

Think Before You Act

Jim Dickie

One time, we inflated a 14-foot-diameter weather balloon in the office of one of our colleagues. It filled the entire space from wall to wall and floor to ceiling, but because it really didn't have any pressure in it, it would not deflate. So in a fit of pique, our colleague used his pocket-knife to cut it open. He forgot that weather balloons, being made from natural rubber and thus filled with talcum powder so they wouldn't stick to themselves, are very messy when cut open. In this case, he promptly disappeared in a cloud of white powder as he slashed the balloon from floor to ceiling.

Johnny and the Firecrackers

Gordon Repp

We held division meetings in the Lab Auditorium, which was on the second floor of Building 162. In 1956, the auditorium had a very noisy air conditioner that was rarely used, because the noise made it difficult for people to hear. Thus, the room could get very hot. One computer code developer had difficulty staying awake during the meetings. One meeting, he was very abruptly awakened. Johnny Foster had lighted a string of firecrackers and thrown it under his chair.

One Good Swift Kick

John Fletcher

Between Ancient Times, when the Lab's mainframe computers were accessed by placing punched cards in drawers, and the Modern Era, when access is provided through workstations in offices, were the Middle Ages, when access required using centrally located Model 33 Teletypes.

The motors in our Teletypes would shut down after periods of inactivity, and to begin typing again, one had to flick a small switch. One Teletype on the main computer floor developed a flaky switch that had to be jarred into action by striking the machine with one's hand. The situation gradually deteriorated, and the force of the blow necessary to restart the motor became greater and greater, eventually reaching a level painful to the hand.

Jumpin' Johnny

Malcolm MacGregor

Johnny Foster was a good athlete, and at one time, he had tried out for the Canadian Olympic ski jumping team. Around 1953, it got to be a joke in B Division that if anyone could do a running broad jump farther than Johnny, he would become the division leader. The hall in our building, which had a wooden floor, was very long and well suited for practicing jumps. During the day, you could frequently hear the sound of someone running, then a moment of silence, then a crash as the jumper returned to earth. Jimmy Quong, a junior physicist in B Division, was our best jumper, but he never succeeded in displacing Johnny.



Johnny Foster.

One day while I was working at this Teletype, the motor shut down. When I was ready to type again, I proceeded in the manner that at the time had become necessary: I rolled my chair back a way, raised my leg and sharply struck the front of the machine a few times with the heel of my shoe. After the motor had restarted and as I was rolling my chair back into typing position, I glanced up. A tour of VIPs was passing by, led by Sid Fernbach, the long-time head of Computation.

I have always wondered what Sid and his guests were thinking. There was no doubt that they had been watching as I kicked the equipment. Perhaps Sid was well enough plugged into the details that he knew about the recalcitrant Teletype. In any case, he never asked me for an explanation.

Maestro, Please

Steve Massey

A three-million-dollar computer doubled as a jukebox.

during the early days, we had great fun with the physics and the resources available at the Lab. Experts were created on the fly, and there was an unforgettable atmosphere of exploration and invention.

In 1967, when I was working as a project physicist for L Division, one of the night-shift computer operators provided one of my most hilarious experiences. LaRoy Tymes was working on a mathe-

matics degree at Cal State Hayward and moonlighting at the Lab. At the time, the Rad Lab had two state-of-the-art CDC 3600 computers located in a trailer complex south of Building 121. In his job as an operator, LaRoy found that the tape drives were noisy. If read/writes were sequenced just right, they would generate musical tones. In addition, the machines had typewriters, printers, and monitors on the B registers that provided an audio tone to let the operators know if the machines were in a loop.

A creative guy, LaRoy used his spare time to write a program that played “The Stars and Stripes Forever” with four-part harmony (tape drives), piccolo trills (B register), and percussion (typewriter and printer). Remember, this was well before Moog or any synthesized music.

I used to walk into the trailer complex at midnight and watch LaRoy interrupt the system and boot up the program on a three-million-dollar computer system (real money at the time). The program began by typing the introduction: “‘The Stars & Stripes Forever’ by John Philips Sousa, arranged by LaRoy Tymes.” A piccolo trill introduced the selection, and then everything broke loose. LaRoy walked around to the tape drives and adjusted the volume of each by opening and closing the drive covers. Never has a jukebox brought more pleasure.



CDC 3600 computer.

Weight! Try This.

John Nuckolls

Nuckolls put Lowell Wood's dedication to his briefcase to the test.

In the 1960s, Lowell Wood carried a big briefcase, stuffed full of technical books, journals, and papers. Young Lowell was strong and carried this heavy briefcase effortlessly. One day, when he was departing for Washington, we executed an “experiment.” Would Lowell know the difference if we added a lead weight to his briefcase? We inserted half of a lead brick in the bottom of his briefcase while he talked on the phone. As usual, Lowell had to rush to catch his plane. He snatched up the weighted briefcase and rushed out of the office and down the hall. I yelled, “Lowell! I bet you can’t lift your briefcase over your head.” To our amazement, he elevated the briefcase with one arm as he disappeared out the door. When Lowell returned several days later, the lead weight was still in the bottom of his briefcase!