

March 10th

Bell Calls Watson March 10, 1876

Prev: [March 7] Next: [June 25]

Three days after receiving his "Improvement in Telegraphy," patent [March 7], Alexander Graham Bell made what's considered the first phone call in history, to his assistant Thomas A. Watson: "Mr. Watson, come here I want you."

There's some dispute over the phrase, which was noted in this form in Watson's lab journal, but Bell's journal claims the sentence was "Mr. Watson, come here, I want to see you."

Bell didn't immediately realize that his call had worked, because it was a byproduct of him shouting out when he accidentally spilled some acid (which therefore also makes it the first emergency phone call). Sadly, this acid spill may have been an invented detail since a letter from Watson soon after the event said, "[T]here was little of dramatic interest in the occasion."

Bell's journal continues: "To my delight he came and declared that he had heard and understood what I said. I asked him to repeat the words. He answered, "You said 'Mr. Watson - come here - I want to see you.'" We then changed places and I listened at S [the speaker] while Mr. Watson read a few passages from a book into the mouthpiece M. It was certainly the case that articulate sounds proceeded from S. The effect was loud but indistinct and muffled."

The same day, Bell wrote to his father about his "great success" and speculated that "the day is coming when telegraph [phone] wires will be laid on to houses just like water and gas - and friends converse with each other without leaving home."

Today's famous words should not be confused with the

message, "What hath God wrought!" which was the first telegram message, sent between Samuel Morse and Alfred Vail [May 24] in 1844.

Dying to Switch? March 10, 1891

Almon B. Strowger was issued US patent 447918 for his electromechanical switch for automating telephone exchange calls. Strowger wasn't the first to think of this, but he was the first to make a practical device.

The Strowger switch was based around a two-motion stepping relay. As pulses came in from a telephone call, a contact arm moved up to select one of ten rows of contacts, and then rotated to select one of ten contacts in that row. For example, phone number 36 would move the mechanism to row three, and then the contact arm would swing to column six. Of course, this limited the total possible numbers to 99, but who would ever need more?

The motivation behind the invention lay in Strowger's day job as an undertaker. The story goes that his business was losing clients to a competitor whose telephone exchange operator wife was redirecting everyone to her husband, even when they asked for Strowger's services.

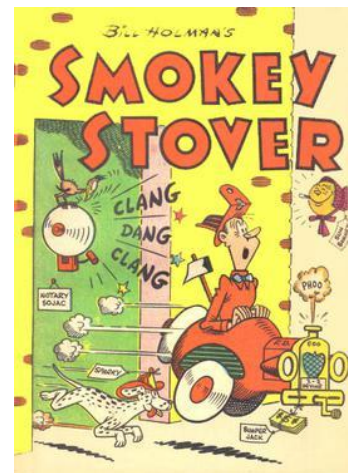
When Strowger's system debuted, he bragged that his exchanges were "girl-less, cuss-less, out-of-order-less, and wait-less." Automation also resurrected his near moribund trade.

Foo March 10, 1935

The term "foobar", or just plain-old "foo", is frequently used as a placeholder name for variables and functions in programming. A more recent usage is as the name of the hacker conferences "Foo Camp" and "Bar Camp" [Aug 26].

The first use of "foo" in a programming context is generally credited to the Tech Model Railroad Club [Sept 6] in the 1960's, and it first appeared in print in the March 1965 edition of MIT's *Tech Engineering News* (Vol. 47, Issue 2, p.63).

"Foo" combined with "bar" can be traced back to the WWII slang FUBAR, meaning "Fouled Up Beyond All Recognition" (or something similar). The Oxford English Dictionary cites the US Army's weekly magazine, *Yank*, (Jan. 7, 1944, p. 8), as its earliest appearance.



A "Smokey Stover" comic book cover (1953). Drawn by Bill Holman. Fair Use.

The word "foo" dates back further, to today's occurrence in the comic "Smokey Stover" drawn by Bill Holman. The strip featured the wacky misadventures of Smokey Stover, the "foolish foo (fire)fighter", often seen riding his two-wheeled "Foomobile".

Holman stated that he was inspired to use the word after seeing it on the bottom of a jade Chinese figurine in San Francisco's Chinatown, where it meant "good luck". This may be related to the Chinese word "fu" ("福", sometimes transliterated as "foo"), which can mean happiness. Alternatively, Holman may have been inspired by the French word for fire, feu, since Smokey's catch phrase was "where there's foo, there's fire".

During WWII, images of Smokey were often painted as nose art on American bombers.

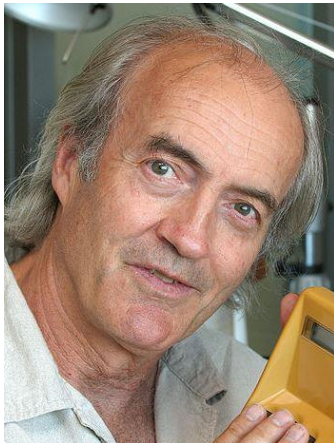
A different origin comes from Australia: graffiti of a timid bald-headed man peering over a wall, with the inscription "Foo was here". It was first reported as appearing in camps of the Australian Imperial Force during World War I.

William Arthur Stewart (Bill)

Buxton

Born: March 10, 1949; Edmonton, Alberta

Buxton pioneered several multi-touch interfaces and music composition tools in the late 1970's while working in the Dynamic Graphics Project at the University of Toronto. He had previously been a composer and performer, and became interested in human-computer interaction (HCI) when he started designing his own digital musical instruments.



Bill Buxton (2009). Photo by Dcoetzee. CC0.

Buxton's insight was to realize that musicians use many parts of their body during a performance, which pointed towards richer forms of computer interaction. For example, during the 1990's, he developed the Flip Keyboard, the Active Desk, and the Portfolio Wall. His work on

interactive tabletops led to the Microsoft Surface [May 30].

In 2001, *The Hollywood Reporter* named him one of the ten most influential innovators in Hollywood, and his book "Sketching User Experiences" (2007) is required reading for HCI practitioners.

Buxton is an accomplished equestrian, and in 1996 was awarded the "Veteran Rider of the Year" award from the Ontario Horse Trials Association.

UNIVAC and Porky Pig

March 10, 1956

"Rocket Squad" was a 1956 Warner Bros. cartoon featuring Sgt. Joe Monday (aka Daffy Duck) and his partner, Det. Schmoie Tuesday (aka Porky Pig), directed by Chuck Jones and written by Tedd Pierce.

The cartoon parodied the TV show *Dragnet* (1951 - 1959) by relocating it to the 24½th Century.

On the track of the nefarious Flying Saucer Bandit, Tuesday (Porky) empties a bag of clues into an Ajax CryptoAnalyzer ("Caution: remove all chicken bones).

The data is processed by a (rather stylized) UNIVAC [March 31], which generates a stack of punch cards, and a robot hand selects one. Tuesday loads the card into a UNIVAC "player piano", which belts out "Mother Machree", which is immediately identified by Daffy.

The last step has Daffy and Porky visiting a vast index card library to search through drawers of cards manually. Clearly, more automation is required in the 24½th Century.

Palm Pilot Released

March 10, 1996

The Palm Pilot 1000 and 5000 weren't the first personal digital assistants (PDAs), but they were the first popular ones, and they benefitted from combining elements from earlier devices, such as the GridPad (1989) [June 1], Newton MessagePad (1993), and the Casio Zoomer [June 3].

The Pilots were refreshingly small, and sported a pleasingly simple user interface based around a 160 x 160 pixel screen with an area for stylus-based text input. Both devices ran Palm OS, a touchscreen-based GUI which included a suite of basic applications. Internally they used the Motorola 68328 DragonBall chip, a low-power cousin of the 68000 [Sept 26].

The OS proved so successful that later versions were ported to a variety of smartphones, wrist watches, handheld gaming consoles, barcode readers, and even GPS devices.

Palm Computing was founded in 1992 by Jeff Hawkins [June 1]. Hawkins led the development of Palm OS, while Donna Dubinsky and Ed Colligan developed the Palm Pilot hardware. Before work began, Hawkins carried a block of wood, the size of the potential Palm, in his pocket, to help him judge its portability.

Soon after the Palm Pilot's release, Palm Computing was sued by the Pilot Pen Company for trademark infringement. After losing in court, Palm changed the device's name to PalmPilot (i.e. no space), and later to Palm.

First CD-RW Drive March 10, 1997

Office equipment giant Ricoh exhibited the world's first CD-ReWritable (CD-RW) drive, the Ricoh MP6200S, at the CeBit trade show [March 12]. Each disk could be rewritten over 1,000 times.

Rewritability was considered such a huge advantage that, for a time, it seemed that the CD-R format would simply disappear. That wasn't the case due to technological teething problems with CD-RW, including high cost, slow writing speeds, poor software, and consumer confusion over the CD-RW's capabilities and requirements. For example, CD-RW discs required a reader that used more sensitive laser optics than those necessary for CD-Rs. Consequently, CD-RWs couldn't be read by many older CD drives.

Dot-Com Peak March 10, 2000

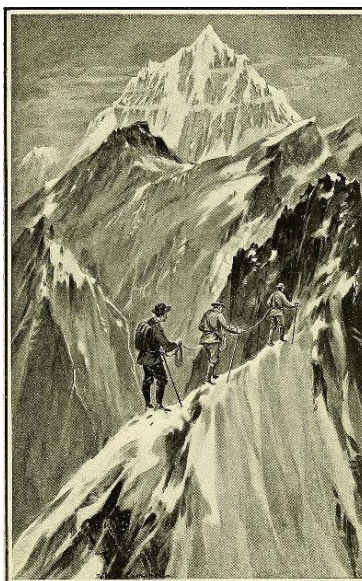
On this day, the NASDAQ [Feb 8] Composite hit a record high of 5,048.62 points during the dot-com boom [Aug 9]. It had taken just ten weeks to get there after passing 4,000.

However, today was its high-water mark, and the bubble's collapse is usually reckoned to have begun the next day (March 11). The market had fallen to 3,227 by April 17, and by the end of the crash (usually considered to be Oct. 9, 2002) had lost 78% of its peak value.

Some companies, such as Boo.com [May 18], Pets.com [Nov 7] and Webvan (for online grocery shopping) shut down. Others, such as Cisco, saw their stock decline drastically,

Exactly what triggered the crash is still hotly debated. There was bad economic news from Japan on March 13, an article in *Barron's* magazine on [March 20] about the imminent bankruptcy of many Internet

companies, and the conclusions of the *US v. Microsoft Corp.* case were published on [April 3].



Daring deeds of great mountaineers (1921). Drawn by Richard Stead.

It took years for the NASDAQ to clamber back to 2,500. It then promptly collapsed again during the stock-market meltdown that accompanied the 2008 financial crisis. However, on March 2, 2015 it finally climbed above today's peak, and is currently (March 2021) just north of 13,000.

Enlarged Spam Attack March 10, 2004

America Online (AOL [Oct 2]), Earthlink, Microsoft, and Yahoo! [March 2] filed multiple civil lawsuits against several prolific spammers. AOL went after an individual who sold penis enlargement pills, Microsoft filed against JDO Media, a multilevel marketing firm, and Yahoo! accused Golddisk.net of sending out almost 94 million e-mails selling financial and travel services.

The suits were the first ones created under the auspices of the CAN-SPAM Act [Dec 16], and came just days after the release

of a report that claimed as much as 62% of all e-mail was spam.

For more spam, see [Jan 24], [March 31], [May 3], [April 12].
