# General AFIPS History of Computing Activities

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It certainly seems appropriate that in the first issue of this new journal involving computing history, which AFIPS is launching, there should be a description of what is also AFIPS' first major venture into a *broad based* spectrum of activities in the area of computing history. It is the purpose of this article to describe these AFIPS activities and plans, and simultaneously to encourage all readers to participate, either actively or supportively.

First, a word about the *Annals* itself. As chairman of the AFIPS History of Computing Committee, I strongly support this publication and urge all readers to do likewise, both in terms of writing articles and of suggesting that other people read it and subscribe to it. The History of Computing Committee (HOCC) and the Editorial Board of the *Annals* have a significant number of people simultaneously serving on each; this is deliberate, not accidental, and is for the purpose of making sure that each group feeds and helps the other while at the same time recognizing a difference in purpose and approach.

I said above that this is AFIPS' first venture into "a *broad based* spectrum of activities in the area of computing history." This is true, although this is not AFIPS' first effort in the history area. In the period 1967–1974, there was a joint project involving AFIPS and the Smithsonian Institution, to which AFIPS contributed approximately $130,000 and in which the major activity was the collection of a large number of oral histories. (More will be said about the current status of this later.) For the period 1974–1977 there were some minimal AFIPS efforts in the history area (aside from the work to start the *Annals* itself), but no committee.

When I agreed in September 1977 to accept the Chairmanship of the History of Computing Project (as it was then called), I felt it absolutely essential that a broad based committee be formed and that activities in a number of areas be undertaken. After soliciting volunteers and suggestions for work to be done, a list of potential activities was created and in January 1978, for the first time in its own history, AFIPS had a meeting of a committee whose purpose was to plan a broad scope of activities in the history of computing. This meeting, attended by nine members of a 12-person committee, had two major results.

The first result was the assignment of the proposed activities into three categories of priority, with A the highest, as follows:

*Priority A*
General archive problem
Smithsonian Archive and Oral History Collection
Education to propagandize and make people aware of the importance of history
Prizes, awards, support and encouragement of research

*Priority B*
Education in historiography
Pioneer Day
Encouragement of conferences, sessions, bibliographies

*Priority C*
Education involving courses on computing history and introduction of history into computing courses (= curriculum)
History and archives for AFIPS and constituent societies
Reference/evaluation/screening etc. functions
Videotape/slide development

A number of subcommittees were appointed to deal with some of the above topics. As is true of most volunteer activities, the establishment of the subcommittees did not correspond exactly to the priority list, and some Priority C items are being undertaken before some A items! The current active subcommittees and their actions are described below.

The second major result of that January 1978 meeting was the unanimous passage of the following resolution:

> There is unanimous agreement that the general archive problem is the most important one for this committee to deal with but it is big and difficult and expensive and we will have to proceed in stages towards a solution.

The importance of this resolution is that it has really affected all of our thinking in other areas as well. Lest anybody be unsure about what is meant by "the general archive problem," let me describe it simply as the need to preserve all important papers pertaining to the history of computing, and to make sure that these are safely stored in one or more places with proper cataloging so that they are available to current and future scholars and researchers.

To implement this primary committee concern, a subcommittee was established with Dr. Arnold

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A. Cohen (University of Minnesota) as the chairman. At the June 1978 meeting of the HOCC he presented an excellent description of a proposed Center for the History of Computing. Among other ideas presented, it was recognized that (a) the archival collections of material would necessarily be located at more than one site, and (b) all but one of these would *not* be under AFIPS control. The reason for this is that individuals—particularly faculty members—tend to leave their papers with the organization with which they have been affiliated. Thus AFIPS could not, and indeed should not, attempt to maintain an archive of "all" material. What can, and indeed should, be done is for the proposed AFIPS Center to maintain cognizance of where all the other material is, and to the largest extent possible, establish a central catalog and some consistent standards for describing the material existing elsewhere. Thus, inherent within the proposal is the concept of a network of autonomous AFIPS-affiliated history centers. It was also deemed very desirable that the AFIPS center be located at a university.

Major functions of the proposed center include (a) soliciting of material, (b) participation in developing archival and cataloging standards, (c) providing guidance to prospective donors on what to keep or destroy and what types of information should be identified for only limited access; (d) providing education and training for prospective users and donors; (e) supervising the physical processing, using appropriate technology. In the most general terms, the proposed center would serve as a focal point for all people interested in the history of computing either as donors of material or as researchers.

At the request of the AFIPS Board, a more detailed study of this concept was made in the July-November 1978 time frame and approved by the HOCC at its November meeting. Included in that study was a proposed budget for several years and discussions of staffing patterns and the factors involved in the selection of a host institution for the proposed center.

In the summer of 1978, the Charles Babbage Institute (which had been founded by Mr. Erwin Tomash in late 1977 to carry on activities in the history of computing) proposed to AFIPS that the two organizations combine their efforts and establish a single center for the history of computing. The History of Computing Committee strongly endorsed this concept and recommended to the AFIPS Board that they approve it.

At its December 1978 meeting, the AFIPS Board did indeed approve this joint venture in principle, including a substantial financial contribution from AFIPS; the support of this "joint effort of AFIPS and the information processing industry" is contingent upon the development of a satisfactory contract, which is to be developed in the spring of 1979 and (hopefully) approved by the AFIPS Board at its June 1979 meeting. Since this article is being written late in December 1978, it is of course impossible to know how this will turn out, but I think those of us involved have high hopes of embarking on an exciting venture which will be unique for the computing field.

While the archival center described above was considered of prime importance by the HOCC, it is by no means the only activity under way. A subcommittee, led by Ms. Joe Ann Clifton (Litton Industries), is concerned with Constituent Society Liaison. Since AFIPS is itself composed of about 15 societies, it is imperative that AFIPS both encourage and help them to do work in the history of computing, without interfering with any plans any of them might have in this area. Thus this subcommittee is concerned with (a) encouraging the societies to develop and/or maintain their own archives and history; (b) encouraging the societies to have technical sessions on history at their conferences—or indeed to have special conferences on history; (c) providing lists of possible speakers; (d) fostering any other activities which provide proper interaction between AFIPS and its constituent societies in the history area.

Another activity of long-range potential value is the Audio-Visual Aids Subcommittee headed by Mr. James Van Speybroeck (Scott Community College). That subcommittee's concern is two-fold. On one hand, Jim Van Speybroeck is personally preparing some slide presentations (with associated audio) on various aspects of the history of computing; the first presentation, which covers the period from cave men to Hollerith, is virtually completed (as of December 1978), and others covering periods after Hollerith are being prepared. It is hoped that experimental showings of these for critical evaluation can be made at the AFIPS National Computer Conference in New York in June 1979. A second purpose of this subcommittee is to prepare a catalog of existing audio-visual material (from any source) concerned with the history of computing; such a catalog would describe the material and its source, so that any group wishing to

have a meeting, or a session, or a class, devoted to history would have ample choices from which to select. Any readers who know of such material should send detailed information to Jim Van Speybroeck at AFIPS Headquarters.

Many readers have probably attended one or more of the Pioneer Day sessions which were held at each of the AFIPS National Computer Conferences from 1974 on. Events or activities or groups honored have been the Dartmouth Time Sharing System (and the development of BASIC), the Electronic Computer Project at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, the Moore School of Electrical Engineering at the University of Pennsylvania, the computing group of the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory, and the SWAC development at UCLA. Since each of these has been under the guidance of each year's NCC General Chairman, and there was no history committee, it has been impossible to maintain consistency of selection and planning for these Pioneer Day sessions. A subcommittee under Professor Henry Tropp (Humboldt State University) has been developing some general criteria and guidelines so as to make these sessions more valuable and interesting to attendees, as well as to provide valuable historical information.

While relations between AFIPS and the Smithsonian Institution have been dormant for several years, an investigation of the status of the oral histories which were collected in the early 1970s made it clear that the staff at the Smithsonian is too small to permit expeditious processing of these histories or the material which was collected in conjunction with them. With the concurrence and support of Dr. Uta Merzbach, Curator of Mathematics at the Smithsonian, a volunteer subcommittee of the HOCC was set up to provide Smithsonian Liaison. This subcommittee, chaired by Mr. William P. LaPlant, Jr. (Air Force Data Services Center), has embarked on an ambitious volunteer program to provide service in five areas: (a) developing "finding aids" to provide easier access to the vast amount of written computing material now at the Smithsonian; (b) indexing of the oral history transcripts against the tape recordings to ensure accuracy; (c) verifying the remaining typed transcripts against the taped recordings to ensure accuracy; (d) making potential exhibit material operational, i.e., getting some of the old computers now at the Smithsonian workable; (e) serving as tour guides. While many of these tasks require a physical presence in Washington, D.C., task (b) and

conceivably some others do not, and anyone interested in volunteering for either of these should write to Bill LaPlant at AFIPS Headquarters.

Underlying all of these activities has been the HOCC realization that people need to be trained and encouraged to do research in the history of computing. Among ideas which have been discussed by the HOCC are the granting of prizes and/or fellowships, and the holding of training workshops. Plans for all of these are too preliminary at the time of writing to permit anything more to be said.

Now all of the above may appear to the readers to be merely a report of a committee. In some sense that is true; but in a larger sense it delineates a wide variety of activities which can be (and indeed are being) carried out by volunteers under the auspices of AFIPS. But as is true with any volunteer activity, people are always needed to work on these or any other projects. One of the beauties of this type of activity (although also one of its disadvantages) is that we can allow almost any appropriate work to be done under the auspices of the AFIPS HOCC, providing the person(s) can supply the necessary resources. Some funding support for these projects is being supplied by AFIPS, but new projects from the HOCC must compete for available resources just as in a business environment. But all of this can be lots of fun!

I sincerely hope that many readers of this overview will be encouraged to write to me with other ideas, and offers of help. There is no need to limit the HOCC activities to those cited, and so if you have another or a better idea and are prepared to carry it out, please write me, care of AFIPS Headquarters.—J. S.