

Collecting Computing History is Everyone's Job

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This Think Piece challenges the *Annals* readers who are practitioners in the computing industry to accept the challenge of collecting computing industry history and suggests ways that the readers can do this.

I believe that it is our responsibility as professionals in the computing industry to help preserve the history of our industry by collecting the stories, materials, and artifacts that historians need and use. Historians are responsible for providing perspective, structure, and analysis of what has been collected. And the good historians do much further research, as well as examine what has been collected and preserved, to provide insight into specific business and technology areas, taking advantage of the passage of time and using their accumulated industry knowledge. But they need clues and roadmaps to help to identify areas to be explored. That level of industry overview needs professional historians who have the interest and the time to really dig into the available collected materials, both documents and oral histories, and that is where we as industry professionals can really help.

There are still only a few books by professional historians that describe major segments of our industry: computers (mainframe, midrange and mini, personal); components; peripherals; software products and services; and Internet and cloud services. While there are many books about the computing and information technology industry, they have been produced mostly by journalists and industry specialized authors. Some of these are carefully researched and well-written, but too often the authors have simply used readily available material from companies, augmented by some individual interviews with executives and brokerage firm analysts (who may have a professional or financial bias) or company and competitors' spokespeople. These do not necessarily provide a fair or accurate—and certainly not a

comprehensive—picture of a company, much less of the industry.

A prime example of this kind of “sloppy” journalism is what got Luanne Johnson and me to start collecting software history in 2000; we decided that if we did not do it, it was likely that all of the history of software companies from the 1950s on would be lost and buried under the onslaught of the personal computer software companies. In 1999, *Fortune Magazine*, a highly respected business publication, featured an article lauding Bill Gates' achievements in founding and growing Microsoft (which he certainly deserved), but stated that he had started the first pure software company. Those of us who had been in the industry since the 1950s took umbrage at this glaring misstatement. Luanne wrote a letter to the *Fortune* editor, which was published in the next issue, that attempted to correct the record. But, as all of you know, corrections seldom get the same attention or regard as the original statements, even when the original is dead wrong. That experience helped to motivate the two of us to start what we initially called the Software History Center. We decided that it was up to us to take the initiative to collect, preserve, and communicate the history of the software industry to which we had each devoted most of our working lives. What we were able to accomplish over the next twenty years is summarized in three Anecdotes we wrote for the *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing*.¹

This Think Piece is a plea to challenge some of you to take the responsibility to see how you can make a difference by collecting computing industry and information technology history. There are a lot of avenues that you can pursue in any area of the industry in which you are knowledgeable and skilled. Training or experience in collecting history is not a requirement. What is needed is a belief that preserving the industry's history is important to the future of society.

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You will find that most of those people who have built or are running companies do not appreciate the importance of collecting and preserving this knowledge. They have a standard response when asked to participate, “Who would be interested?”

Yet, when you invite them to attend a pioneer meeting or to have their own oral history done, they will accept with alacrity, find the meeting fun, enjoy going down memory lane, and get enthusiastic about explaining what they did and why it was significant. They may not see why someone else would be interested, but they certainly are.

Your next question might be, “Maybe I’m interested, but how do I go about doing something useful?” This depends on your current work situation and location:

- ▶ If you are still working at a company, you can try to convince some of the executives (or yourself) that preserving records and correspondence and even artifacts from displays and exhibits is worthwhile. You may have to convince the company attorneys that keeping files is the responsible thing to do to protect the company against future claims and to preserve its history. Items to preserve include business files, prospectuses, and annual reports as well as marketing materials, records of technology development, and management correspondence. Both paper documents and electronic records are valuable.
- ▶ If you have retired or have some extra energy cycles, you can volunteer to work with one of the computing museums or archives such as the Computer History Museum (CHM), Charles Babbage Institute (CBI), Hagley Museum and Library, IEEE History Center, ACM History Committee, IEEE Computer Society, as well as organizations in the U.K., Germany and France.
- ▶ You could become active with the IEEE Computer Society or ACM or the comparable organizations in other countries. These organizations not only need docents, but they need participants in their Special Interest Groups (SIGs), which provide a structure and relationship with others who are already collecting computing history.

Working with one of these is probably the best way to quickly become productive in collecting historical information. But another way is to read a few books on how to collect. Most of these are written by historians for historians, but some of them are usable by the rest of us and provide insight into the process. One book by a historian directly involved in the computing field was written by James Cortada, *History Hunting*.² Although he was educated as a historian, he worked for IBM for many years and his book gives lots of techniques and

guidelines which are useful for industry professionals. And if you want to get a picture of how much fun there is in collecting history, read Martin Gilbert’s book, *In Search of Churchill*.³ Martin Gilbert wrote the seminal eight-volume biographies of Winston Churchill. A collecting adventure in our industry is described in an article by Paul McJones in the *Annals*,⁴ which tells of his eventually successful search for early copies of Fortran software and program documentation.

And for those of you who enjoy writing, the *Annals* is pleased to accept and publish well-written articles by practitioners, although we do not need to have the extensive citations that mark the professional historians’ output. The *Annals* uses other practitioners as well as historians to review our articles to ensure that we do not make claims that are not backed up by personal experience or industry records or other vetted documentation.

I also believe that there are a great many subjects that should have already been covered but still lie fallow. For one example, CICS, an IBM mainframe data communications program released in 1969, was the most successful systems or application computer program as measured by revenue dollars for over 30 years, until it was finally surpassed by Microsoft’s Windows in the late 1990s. And yet, to date, there is no book or even a well-researched paper on CICS business and technical history. This is just one example of the wealth of treasure that still lies buried.

So, this is my message: do not leave it just to historians to collect, preserve, and communicate the history of our industry. It has been said that journalists write the first draft of history; while historians may write more analytical narratives, that at the time may be considered at the time to be definitive. But I think that there is a challenge to those of us who helped to build and grow the industry to collect the stories of our associates and the documents of our companies to help to create a solid basis for future historical perspective. If you do not do it, who will?

REFERENCES/ENDNOTES

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