

Before there were computers, there were calculators

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The Lab has a long history of visualizing data, so as the Bradbury staff began pulling together items for a display on that subject, a gap in its collection became clear: no pocket calculators.

Although the collection does include several large, heavy Marchant machines (see image at left), it didn't have examples of the technological advances that came in the early 1970s with the first scientific pocket calculators.

A call was put out to Lab employees and more than 20 people responded with examples of the calculators they had kept—in some cases—for more than 30 years.

“Not only was I surprised at the number of people who responded to our request, I was also surprised at the affection people showed for their items,” said Wendy Strohmeyer, the Museum Artifacts Collection Specialist.

In many cases, she said, not only did people have fond memories of when they acquired the calculators, but they also remembered the amount they'd paid for each of them. That's probably because a unit that sold for \$400 back in the early 1970s

would cost more than \$2,000 in today's dollars—so it was a considerable cash outlay to acquire them.

She also heard stories of what it was like to transition from using a slide rule to the new technology, and people were anxious to do so. In the case of one Lab employee:

“In 1974 I was taking a nighttime math class at UNM-LA. We had all gotten instructions in how to use a slide rule, but the instructor urged us to learn to use the new scientific pocket calculators if we could get our hands on one. Calculators were easier to use and more accurate than slide rules.

“Many of my Lab employee classmates had access to a calculator at work and were able to submit property loans in order to bring them to class.

At the time, Los Alamos Credit Union (LACU) worked out some sort of wholesale deal with Texas Instruments. A model TI SR-50 could be sold to members for \$130 or \$20 less than retail. Then, \$130 was a lot of money [almost \$700 today], but I scraped it together and participated in LACU's discount. The slide rule never saw the light of day again.”

Another comment about the ease calculators made:

“They were such an advance at the time that they changed my life. I was used to carrying big logarithm table books around, and this pocket thing had more significant figures plus incredibly more functions.”

A Hewlett Packard 35 Donor

The Visualizing Calculators exhibit, which features three early examples, will start out at the Lab's main administration building and will move to the Bradbury this summer.

Have items to donate?

If you have artifacts you would like donate to the Museum (textiles from the Manhattan Project era—including uniforms—would be greatly appreciated), please send a photo and description to [Wendy Strohmeyer](mailto:Wendy.Strohmeyer@lanl.gov), who will determine if they would benefit the collection. Her email is wstrohmeyer@lanl.gov.

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