Charles Babbage Institute Website Review

by Ben W. Brumfield

People interested in the history of computing have long gathered on the Net, usually reminiscing about card-punches and portable micros in alt.folklore.computers, bit.listserv.asm370, comp.os.cpm, or other newsgroups with nostalgic bents. Since the advent of the WWW, enthusiastic individuals, user groups, and museums all over the world have created websites celebrating long-dead operating systems and machinery, displaying photographs and specifications of their favorite systems. While these sites are usually very well done, their primary emphasis is nostalgic, rather than historical.

The Charles Babbage Institute webserver (http://www.cbi.umn.edu/) is the best source of real scholarly information on the history of computing on the Net today. It is maintained by the Charles Babbage Institute Center for the History of Information Processing, a research and archival center at the University of Minnesota. The CBI has acquired an immense collection of manuscripts, trade journals, manuals, and oral interviews since it was founded in 1979 and draws upon them to highlight real events in computing history.

The website gives information about the location and availability of the CBI archives collection, which is open to the public, as well as links to its gopher server, and to the card catalogs of its parent libraries. The website also provides listings, abstracts, and electronic ordering information for transcripts of oral interviews with many of the major figures in the development of all fields of modern computing.

These topics will hold less interest to the casual websurfer than will the site's online exhibits. The site is divided into **Timely Features**, **Special Items on the History of Information Processing**, and **Fun Stuff**. The first category contains anniversary articles, recent acquisition listings, and obituaries of important figures in academic or commercial computing. The Fun Stuff lists movies that featured computers, Pentium humor (ostensibly compiled only to record the public reaction to the floating-point division debacle), and an extensive collection of photographs of computers from the 50's and 60's.

The real treats at this site are the exhibits that have been constructed from CBI's archives. A full history of Burroughs, constructed from the Burroughs Corporation Records, opens windows onto the company's 100-year development. The exhibit gives biographical information on William Seward Burroughs, the inventor of the adding machine, then traces the company's product line from mechanical calculators, to accounting machines, to mainframes. The photo gallery shows not only early computing devices from

the Burroughs product line, but scenes from the company's internal literature showing educational projects and recreational facilities. Finally, the exhibit gives a detailed explanation of the complex issues involved in the merger with Sperry Corporation to form Unisys.

The DARPA/IPTO exhibit traces the contributions of the Defense Advanced Research Projects to the development of modern computing and the Internet. It contains fairly sketchy histories of DARPA and IPTO, the Information Processing Techniques Office. Also, the Minnesota Computer Industry exhibit shows the history of computing development in Minnesota, with dozens of company profiles and scanned sales brochures.

Peeking around the corners will reveal that the site is still under a lot of development. The photo gallery contains several pages that seem to be under extensive development, highlighting important events in computing. One such exhibit is the Burroughs-ENIAC Static Memory Project, which displays the entirety of a brochure distributed to Burroughs Adding Machine stockholders describing the first commercial development of core memory. Constructed for the U.S. Army, the Burroughs magnetic core memory expanded the ENIAC's memory from 20 words of 10-digit binary coded decimal stored in vacuum tubes to 100 words of core-memory, allowing computation on much larger datasets before the computer had to resort to much slower punch-card storage.

Expect more exhibits to be added, and more original photographs, posters, and brochures to be used to give real historical depth to the exhibits.