



The Charles Babbage Institute
For the History of Information Processing
Sponsored by AFIPS and the information
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FROM THE ARCHIVES: ACCESS TO NEAR-PRINT RECORDS

A challenge to the modern archivist is to ensure that information is preserved regardless of its form. CBI's near-print collection is a good example of a form of information that falls outside of the traditional realm of archives. The collection, components of which were discussed in previous newsletters, consists of printed material that has not been published, widely distributed, or is not available through normal bibliographic channels. It contains information from corporate, government and academic sources. Product manuals, government reports, advertising brochures, and news releases are all examples of the type of documents found in the collection. These documents have been received from all sources, including manufacturer's representatives, consultant companies, computer associations and individual computer scientists who just "couldn't bear to throw them out." At first it was assumed that many of the documents in this collection easily could be found elsewhere, whether in university libraries or the companies that originated the documents. Spotty evidence reveals that this is not the

case. Many key manuals and unpublished reports are scarce, particularly those dating before 1960. It would be impossible to save all early computer manuals, reports, and brochures, yet clearly much of the material merits preservation. This is demonstrated by the collection's increased use by researchers and the CBI staff.

The near-print collection presents a problem in providing access for its immediate use. The collection is large (over 200 cubic feet), and it is growing. A librarian might approach this material by indexing each document. This would give a researcher the greatest access to information, but at a high cost. A cataloger would find little of this material already cataloged on national bibliographic databases, and the type of cataloging required would be difficult. Consider the prospect of cataloging and indexing the product literature section of the near-print collection. This section contains 30 cubic feet of advertising brochures from over 900 companies!

Instead of indexing each item in the collection, CBI has followed archival methodology by arranging the

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FROM CBI'S PHOTOGRAPH COLLECTION

The Atanasoff-Berry Computer photograph is a recent addition to CBI's collection. This view of the ABC shows the motor, the add-subtract mechanism and part of one of the memory drums.

collection according to the originator of the documents. Thus, all Bendix manuals are found in the corporate manuals section under "Bendix." A guide to the collection gives further descriptive information for each subdivision, enabling users to determine quickly whether the body of documents would be pertinent to their research.

While information in this system cannot be approached at the level of detail available through item indexing, the archival method is cheap to maintain and update. The system does require more sophistication on the part of the user. Background information on a topic is essential to finding information in the near-print collection; of course, this is true of effectively finding anything in an archives. In order to locate information on FIELDATA, an early army project related to the development of MOBIDIC, a researcher would need to know that the work was sponsored by the U.S. Army Signal Corps. FIELDATA materials can indeed be found in the Government Computing Section, under the U.S. Army Signal Corps. Similarly, a successful search for material related to ERMA, one of the first systems used in banking, would require the knowledge that ERMA's software was developed at Stanford Research Institute, and its hardware developed by General Electric.

There are obvious disadvantages to an arrangement based on provenance. A document might have multiple sponsors. It was not uncommon in the early development of electronic computers to find government research carried out on a university campus, or have two corporations working with the federal government on one project. In such cases, a document could be located in a number of places. A researcher not familiar with all the participants in a project might miss important information. This might also happen where a company or government unit has changed names. The guide provides some cross-referencing of corporate take-overs and name changes.

Perhaps the greatest dilemma that this material presents is how to contain its growth. Little effort has been made in actively collecting near-print records, yet they have grown to become CBI's largest collection. It would be impossible for CBI to save any more than a sampling of this material from large computing firms, though even if firms retained such records (and some don't!), researchers could not be assured that they would be accessible. It is unlikely that much of the near-print material from small firms will be needed for research, but certainly some of it should be saved. What criteria should be used to include or exclude these records? If the near-print collection is to remain manageable, it must be selective.

By prompting such questions, the near-print collection has been invaluable in helping CBI define prob-

lems in providing sources for the history of information processing. Its usefulness is a testament to the idea that archivists in science and technology should be more concerned with non-traditional sources in general, and printed material in specific. Life was easier when the archivists' domain consisted solely of the personal manuscript or formal institutional document. Technology has changed the nature of the record, and it is rare to find an archivist who feels secure about the whole process. The boundaries between the role of libraries, archives, and even electronic data bases have become less clear. To the user, the difference may seem unimportant; information is wanted, and the user does not care how it is delivered.

But information has a cost, and the traditional methods of making information available may not be the most effective. Archivists, faced with the need to preserve information in all forms, must find ways to provide information to users without overly taxing the resources of the archives. This need is even greater in the history of computing, where there is less to guide the archivist in understanding what sources will be needed by historians of this discipline. For CBI, these issues are a priority.

MEETINGS AND CONFERENCES

This summer CBI staff members presented papers at two major conferences on topics relating to business records and the availability of resources for historical research.

At the Annual Meeting of the Society of American Archivists, Bruce Bruemmer, CBI archivist, presented a paper on *Business Records Collecting in New Fields: Electronics and Information Processing*. The session on "Business Records—Survival of the Fittest?" in which he participated focused on discussions of collecting policies for business records and how these policies developed and changed during this century to accommodate "new" industries. Florence Bartoshesky, Harvard Business School, presented a paper on *Baker Library: Collection Policy of an Organizationally Mature Institution*. The Chair and Commentator for this session was Richmond Williams, director of the Eluetherian Mills Historical Library. The meeting was held in Washington, D.C., August 30 through September, 1984.

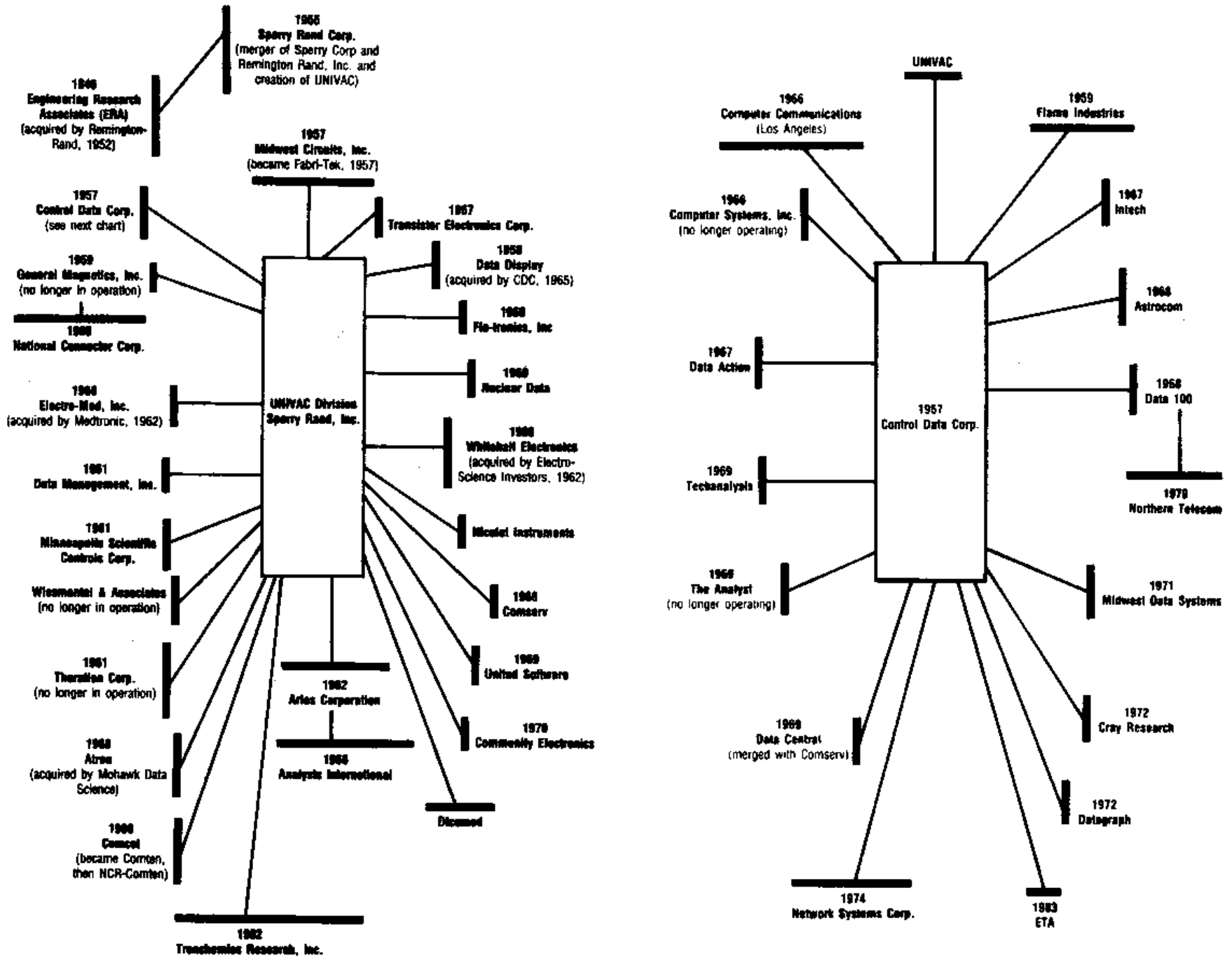
The Rare Books and Manuscripts Section of The Association of College and Research Libraries sponsored a conference on "Collecting in the Twentieth Century" on June 19-22, 1984, in Austin, Texas. Arthur Norberg was invited to speak on *Historical Themes and the Availability of Resources in the History of Science and Technology*. Other speakers and seminars were concerned with issues related to appraisal, processing and legal aspects of collecting policies.

BUSINESS HISTORY AT CBI

Over the past year CBI initiated several projects to assemble information and records for research on business history. The latest project emphasizes development in Minnesota. For this project a series of meetings with people from various companies will occur. The first meeting in June focused on the origins of the digital computer industry in the Twin Cities. Six of ERA/Remington Rand's employees met at CBI with the staff. The reasons for selecting this company first

goes beyond its role as founding company into a desire to learn more about the records of companies with strong ties to government mostly in a classified context. Among the topics discussed were events at and anecdotes about the company and its staff in the early years, technical developments at ERA, and the possible whereabouts of records from those early years that may be in private hands. Details offered were far ranging and one of the participants donated a collection of significant papers to CBI.

The two diagrams below show the influence of two of Minnesota's major companies on the area's computer industry by illustrating the spin-offs and mergers associated with the Sperry Corporation and Control Data Corporation.



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