

Interview with Cecelia Larsen

July 8, 1983

Patricia Haddad

- (P) Today is Friday, July 8th and I'm talking with Cecelia Larsen. We're going to talk about some of the early days at the Laboratory, about the Univac and your exposure to the first giant computer here. Let's start with how you got to the Lab. How did you come here, Cecelia?
- (C) How did I come here? That's a good question. I answered an ad. There was an ad in the Livermore paper for a gal Friday in a one-girl office in a small laboratory that was going to be built by the University of California.
- (P) When was that exactly?
- (C) That was early in '51. I answered the ad and the young man that interviewed me was from the University of Chicago, a Dr. Fields, and he was utterly miserable. It was one of the hottest days of the year. It must have been 110 and he was so uncomfortable and I was uncomfortable too. I could see he wanted to get out of there. The application form was only one sheet at that time and on the top of the sheet it said "University of California, Berkeley". So he scratched out Berkeley and

put Livermore. I still have a copy of that....But anyway, that's how I got the job. It was going to be a gal Friday job for a small laboratory.

(P) What were you doing in that first job?

(C) Well, when I first came out it was very boring because all we had to do was check the badges that were going in and out. Most of them were CR&D people and engineers from the Lab.

(P) So you were doing a job that Security does nowadays.

(C) Right. And I didn't find that very challenging. So, I talked to my boss and I said: "Surely there's something else that I can do that's more stimulating." He was very interested, but by that time, I suspect that he knew it was going to be more than a one-gal one-office operation. So he decided that if I were willing he would give me an internship in Berkeley. It was where all these people were coming from, except the CR&D people. These were coming from across the street where Sandia is now and we called them "CR&D". That was "California Research and Development".

I'd get up at 4 o'clock in the morning, take the babies as far as Pleasanton on the Greyhound bus, leave them there with my aunt, and then take the bus to Oakland, transfer on Grove Street, go all the way up to Shattuck and transfer to the Lab shuttle. That way I got a lot of

experience in Berkeley on Lab policies, Lab procedures and things like that. I did that for quite a while, I guess, right up into 1952...Probably for over a year.

(P) Sounds like a really hard routine to follow with no transportation.

(C) Yes, I'd leave early and I'd get home about 8 o'clock at night. It was a real sacrifice because we had no transportation. At least now we have buses and Bart. But I learned. I spent three months in each department.

(P) Which departments were those?

(C) Oh, various. I spent three months in Security, three months in TID, three months in Engineering, three months in Personnel and in the Director's Office. That was very exciting because there were a lot of dignitaries coming to see Dr. Lawrence all the time and I got to see them and to meet all the Nobel Prize Winners. It was a lot of work but it was fun.

Then we came back to Livermore. The fellow who was in charge of the engineers was getting a crew together because the Laboratory had decided to buy a computer. Lawrence and Teller had agreed to get this "Univac", which had been made commercially available by Remington Rand Corporation. Remington Rand had gotten their design from Dr. Eckert and Dr. Mockley and at first it was called The Eckert Mockley Division of Remington Rand.

That was the first commercially available electronic digital computer and several of us were involved in the engineering aspects. Finally, they got a group of engineers together who were going to go to Philadelphia to work on the Univac over there because it wasn't ready to come here. My boss came to me one day and said: "How would you like to go to Philadelphia?" Without thinking I said: "When?" And he said: "Day after tomorrow." Thank goodness my mother was there so she took care of the kids and I went. You know, it was a chance of a lifetime. I got a chance to meet a lot of important people back there and to study the mechanisms of the input machine.

There was only one way to get information into that machine. At that time they didn't have IBM cards like they have now (and they're even doing away with those things). You had to type on a machine that was about 9 feet high, 3 feet wide, 2 feet deep, and that had a magnetic tape on it. It was something like what they're using now in work stations, except on a work station you can see what you're doing and you can correct it. There, you had no way of seeing what you were putting on that tape so you had to be extremely careful that you didn't make a mistake. If you had a mistake in there, the programmer would just about die and the engineers would just stand around and have a fit. So you learn not to make mistakes.

(P) What pressure, though, all day long.