed by Bill Fox, a Press Association journalist, and then by Mrs. Mia Howe, the wife of the Associated Press representative in London. Thus, she became the actual first lady of transatlantic television.

The transmission received a great deal of media attention. However, *The Times* New York correspondent dampened the hysteria by pointing out that "the features were too blurred and dim to be recognizable as those of particular persons."

From 1929 to the mid-1930's, Baird's electromechanical 30-line system was utilized by the BBC to broadcast programmes, but it was eventually displaced by purely electronic systems [Nov 2], based on work by Vladimir Kosmich Zworykin [July 29] and Philo T. Farnsworth [Aug 19].

Gerald Jay Sussman

Born: Feb. 8, 1947;

USA

Sussman has been involved with AI research for many decades, including the invention of Scheme [Dec 22], a dialect of Lisp, with his former student, Guy L. Steele Jr. [Oct 2].

Gerald Sussman (1986). A still from an MIT video. CC BY-SA 1.0.

However, Sussman is probably best known as the co-author with Hal Abelson [April 26] and Julie Sussman of the fabulous introductory computer science textbook "Structure and Interpretation of Computer Programs" (SICP). It's sometimes known as the "Wizard Book", due to the bearded mage on the cover. If you read one CS textbook, read this one.

The book introduces a cast of fictional characters, who have popped up in many other places since, including Ben Bitdiddle (actually invented by Steve

Ward), Louis Reasoner (the loose reasoner), and Alyssa P. Hacker (a Lisp hacker).

SICP was for many years used in MIT's introductory computer science subject taught by Abelson and Sussman, and videos of their lectures can be found online.

Sussman was the principal designer of the "Digital Orrery", a machine capable of high-precision integrations required in orbital mechanics. Sussman and Jack Wisdom employed the Orrery to discover numerical evidence for chaotic motions in the outer planets.

Sussman is a registered, bonded (i.e. trustworthy) locksmith, and a life member of the American Watchmakers Clockmakers Institute (AWCI). In 1991 he published a paper entitled, "The Best Length for a Mainspring."

A quote: "The key to understanding complicated things is knowing what not to look at."

NASDAQ Opens
Feb. 8, 1971

The National Association of Securities Dealers Automated Quotations (NASDAQ) was the world's first electronic stock market, and is currently the second-largest exchange, behind the New York Stock Exchange [March 9].

Initially, the NASDAQ acted solely as a quotation system (hence the "Q"), but has gradually taken over the processing of the trades that had been traditionally handled over-the-counter.

It was the first US stock market to start trading online, and consequentially attracted a bevy of high-tech and dot-com companies. This means that a graph of the NASDAQ Composite index through the 1990's and 2000's is a sobering reminder of the dot-com bubble [Aug 9]. However, since the 2010's the graph has maintained a pleasing upward rise, and actually passed the "crazy" heights of the dot-com era in April 2015.

A/UX Shipped
Feb. 8-11, 1988

Apple shipped A/UX, its first attempt at combining the Mac interface with UNIX internals, in this case a version of AT&T's UNIX V.2.2. The main reason for this stitch-up was that a UNIX-compatible OS made it possible for Apple to bid for US federal government contracts, and also made it easier to sell hardware to universities.

One problem was that A/UX only ran on Motorola 68k-based Macs which included a floating point unit (FPU) and a paged memory management unit (PMMU) [Sept 19]. This meant that the Quadra 840AV, Apple's fastest 68k Mac, couldn't run A/UX.

Even with the right hardware, the OS was slow and required generous amounts of disk space. Other disappointments were that AU/X could only run around 10% of the Mac's applications, and couldn't display more than one System 7 program onscreen at a time.

Apple released the Power Mac on [March 14] 1994, the first machine in the company's move away from the 68k to the PowerPC [Oct 2]. Porting A/UX to a new platform was seen as offering little benefit, and the OS was discontinued in 1996 after version 3.

A/UX is unrelated to Apple's current UNIX-based macOS [March 24], which is based on the NeXTSTEP OS [Dec 20] from NeXT, which Apple purchased at the end of 1996.

24 Hours in Cyberspace
Feb. 8, 1996

"24 Hours in Cyberspace" was organized by photographer Rick Smolan with contributions from Jennifer Erwitt, Tom Melcher, Samir Arora, and Clement Mok. The aim was to bring together thousands of photographers to create a digital "time capsule" of online life on this day. It was organized as part of the Internet 1996 World Exposition [Jan 1].

Photos were sent digitally to the editors during the day, who selected the best, and added them to the project's website (`http://cyber24.com`).

Rick Smolan (2007). Photo by Rick Smolan.

The site received more than four million hits in the 24 hours that the project was active, and was billed as the "largest collaborative Internet event ever". However, despite the site's time capsule nature, it's no longer online, although its glories can be accessed through the Internet Archive [May 12]. (Currently the address links to a website promoting Ichioshi Royal Jelly.)

A companion book, "24 Hours in Cyberspace: Painting on the Walls of the Digital Cave" was published in Oct. It contained 200 photographs from the 200,000 collected, and has become something of a time capsule itself. Its CD-ROM contains pristine copies of Netscape Navigator [March 25], and generously offers 15 hours' free time on AOL [Oct 2] and GNN [Aug 19].

Smolan was also behind the more conventional "Day in the Life" photo-essay series. His "A Day in the Life of America" is one of the most popular photography books ever published.

"A Day in the Life of Cyberspace", organized by the MIT Media Lab, was a similar event, which took place a few months earlier, on [Oct 10] 1995. Smolan had been attached to that project as a consultant when, just before the occasion, he dropped out, saying there wasn't enough time to do the job right.

Communications Decency Act

Feb. 8 1996

President Bill Clinton signed the Communications Decency Act (CDA), marking the Congress' first attempt to regulate pornographic content on the Internet. Less formally, the bill was called the "Great Internet Sex Panic Act of 1995."

It caused an uproar among legal and media pundits who argued that its vague language violated the first amendment right to free speech. John Perry Barlow [Oct 3] chose this day to release his "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace", and many sysadmins protested by changing their website's background to black, or displaying blue ribbon icons from the EFF [July 6]. The protest was coordinated by Shabbir J. Safdar, and was dubbed "Black Thursday" by the press.

In June 1997, "Reno vs. the ACLU" struck down the anti-indecency parts of the CDA, and Congress amended the act to remove those provisions in 2003.

Free Computers

Feb. 8, 1999

Bill T. Gross, founder of Free-PC.com in Pasadena, announced that his company would start giving each qualified applicant a free computer.

On the downside was that the hopeful candidate had to supply an extensive amount of private information, and the supplied Compaq Presario [Feb 14] gave over roughly a third of its screen to ads. Also the machine recorded what websites you visited, and other usage habits.

Bill Gross (2013). Photo by Loic Le Meur. CC BY 2.0.

By March, the company claimed that it had received almost a million applications, and on Feb. 3, 2000 when the deal ended it estimated that it had handed out 25,000 machines.

During the dot-com bubble [Aug 9], Gross was behind dozens of Internet start-ups through his Idealab! startup investment company, including eToys, CarsDirect, Tickets.com, and Goto.com. In particular, Goto pioneered the pay-per-click advertising model [Feb 18] that was later adopted by Google.

Google Maps Released

Feb. 8, 2005

Google Maps offers satellite imagery [June 11], 360° panoramas [May 14], real-time traffic data, and route planning, but it began as a modest C++ program designed by Lars and Jens Eilstrup Rasmussen at "Where 2 Technologies" in Sydney, Australia. In Oct. 2004, the company was acquired by Google, and the application began its transformation.

On Jan. 27, 2014, documents leaked by Edward Snowden [June 21] revealed that the NSA [Oct 24] and GCHQ intercept Google Maps queries made on smartphones in order to locate users.

For more maps, see [Feb 4], [March 6], [July 14], [Aug 9], [Sept 19], [Dec 24].

GitHub Founded

Feb. 8, 2008

GitHub is a web-based version control repository, mostly used for storing code. As of Sept. 2020, it reported having over 56 million users and nearly 200 million repositories.

GitHub was developed by Chris Wanstrath, P.J .Hyett and Tom Preston-Werner using Ruby on Rails [Feb 24] and Linus Torvalds' [Dec 28] git (a revision control system). Torvalds released git in April 2005, and joked that "I'm an egotistical bastard, and I name all my projects after myself. First 'Linux', now 'git'." (In British English, "git" is slang for an unpleasant person. and has been ruled by the Speaker of the House of Commons to be unparliamentary language.)

Microsoft acquired GitHub for $7.5 billion in Oct. 2018, and the service's CEO became Nat Friedman, although Chris Wanstrath was kept on as a "technical fellow".

GitHub's Octocat mascot is a cat with five tentacles and a human-like face. It was created by graphic designer Simon Oxley, and originally called Octopuss.

GitHub also maintains the GitHub Arctic Code Vault [Feb 2].

Confession App Released

Feb. 8, 2011

"Confession: A Roman Catholic App" for the iPhone is intended to guide members of the Catholic Church through the Sacrament of Penance, better known as the confession.

According to the developer, Patrick Leinen, (an alumnus of the Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio), the app does not replace confession in person before a priest. Instead it's intended to help Catholics determine what sins they may have committed, and guide them to the appropriate prayers in the sacrament.

Useful features include extensibility – sins not listed in the standard examination can be added, and time-management – the display of the time of your last confession in days, weeks, months, or years. Privacy is ensured by password protected user profiles and retina display support.

The app has received a nihil obstat (a declaration of no objection) from the Reverend Monsignor Michael Heintz, and an imprimatur (a mark of approval) from Kevin C. Rhoades, the bishop of Fort Wayne-South Bend.