

Legacy Preservation Partnerships

Millie, the Club, the University, the Museum and more!

Contents

Introduction	1
Millie Gignac – VIP Club Founder and Sperry's First Female Director	1
The VIP Club – Retirees of Unisys, LMCO, and Heritage Organizations.....	2
Legacy Committee Partnered with Charles Babbage Institute @ U of MN.....	3
The Lawshe Memorial Museum @ the Dakota County Historical Society	4
More Legacy Exhibit Sites @ Unisys, the Web, and Others.....	6
Future of our Partnerships.....	6

Introduction

This is the story of a plethora of partnerships formed over many years. The first has endured for 35 years; the last is developing this year. None of these partnerships are for profit nor are they formally registered. All are associated with the computer industry history, which began in 1946 with the formation of Engineering Research Associations (ERA) in St. Paul, Minnesota. A short version of this paper was prepared for the Charles Babbage Institute's (CBI) 2015 spring newsletter.



Millie Gignac – VIP Club Founder and Sperry's First Female Director

In 1979¹, Millie Gignac was managing the Human Resources Department at Sperry Univac in St. Paul on her way to becoming the first female to be named a director in Sperry's Twin Cities operations. As she interviewed employees getting ready to retire, she observed that many were reluctant to break the "Sperry tie." Therefore, in the fall of 1979, she started to plan a clubroom for retirees to be located in the St. Paul Shepard Road plant, and action on her plans started in early spring 1980. Millie and original VIP Club members envisioned that the company's support would be limited to aiding the initial club formation, providing space and facilities without charge, providing a very modest annual budgetary contribution, and giving guidance and support from the Human Resources Department as required.



¹ <http://vipclubmn.org/History.html#ClubStart>



Established in 1980

A Legacy Project Paper

May, 2015

Thus was formed a partnership between a host company and its retirees. A letter was sent to over 450 Twin City area retirees and 150 retirees responded, expressing an interest in forming a retiree's club. The dedicated clubroom at Shepard Road was completed with a ribbon-cutting ceremony on July 24, 1980. Millie invited Bob McDonald, who had just retired as president and chief operating officer of Sperry Corporation, to take part in the ceremony and cut the ribbon. The first general VIP Club meeting was held on September 3, 1980, with about 75 in attendance. The club elected officers and directors and scheduled monthly meetings. They developed a constitution jointly with Sperry and drew up a set of bylaws. The first president was Al Mueller, a retired Antenna Coupler Department manager.

In 1982, club members got involved in community volunteer work to begin working toward the constitution's goal of volunteerism. They took on many projects, which resulted in the retirees being a goodwill extension of the company and an asset to our community. In 1984 the VIP Club was registered with the IRS as the Sperry Retirees Club, a 501c (7) Social and Recreational Club.

After retiring from Sperry in 1986, Millie served as the VIP Club's president in 1988-89. In 2009, the club board certified her as a VIP Club Member Emeritus. Today, as an active nonagenarian, she continues to provide valued counsel to the board.

The VIP Club – Retirees of Unisys, LMCO, and Heritage Organizations

Many Sperry retirees had already seen a few corporate name changes by 1986, when Burroughs bought Sperry to form Unisys. The VIP Club continued using the original Shepard Road clubroom until that plant's closure, but Unisys continued its partnership with the retirees, providing conference rooms in their Roseville and Eagan plants for board meetings and program meetings.



Corporate Heritage Logos, 1946-2013

When Unisys sold its defense operations – including the Eagan plant – to Loral in 1995, Loral did not wish to sponsor the existing retirees' club, and the VIP Club moved to the Unisys Roseville location. One year later in 1997 Lockheed Martin (LMCO) bought the defense industry group from Loral and soon petitioned the VIP Club Board to co-sponsor the retirees' club with Unisys. Thus began the dual partnerships of companies providing VIP Club meeting spaces and retirees providing goodwill through community volunteerism, and the board meetings and program meetings again alternated between Eagan and Roseville.

One of the goals of the original retirees' club, as stated in Article III of the VIP Club constitution, is "to provide a mechanism for member services to the community." From the club's inception through 2010, members provided in excess of 438,120² hours of volunteerism as small groups and as individuals. Included among the 80-plus recipients of volunteer services have been the United Way, Guthrie Theater,

² <http://vipclubmn.org/Articles/30yrBooklet.pdf>



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St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, William Mitchell College of Law and Boy Scouts. Now as we celebrate 35 years of community services, our total volunteerism is over 550,000 hours.

Legacy Committee Partnered with Charles Babbage Institute @ U of MN

In 2005, Lockheed Martin asked its operating divisions across the country to develop history timelines ahead of its 2012 centennial celebration. Richard "Ole" Olson, an LMCO staff engineer in Eagan, approached the VIP Club Board with the corporate request. Board Director Lowell Benson volunteered to co-chair a new IT Legacy Committee, noting the VIP Club constitution's fourth goal: "The CLUB shall provide a forum for information on the heritage and on-going action of the heritage companies." Board Associate Dick Lundgren offered to coordinate the first Legacy Committee meeting at the Charles Babbage Institute (CBI).

The joint VIP Club and LMCO Legacy Committee met at CBI in January 2006 for legacy preservation discussions. Although Founding CBI Director Dr. Arthur Norberg's 2005 book³ covered UNIVAC's formation, the committee agreed that it did not tell the entire story of innovation in the Twin Cities that began with ERA. At that January meeting, Dr. Norberg suggested asking retirees to write career summaries and record some oral histories. He added that if we could gather experiences from 200 key people, we might get the total history of the corporate lineage. It seemed apropos to begin with ERA for two reasons: 1) CBI founder Erwin Tomash worked at ERA early in his technical and business career, and 2) CBI directors hold the ERA Land-Grant Chair in History of Technology at the University of Minnesota.

Heeding Dr. Norberg's advice, the new Information Technology (IT) Legacy Committee established three objectives:

- First, to **capture** any legacy material and information still available;
- Second, to **catalog and archive** all the material collected; and
- Third, to **publish/publicize** our history and heritage in ways that interest industry and our fellow Minnesotans via the web and local institutions.

This meeting established the partnership of CBI and the VIP Club in the IT Legacy Committee. The committee realized that not all of Minnesota's computer history could be documented by us, thus decided to focus on the heritage illustrated in our IT Legacy icon.

Thus, even though Bill Norris was one of the ERA founders, we would not follow his subsequent founding of Control Data Corporation (CDC). And, although Seymour Cray followed Mr. Norris to CDC and subsequently founded Cray, Inc., we would not pursue that history. Unisys Fellow Ron Q. Smith, from the Roseville facility, joined the IT Legacy Committee to provide the commercial computer industry aspects of the Twin Cities IT Legacy.

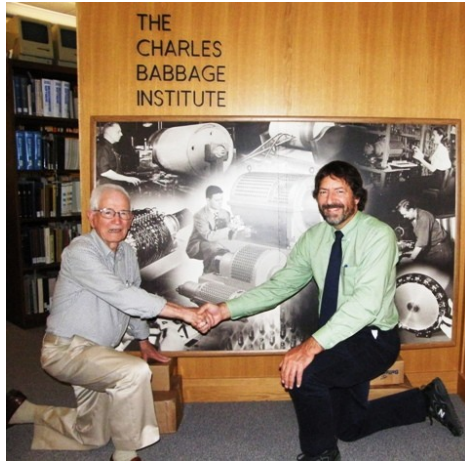


³ *Computers and Commerce: A Study of Technology and Management at Eckert Mauchly Computer Company, Engineering Research Associates, and Remington Rand, 1946-1957* (MIT Press, 2005)

When Dr. Norberg retired, the new CBI director, Dr. Thomas Misa, continued the partnership, counseling on preservation methods. Ole Olson retired in 2008; John Westergren took on the role of Legacy Committee co-chair at LMCO. In 2010, the VIP Club celebrated its 30th year of activities and

published a 30-Year Anniversary review booklet. At the October 2010 event, Dr. Misa presented a short version of his lector series, “Minnesota’s Hidden History in the Computing Industry, Origins in the Engineering Research Associates”:

http://vipclubmn.org/Articles/HiddenHistory_02_2010-Oct4.pdf.



In November 2011, the committee facilitated the donation of a drum memory collage from ERA/Sperry engineer, Don Weidenbach, to CBI – Dr. Misa is shown here accepting the collage from him. This collage was originally on the office wall of ERA founder, Bill Norris. Don is the engineer pictured in the collage.

The Lawshe Memorial Museum @ the Dakota County Historical Society

In November 2010, Lockheed Martin triggered the ending of the VIP Club-LMCO partnership with its announcement of a pending 2013 LMCO facility closure in Eagan, Minnesota. In 2011, Bernie Jansen⁴ invited Chad Roberts, then the Dakota County Historical Society (DCHS) executive director, to visit the LMCO Eagan facility and review our growing artifact collection. Mr. Roberts was immediately interested in our rich UNIVAC/Sperry/Unisys/LMCO local history. The DCHS Board subsequently approved a motion by Mr. Jansen to accept a donation of the hardware and photo artifacts gathered by the IT Legacy Committee and to house a permanent Legacy display at their Lawshe Memorial Museum in South St. Paul. Therefore, yet another partnership began – the VIP Club and DCHS.

In the fall of 2012 John Westergren facilitated shipping one semi-truck load of documents, brochures, engineering logbooks, photo negatives, and other two dimensional items to the Charles Babbage Institute. John also facilitated the LMCO donation of two semi-truck loads of three-dimensional items such as computers, hardware items, corporate mementoes, photo prints, 35mm slides, photo transparencies, etc., to the DCHS Lawshe Memorial Museum. Mr. Roberts proposed and received a state Legacy grant for the accessioning of the artifacts into the DCHS database. At the museum, VIP Club volunteers set up a five-



DCHS Lawshe Memorial Museum
South St. Paul, Minnesota

⁴ DCHS trustee and VIP Club Member Emeritus

station computer network with which to log and identify approximately 20,000 photos. Keith Myhre converted the previous Legacy Committee cataloging format from Excel spreadsheets to the museum's database formats.

In 2013, VIP Club volunteers worked with new DCHS Executive Director Lynn Gruber to write a second state Legacy grant proposal, "The Birth of Minnesota's Computer Industry – A Photo Essay." The partnership set up several history displays⁵ in their Great Hall (photos right and below by Keith Myhre) for public viewing beginning in August of 2013 as DCHS staff and VIP Club volunteers began working on the second Minnesota Legacy grant.



**Legacy Display Opening Celebration
DCHS Lawshe Memorial Museum Great Hall**

This spring of 2015, VIP Club volunteers will help the museum staff finish the second grant contract and:

- 1) Celebrate Legacy Committee successes and the VIP Club's 35 years with a members-only poster showing at the Lawshe Memorial Museum on September 8, 2015;
- 2) Help the museum staff write a third state Legacy grant proposal to develop additional topical poster boards for the Lawshe Memorial Museum Exhibits; and
- 3) Continue the volunteer photo identification work at the museum.

⁵Exhibit descriptions are articles #185, 199, & 200 at <http://vipclubmn.org/documents.html>

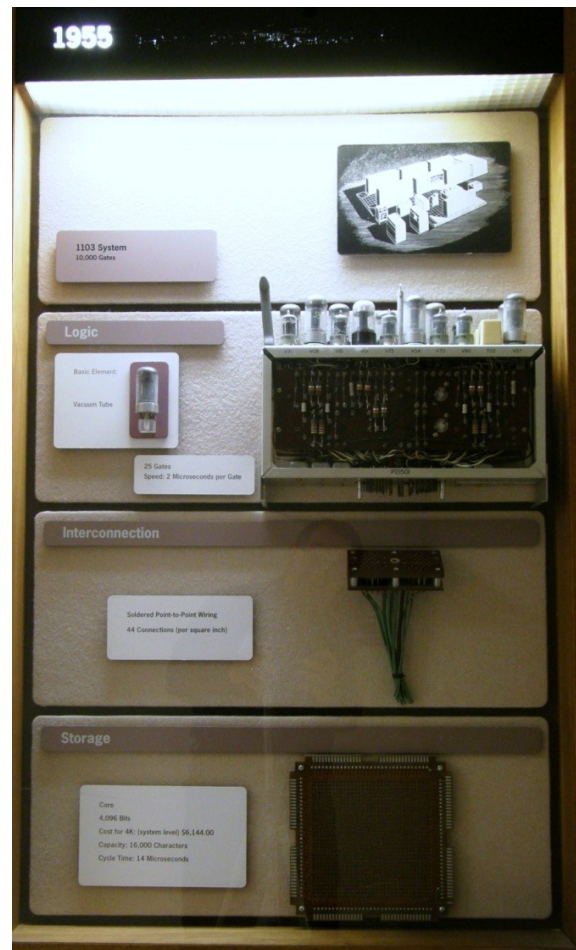
More Legacy Exhibit Sites @ Unisys, the Web, and Others

In 2014, we added an Exhibit web page to our website to feature the previous Unisys, Roseville display shadow boxes; the developing DCHS exhibits; and the Minnesota Historical Society's repository of the original drum memory prototype, <http://vipclubmn.org/Exhibits.html>. Shown at the right is the 1955 technology of the ERA-UNIVAC 1103 computer, just one of over 25 history shadow boxes. Thanks to Chuck Lefebvre for saving these from the scrap heap in 2012.

Future of our Partnerships

The VIP Club and our legacy preservation partnerships will continue for the foreseeable future:

- The Legacy Committee will continue to collect artifacts from retirees and catalogue them for the CBI and/or Lawshe Memorial Museum archiving. These provide historical data for future researchers and public education.
- We will expand our computer systems history preservation by interfacing with the Eagan LMCO Air Traffic Management organization and the Unisys, Eagan facility.
- CBI staff will continue to include articles about the Twin Cities computer history in their publications.
- The VIP Club Board will continue to look for partnership opportunities to publish or present stories of our IT pioneering in the Twin Cities environs.



Author: Lowell A. Benson, UNIVAC 1960 -> Unisys 1994; BEE, University of Minnesota 1966.

- Thanks to the hundreds of volunteering retirees who have contributed to the decade long successes of the Legacy Committee partnerships,
- Thanks to Bernie Jansen and Keith Myhre for their detail information about Lawshe Memorial Museum activities, and
- Thanks to Sue Goolsby for her editorial review of this article.

An adage: *'Predict the future then work to make it happen!'*