

DEPARTMENT: ANECDOTES

Preserving the Past by Industry Participants

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FOR over 40 years practitioners in the world of IT and historians of computing and information have come together in these *Annals* to share their understanding of computing's history. Participants have their own reasons for involvement with the *Annals* and have their own approaches to studying and reporting history. Historians typically have different research agendas than practitioners, often dealing with much broader concerns than the practitioner. While some practitioners may have explicit research agendas, many others may just enjoy reading about the history they lived through or are collecting that history in maybe somewhat accidental ways. For instance, many preserve records of their research and development projects, companies and jobs they have engaged with, gray literature (company published manuals and brochures) that came into their sphere, even parts of machines, print-outs of software, coffee mugs, certificates, and other documents. They do this collecting either because they are naturally "pack rats" or because they have a feeling or belief that it is important for them to preserve such documents and artifacts. In over 40 years of working with such participants in computing, I have been amazed at how many store materials relevant to the history of computing, also how many do not yet know how important these are or how to ensure their survival after they have passed from the scene. It may be useful for such participants to hear my story.

I have been collecting paper and other records, largely about IBM, for nearly a half century. I would like to suggest that many other IT practitioners can do the same. I stumbled on a two-prong strategy that proved fun, relevant, and easy to execute. In the beginning it was about selfishly preserving documents relevant to my personal role at IBM, where I worked from 1974 to 2013. These included my initial job offer letter,

congratulatory notes on joining IBM, later others complimenting my work, award certificates and appraisal notes, among others. Some e-mails I thought historically important went into the collection too, most notably the ones that circulated in IBM the week of the 9/11 attacks. Priceless! Many, if not most, colleagues did the same.

We either tossed these documents into a cardboard box for years or meticulously put them in a file cabinet in folders. I began with the box, later on folders. Along the way I also accumulated material items, such as my 100 Percent Club pins, which indicated that I had achieved my sales targets—a very big deal in IBM, especially for those of us eager to move up the corporate career ladder. Mementos of visits to laboratories and factories also were tossed into a box, along with IBM logoed coffee mugs, pen, and pencil sets given out as sales awards, and a few binders with IBM training materials. Yes, postcards, key chains, and other credenza dust collectors made it into the boxes too, three by the time I retired.

As so many readers of the *Annals* have done, I accumulated books dealing with the history of my employer, which I read as they were being published. It was easy to do, because when I was coming up, the number of publications about the history of IBM and its industry were few, so always fun and novel to read. By the time I finished digesting the multiple technical histories of IBM written by Emerson Pugh and his colleagues in the 1980s and early 1990s, I had become sensitized to the kinds of materials not in the company's archives but that could be potentially useful to future historians. That is when I started to collect methodically, much the way a hobbyist/collector might art, old radios, or stamps. As I looked around, I saw collectables all over the place.

When IBM decided to no longer advertise its PCs with Charlie Chaplin cartoons, that day I noticed a PC poster with the classic tag line "A Tool for Modern Times" hanging on the wall in my building. I asked the local administrative manager if I could have it; he said yes, and today it hangs on a wall in my home. Good luck trying to find one anywhere; but I saved one. Since the 1950s the most famous poster in IBM was of a green duck entitled, "How to Stuff a Wild Duck," which referred

to IBM encouraging technical wild ducks to create new information technologies. I wanted one, and eventually two decades later, obtained one from an IBMer who no longer wanted his. Try and find that one; the last copy I saw was for sale on eBay for nearly \$1000.

In 1984 or 1985, the IBM sales office in Nashville, Tennessee, decided it was too cluttered and so held a contest to see who could throw out the greatest amount of old paper. I had the presence of mind to realize here was an opportunity to preserve old IBM publications (e.g., about S/360s and S/370s), photographs of the office from the 1950s onward, even a few certificates congratulating people on various achievements. That effort resulted in two boxes of materials and a “heads up” call to corporate archives that there was a nearly complete set of manuals about the iconic S/360 family of computers. The archivists moved swiftly to save those materials. I stored my 2 boxes of Nashville materials in the basement of our home.

Over the years, colleagues learned that I was interested in preserving IBM materials and so would send things to me. In the 1980s and 1990s, for example, cartoons and other humor related to IBM flowed my way, a box full to be precise. If someone came across a 50th anniversary history of IBM in Ireland or Norway, they remembered me and grabbed a copy for my collection. When I visited an IBM factory or laboratory, I would ask if they had marketing materials or employee publications that I could have for my collection; more stuff into a brief case. Such behavior became a habit, business as usual. Little did I know at the time how much that behavior was evident all over the company, especially among the ranks of American customer engineers (the folks who installed and repaired hardware), engineers and scientists, and French salesmen and systems engineers.

After I retired from IBM, all those various sources began to dry up, but I knew the day would come when I would write a history of IBM, which I published in 2019.¹ In 2013, I turned to eBay to see what it had and over the next seven years acquired about a banker box of materials per year just from that one source. I acquired manuals that described IBM’s key products from the 1950s forward, with particular emphasis on materials published between the 1930s and the end of the 1980s. I found about 100 postcards about NCR, where IBM’s long term CEO Thomas Watson Sr. matured into an executive, and dozens of others of IBM facilities from the 1920s through the 1990s. I found a 1928 graduation certificate from IBM’s Sales School (I graduated in 1975 and have mine too), letters signed by senior executives, congratulating employees about their achievements, a few ancient slide decks from the 1960s and 1970s, product repair manuals from the 1930s, even a welcome packet for a new IBM

employee circa 1962 that shed light on how seriously IBM took its legal responsibilities to adhere to its 1956 Consent Decree in the United States. Press photographs of Soviet premier Nikita Khrushchev’s visit to IBM’s manufacturing site in California in 1959 kept appearing for sale over the years, including a brochure Russian visitors received earlier that year when IBM exhibited a RAMAC system in Moscow at the same industrial fair where President Richard Nixon had his famous “kitchen debate” with the premier.

I noticed one day that a dealer of all manner of things had sold me two small collections of private records of deceased IBMers in California. So I reached out to her to find out how she obtained such materials. There were few records of product engineers so acquiring more of these was important to me. She explained that her role was to clean out homes of deceased people, others moving to assisted living situations, and those of hoarders. I explained that I was collecting with the intent that all my materials would be deposited at an archive, such as the Charles Babbage Institute at the University of Minnesota. She began to send me materials that would be difficult to sell on eBay, with the result that more came in: a woman’s ID badge from Poughkeepsie, New York, issued in 1944; a file containing a patent application and lab records on the design of the device in question; photographs of individuals in various offices, a secretary’s manual on how to use an IBM Selectric typewriter (considered probably the most popular typewriter in post World War II America), yet from another teaching materials from a typing class of the 1950s.

After publishing my history of IBM, a few people reached out to me, none so fascinating as the daughter of a retired South American IBM sales executive, Luis A. Lamassonne. She had “stuff” and wanted to know if I wanted these. He had self-published a memoir in English years earlier, which one could find through Internet book dealers.² But a Spanish edition had also been published which one could not find, but a member of the family had one. Lamassonne’s daughter also had a manual he published while working in Spain just before the start of the Spanish Civil War of 1936–1939, and was willing to part with that. In 1957 on the occasion of his 25th anniversary of working at IBM, his staff put together a book of letters and photographs, as was customary around the world and still practiced in the 21st century. IBMers value their binder, as do I mine. I had never seen one from Latin America, solid evidence that IBM’s corporate culture was practiced in Latin America. That was a big deal for an historian to uncover. I now have nearly a half a banker box of materials from this one family that sheds light on IBM’s role in South and Central

America, largely from the 1930s through the 1960s. This gentleman lived to over 100 years of age, IBM's oldest retiree at one point. It made my year.

A retired IBM typewriter repair customer engineer in his '80s in the United States began an e-mail dialog with me after reading a copy of my book given to him by his daughter as a Christmas present. The exchange of e-mails went on for several weeks in which he essentially wrote his memoirs of working at IBM. He now resides in one of my file cabinets with his own folder, accompanied by others from IBMers, and still others that included typewrite customer publications I acquired through eBay. Besides saving him from anonymity, we know too little about IBM's typewriter business, yet it was always a front and center concern to IBM's CEO for 40 years, Thomas Watson Sr.

Every week I spend 15 min to see what is for sale on eBay and by online second hand book dealers, acquiring odds and ends. From AbeBooks, for example, I acquired two copies of a hardbound celebratory volume published in Nazi Germany in the 1930s on the occasion of IBM opening a new manufacturing facility. It was strange seeing photographs with Nazi Party officials in their uniforms. From France, I found several IBM France annual reports from the 1960s that even IBM's corporate archives did not have. Three books written about IBM in Argentina showed up, so too seven published in Japan. About three dozen IBMers have self-published their memoirs, including two for consumption only by their families, one of which was written by a senior vice president that proved valuable when writing my book. I doubt any publication cost me more than \$20 each, from eBay between \$5 and \$20 each plus postage. So the costs of acquiring materials remained low. Once in a while on eBay I competed with an unknown buyer, but that was fine because I suspected that rival valued the material and would preserve it too. After all, the purpose of acquiring ephemera was to preserve them.

What lessons can I draw from these experiences? If we accept the idea that we have personal responsibilities for preserving the history of IT, our careers, our employers, and computing at large, it is not a difficult or expensive task. But it does require that you keep an eye out for materials and preserve them. It matters less whether you think something is important; let future historians figure that out. For example, when I obtained a 1944 employee ID badge, it taught me a lot. She had to pass a criminal-record check, it had to be issued by the police department (not IBM), and it included her Social Security number, birth date, and

photograph. It was as official as a driver's license. I now know why when I lived in Poughkeepsie I could cash a check by flashing my IBM ID card rather than a driver's license—the card proved I had a job, so could probably cover the check! More seriously, the card was further proof that what IBM was doing at its factory was defense-related and therefore subject to American military security processes.

Treat collecting and preserving like a hobby; keep it fun and interesting. Encourage colleagues to do the same and when their spouse declares that their garage or basement needs to be cleaned out, reach out to a university, library, archive, or fellow collector about how to dispose of the materials. Yes, even reach out to anybody on the board of editors of the *Annals*. When my basement fills, I will ship what I have to an archive; my family knows which ones to contact should I die or otherwise be incapacitated. You should establish the same understanding with your family. Too many materials end up being put out as trash. Do not assume that after you are gone that your family will have a better idea of what you did than when you worked.

On occasion, organizations like the Charles Babbage Institute and the Computer History Museum conduct research initiatives where they ask for materials dealing with a specific topic. They also interview people on their careers. Pay attention to those events—they are often reported on in the *Annals*, retiree websites and elsewhere. Volunteer to participate. Do not assume you have nothing of value; we still know so little about the history of IT that you cannot assume your materials and history are minor. You may be the least qualified person to judge your collection or career. From IBM retiree websites, I have collected several hundred obituaries and biographies. That means each of those individuals will be remembered, their stories will be the ones historians learn from. The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle is remembered not only because he had something to say; but, because some of his writings were preserved. Scholars believe he associated with many other philosophers who have gone anonymous, hence forgotten, because nobody saved their records long enough. So, his is the experience we know.

REFERENCES

1. J. W. Cortada, *IBM: The Rise and Fall and Reinvention of Global Icon*. Cambridge, MA, USA: MIT Press, 2019.
2. L. A. Lamassonne, *My Life With IBM*, Atlanta, GA, USA: Protea Publishing, 2000.