May 24th

First Commercial Telegram

May 24, 1844

Samuel Morse sent the first commercial telegram [Oct 19] over a line from Washington, D.C. to Baltimore. The message, "What hath God wrought!" was transmitted to his business partner, Alfred Vail, who sent it straight back.

The biblical text, from Numbers 23:23, was selected by Annie Ellsworth, the teenage daughter of the US Commissioner of Patents.

The first public telegraph demonstration had been held on [Jan 6], 1838, but the Washington - Baltimore line was the first commercial service.

Mobile Telegraph

May 24, 1862

The portable Beardslee Telegraph, developed by George Beardslee, was first used in earnest on this day by Albert Myer, the head of the Union Army's Signal Corps, during the US Civil War's Peninsular campaign.

The device was portable in the sense that it ran off hand-turned magnetos rather than the heavy acid-filled batteries used by civilian telegraphs, and weighed about 100 pounds. However, a train was required to carry all of its associated equipment, including five miles of vulcanized rubber-insulated wire, reels and carriers, 200 telegraph poles, and tools for splicing and repairing lines. Also the transmission range was limited to about ten miles due to insufficient power, and it proved hard to synchronize sending and receiving sets.

On the plus side, it employed an alphabet dial and pointer for composing messages which meant that an operator didn't need to know Morse code. However, the dialing procedure was both more complicated, and much slower that Morse [Oct 19].

Eventually the Beardslee Telegraph was replaced by Morse-type conventional telegraph equipment. Part of the reason was politics – Morse was heavily promoted by the US Military Telegraph Corps (USMT), a competing group within the Union Army.

LINC Begins

May 24, 1961

The Laboratory INstrument Computer (LINC) is often considered to be the first minicomputer, as well as the first "user friendly" system, in the sense of being easy to program and maintain.

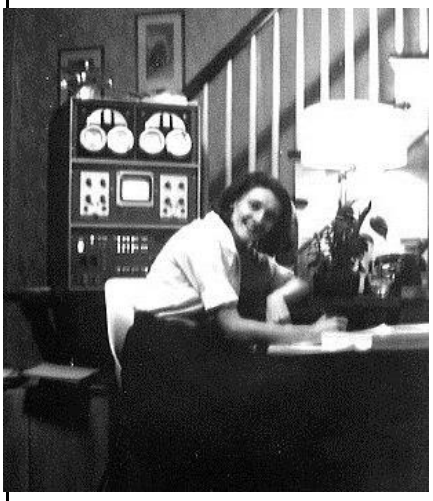
It was designed at MIT's Lincoln Lab by Wesley A. Clark [April 10], with Charles Molnar as chief engineer. It was intended as Clark phrased it "to be just another piece of lab equipment."

Clark's design was based on his work on the Whirlwind [April 20], the TX-0 [Nov 20], and the TX-2 [Feb 26]. Apparently LINC's design was completed in just three weeks at the start of 1961.

It was built using off-the-shelf modules supplied by DEC [Aug 23], and the success of this approach was one reason for DEC deciding to make its own minicomputers.

Each LINC had a tiny 256 x 256 CRT display, 1 K of core memory (expanded to 2 K later), and two Tektronix display oscilloscopes in early versions. It included a novel high-speed magnetic tape storage device, the LINCTape, that would later evolve into the DECTape used on the PDP-8 [March 22].

Mary Allen Wilkes's LINC Assembly Program (LAP) combined a screen editor with access to the file system, making it easier for non-computer professionals to program the machine (albeit still in assembly).



LINC at home with Mary Allen Wilkes (1965). Photo by Rex B. Wilkes.

LINC was manufactured commercially by DEC from 1964, with around fifty produced, most of them for Lincoln Lab.

Pong vs. Tennis

May 24, 1972

The Magnavox Profit Caravan was a national tour to promote the Magnavox Odyssey [May 2].

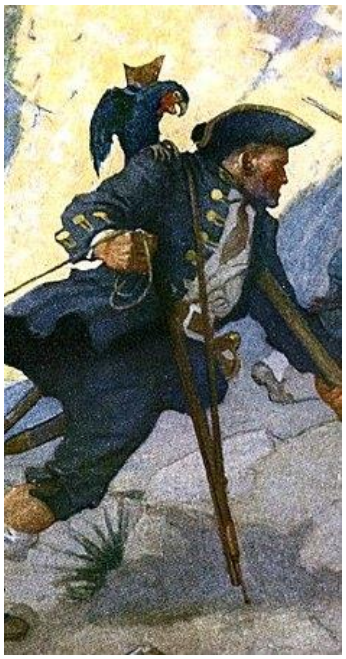
On this day, Atari's [June 27] Nolan Bushnell [Feb 5] attended the tour event held at the Airport Marina in Burlingame, California.

One of the games for the Odyssey was "Tennis," which let two players use paddles to knock a ball back and forth on a screen. A transparent overlay, stuck on the TV screen, added a tennis court layout. There was also a "Table Tennis" game which didn't use an overlay.

Back at Atari, Bushnell tasked Al Alcorn [Jan 1] with making a ping pong game based on the Odyssey's [May 2] "Tennis", supposedly as part of a contract with General Electric. However, that later turned out to be Bushnell's little white lie, but it motivated the creation of Pong [Nov 29] nevertheless.

Clearly, Bushnell and Alcorn didn't "pirate" Tennis in the

modern sense, since Bushnell had only played the game, and Alcorn only had Bushnell's description to work upon.



A Typical Pirate and his Parrot. Author: Newell Convers Wyeth.

Also, Alcorn improved the game play in several ways – he divided the paddle into segments to make it possible to change the ball's angle of return based on where it hit, added on-screen scoring, and included sound effects.

Despite these changes, Magnavox sued Atari and several other companies for patent infringement. In an out-of-court settlement in June 1976, Atari became a licensee of the relevant Magnavox patents for $700,000. Over the next 20 years, Magnavox made close to $100 million from those patents.

HELP ME!

May 24, 1988

An individual posted a message to multiple newsgroups with the title "HELP ME!", requesting money for Jay-Jay's college fund. Donations were to be sent to a PO Box in Nebraska.

The note closed with a request: "PS. Please don't flame me for posting this to so many newsgroups". However, it wasn't the first copy to be sent out, which had begun appearing on the 17th, and several more times up to the 30th.

It was probably the first spam USENET post (although "spamming" wasn't coined until [March 31] 1993). However, most people prefer to label Dave Rhodes' "MAKE MONEY FAST" chain letter [Nov 13] as the first.

First SSD Computers

May 24, 2006

The Samsung Q1 was one of the first ultra-mobile computers (UMPCs) produced under Microsoft's "Project Origami". It featured a 7-inch single-touch LCD screen, weighed just 0.8 kg, and ran Windows XP [Oct 25] Tablet PC Edition.

It included a 32 GB solid-state drive (SSD), the was the world's first computer to feature solid-state flash memory. The SSD version was about twice as expensive as a mchine using a conventional hard drive, but it ran 2-4 times faster, and the weight was less.

Before the Q1's announcement, interest in the mysterious "Project Origami" was stoked up through a viral marketing campaign with the tag line "What is Origami?"

Unfortunately, the rumor mill decided that the answer was a new gaming device to compete with Nintendo's DS [Nov 21] and Sony's PlayStation Portable [Dec 12]. That notion was hurriedly corrected, much to many people's disappointment.

UMPCs were generally smaller than subnotebooks, and operated like tablet PCs but with a keyboard. The tablet format won out, and UMPCs disappeared after a few years.