Nov. 4th

Calculating Wizards Clash

Nov. 4, 1818

Zerah Colburn, a calculating prodigy from the US, and George Parker Bidder, similarly gifted but from the UK, appeared together at "The Yorkshire Stingo" a public house in Marylebone, London, to compete against each other by answering a variety of math questions. At the time, Colburn was 14, from Cabot in Vermont and Bidder 12, from Moretonhampstead in Devon.

A typical question: if the globe is 24,912 miles in circumference, and a balloon travels 3,878 feet in a minute, how long would it take to travel around the world? Colburn was unable to answer after nine minutes, but Bidder responded in two minutes -- 23 days, 13 hours, 18 mins, which was received with great applause.

A reporter noted that "Many other questions were proposed to the American boy, all of which he refused answering, while young Bidder readily replied to all. A handsome subscription was collected for the Devonshire youth."

Colburn had an extra finger on each hand and an extra toe on each foot, although the extra fingers were removed when he was 10. He could multiply any two four-digit numbers almost instantly, but he hesitated a moment on five-digit numbers. He returned to America when he was 20, and became a Methodist preacher.

In Bidder's case, professors at the University of Edinburgh took over his education, and he eventually became a successful engineer. For example, he designed and supervised the construction of the Victoria Docks in London.

Shakuntala Devi

Born: Nov. 4, 1929;

Bengaluru, India
Died: April 21, 2013

Devi was known as the "human computer", and her calculation talent earned her a place in the 1982 edition of "The Guinness Book of World Records". For example, in 1977, at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, she extracted the 23rd root of a 201-digit number in 50 seconds, beating a UNIVAC 1101 [March 31], which took 65 seconds to produce the answer.

On June 18, 1980, she multiplied two 13-digit numbers – 7,686,369,774,870 and 2,465,099,745,779 – picked at random by the Computer Department of Imperial College London. She correctly gave the result as 18,947,668,177,995,426,462,773,730 in 28 seconds.

Her father was a circus trapeze artist and lion tamer. He discovered her ability while teaching her a card trick when she was three years old. He left the circus, taking her on the road in a show that displayed her skills at calculation.

For other human computers, see the ENIAC Refrigerator Ladies [May 00].

Max D. Hopper

Born: Nov. 4, 1934;

Lufkin, Texas
Died: Jan. 25, 2010

Hopper has been called the "father of airline automation in travel agencies" due to his work on the SABRE reservation system [Nov 5] used by airlines, railways, hotels, and travel companies.

He first became involved with reservations systems when he joined Electronic Data Systems in 1967 and was assigned to a United Airlines project.

In the late 1980's, Hopper pioneered systems integration, when he led the development of InterAAct, a landmark network of desktop machines for American Airlines.

In 1992, *Computerworld* magazine placed Hopper among the top 25 greatest contributions to the field of Information Systems.

UNIVAC Predicts Election

Nov. 4, 1952

CBS News borrowed a UNIVAC [March 31] from Remington Rand [Jan 25] to predict the outcome of the 1952 presidential election, a race between Dwight D. Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson.

The computer's analysis based on early returns showed an easy victory for Eisenhower, but newscasters Walter Cronkite and Charles Collingwood were uncertain of the machine's accuracy, especially since earlier opinion polls (run by humans) had predicted a landslide victory for Stevenson.

Remington Rand employees, Harold E. Sweeney (left) and J. Presper Eckert [April 9] (center) demonstrate the US Census Bureau's UNIVAC for CBS reporter Walter Cronkite (right). Photo by the US Census Bureau.

On the night, Remington Rand's Arthur F. Draper was persuaded to modify the program twice, in an attempt to bring its predictions more in line with the expected results. Draper later said that it was "one of the worst evenings I ever spent in my life."

When all the votes had been counted, the UNIVAC's initial prediction turned out to be amazingly accurate. UNIVAC had thought that Eisenhower would get 32,915,000 votes, while he actually received 33,936,252, an error of only about 3%

Another headache was CBS's desire to have the UNIVAC present in the studio. Art Gehring [March 00] (logic designer of the machine) found a solution: "We didn't want to take a chance on moving it. So we said we'll dummy up a phony control panel in New York, and we'll put some circuitry in the back. It'll flash lights – that was a big thing in those days."

The machine used was the fifth UNIVAC off the production line, installed (for real) at the Lawrence Livermore Lab in April 1953.

On the competing TV channels, NBC opted for the Monrobot [April 22], a smaller "electronic brain." But ABC's News Director John Madigan disdained such gimmicks, declaring: "We'll report our results through Elmer Davis, John Daly, Walter Winchell, Drew Pearson—and about 20 other human brains."

Compaq Portable

Nov. 4, 1982

Compaq proudly announced the Portable, which it billed as the first 100% IBM PC-compatible computer [Aug 12]. It featured a 4.77 MHz 8088 chip, 128 KB of RAM, a 9-inch monochrome monitor, and a 320 KB 5.25-inch disk drive. The machine began shipping in March 1983.

"Portable" was stretching things a tad – at 28 lb. (13 kg) it was more accurately "luggable". In fact, due to its size, it soon earned the nickname "the sewing machine."

First-year sales reached $111 million, a great return on investment since the company had spent a mere $1 million to create its IBM-compatible ROM BIOS that didn't violate IBM's copyright.

This wasn't an approach that most PC compatible makers could afford to follow, but fortunately Phoenix Technologies developed a legal copy of the IBM BIOS [July 10] in 1984, which cost a mere $290,000 to license. This opened the floodgates on the development of PC clones.

Although the Portable was advertised as the first 100% IBM PC-compatible, it was actually beaten to market by the MPC 1600-1 in [June 00] 1982.

Microsoft Bounty

Nov. 4, 2003

Microsoft offered rewards totaling $500,000 for information leading to the capture of the people behind two of this year's most damaging computer viruses: the MSBlast worm [Aug 11] and Sobig [Aug 18]. The sum was part of its larger anti-virus reward program, with initial funding of $5 million.

Microsoft unveiled details at the National Press Club in Washington, accompanied by representatives of the FBI and Interpol.

During the first year, one hacker was caught, a German teenage responsible for the Sasser worm [April 30].

Kinect

Nov. 4, 2010

The Microsoft Kinect (codenamed Project Natal) was a motion sensing input device for the Xbox 360 [Nov 22], Xbox One [Nov 22], and Windows PCs. Its skeletal mapping technology was capable of simultaneously tracking four people by observing 48 skeletal points on a human body.

It was first announced on June 1, 2009 at E3 [May 11], and the official launch was at midnight on Nov. 3 in Times Square, when singer Ne-Yo performed with hundreds of dancers.

The Xbox One's Kinect. Photo by Evan-Amos.

Microsoft sold 2.5 million units within the first 25 days, and ten million by March, making it the fastest selling consumer electronics device in history. When the Kinect was discontinued on Oct. 25, 2017, Microsoft reported that 35 million had been sold during its lifetime.

Google Home

Nov. 4, 2016

"Google Home" is a 'smart' speaker which understands users' voice commands that interact with Google's services. It was released, somewhat belatedly, to compete with Amazon's Echo [Nov 6].

Hackers immediately began testing the limits of the device's abilities, with command such as: "Hey Google, Do You Speak Morse Code?" [Oct 19], "Hey Google, All Your Base Are Belong to Us" [May 31], "Hey Google, Do You Know Clippy?" [April 11], and "Hey Google, Self-Destruct."