Land of 10,000 Engineers:
UNIVAC and the University of Minnesota

Right: Erwin Tomash and Dr. Arnold Cohen (L to R) both joined ERA in 1946. Tomash was a 1943 graduate of the University of Minnesota and Cohen was and later served as the associate dean in the U of M school of engineering.

In the early days of ERA, most of the engineers the company hired were graduates of the University of Minnesota. Over the years, UNIVAC and other Minnesota tech companies continued to stay connected with the University in what remained a mutually beneficial relationship.

Keeping up with the times, the University purchased their first digital computer in 1957. Having first contemplated purchasing an IBM computer, they bought a UNIVAC 1103 for a bargain $250,000. This state-of-the-art machine helped spur on the field of computer science at the University which they later established as a formal department in 1970.

Right: A picture showing the construction of the Computer Science building at the University of Minnesota in the mid-1980s. Prior to the establishment of Computer Science as a field, many of UNIVAC's employees were graduates of the U's Electrical Engineering School.

Some of the company's early hires from the University went on to become leaders in Minnesota's computing industry, and for a few, industry giants. Seymour Cray, an alumnus, is widely regarded as a pioneer in the industry. Known for his genius in designing computers, he later founded Cray Research and built supercomputers. The U acquired a Cray-1 computer in 1981.

Today the legacy still remains. Several endowed chairs, one named for William Norris (who later founded Control Data), bear the names of important individuals and companies in Minnesota's tech industry. The University also houses the Charles Babbage Institute, dedicated to preserving the world-wide history of the IT field.

We took virtually the whole class of 1950 and '51 out of the electrical engineering school.

Erwin Tomash
ERA Employee

From a 5/15/1983 oral history interview from the Charles Babbage Institute.

Below: A continuation of their 1100 computer series, UNIVAC rebranded an upgraded 1103 computer as the "UNIVAC Scientific." Its commercial successors, the 2200 series from Unisys, continued into the 1990s.