

A Personal History of the Department Computer Sciences

Professor Seymour Parter

Before I begin to describe what I know of the CS department history let me give the reader two caveats. One: I believe the department of numerical analysis came into being in the academic year 1961-62. I came to the university of Wisconsin in September 1963. Therefore anything I write about events before September 1963 is based on hearsay, gossip and other unfounded sources. Two: I will digress a bit to discuss my own earlier relationship to Preston Hammer and the general development of CS in the early '60s.

Digression

I went to Los Alamos in March of 1951. I had been hired by Preston Hammer who was a group leader of a group with some basic computational responsibilities and also had the responsibility of developing computing at Los Alamos. Preston was a remarkable man. I believe he himself knew very little about technical or scientific computation. But he managed the group by intelligent delegation of responsibility and a somewhat heavy hand. In any case the development of computation at Los Alamos was placed in another group during the summer of 1951. Although I no longer worked directly for Preston Hammer, I knew him socially and was friendly with him.

Sometime in the late 1950's IBM designed and built an internally programmed computer, the 650. This machine had a magnetic drum memory and was a 'two address' machine. IBM then devised an ingenious plan to develop computing in academia. They offered universities and colleges the 650 free, provided that the institution would offer a course in computation. Universities jumped at this opportunity to get something for nothing. The problem was: where were they to get people to run these machines and teach these courses? Naturally they went to industry and the government labs. There was one catch, they had to offer professorships to the people they got this way.

The University of Wisconsin 'lured' Preston Hammer away from Los Alamos. This was not too difficult since he was unhappy about losing the development of computation to another group. Thus, he became a full professor of mathematics at the university of Wisconsin. From conversations I had with him before I came here and conversations with members of the mathematics department after I came here I know it was a rocky relationship. The department expected him to be a director of a computation center and teach only about computing. He took the view that he was a full professor and entitled to all the privileges that went with that rank.

History Proper

Things came to a head in the early 1960's. Preston was not happy. He went to the administration and created the department of numerical analysis in September 1961.

It was a very small department housed in a small bungalow on Park Street, just where the loading dock for Vilas Hall is located. Preston went on leave for the academic year 1962-63. Steve Kleene became the acting chairman. He recruited me. After receiving the offer to come here I called Preston on the phone and we spoke at length. And while I don't remember any of the actual words we said I believe that part of my knowledge of the background on the formation of that department of numerical analysis comes from that conversation.

I came here in September of 1963 as an associate professor with a joint appointment in numerical analysis and mathematics. At the same time Barkley Rosser came to the University of Wisconsin as the new director of the mathematics research center with academic appointments in both Mathematics and Numerical Analysis. The tenured faculty of the NA department consisted of Preston Hammer, Steve Kleene, Barkley Rosser, Eldo Koenig, Seymour Parter. The executive committee also included Guy Orcutt whose primary academic home was economics. Guy was well known for his work in applying computers to problems in economics. He left soon after I came. At this time the numerical analysis department still had the responsibility for the operation of the university-wide computer center. Some of the people who taught and/or helped run the comp. Center were Stuart Lovell, John Mcnall and Lee Thompson. At one of our very early meetings Barkley Rosser said; the University of Wisconsin does not need a department of NA, it needs a department of computer science.

We all agreed, although I am not sure how happy Preston was.

One of the first people we recruited was Ben Rosen who works in optimization theory. Ben came in the fall of 1964 to a position at MRC and a professorship in the CS department. In addition, Larry Travis and Ralph London came in the fall of 1964. Larry and Ralph were the first persons who were not interested in numerical computation but interested in other uses for the computer. Ralph was our first faculty member who actually had a PhD in computer science. Also, in the fall of 1964 we made a major change. Merv Muller came to the university as the director of the computer center with an academic appointment in CS. The department was no longer responsible for the university-wide computer center. Preston Hammer left in June of 1965. Ben became the chairman, succeeding Preston. Len Uhr came in 1965 giving us another person without a numerical background. Sheldon Klein came in in 1966 with a joint appointment in CS and linguistics. Olvi Mangasarian and Larry Landweber came in 1967. Larry was the second faculty member to actually have a degree in CS. Ben Rosen stepped down as chair in 1968. He was succeeded by Seymour Parter. By this time we had given up the park street cottage and had moved to stage 1 of the current CS/stat complex.

In 1969 we added two more CS PhD's, Ed Desautels and Tad Pinkerton. Ben Rosen left in the summer of 1971 to become the chairman of a new computer science department at the University of Minnesota. At this time, despite our best intentions most of the faculty were primarily interested in numerical computation as opposed to computer science per se. In addition to those already named we had John Halton who was interested in Monte Carlo calculations and other probabilistic computations and Ramon Moore who was the founder of interval arithmetic. George Collins, whose PhD was in logic was also a member of the faculty. George was and is interested in symbolic computation.

My two year term as chairman was spent dealing with student unrest; a TAA strike and student concerns about the Vietnam War. In addition we tried very hard to recruit more computer scientists, without much luck. In 1970 I stepped down and George Collins became the chairman.

