

THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS (as remembered by an old IBM machine)

I wish you a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year and offer a little poem as my contribution to your holiday cheer. But, first, an historical note: Back in the old days, B.C. (before computers), electronic data processing was done by “tabulating” machines, or, electronic accounting machines. These machines used the then ubiquitous punched card, made lots of noise and were sometimes fun to operate. They were programmed by removable panels often crammed to spaghetti density with multicolored wires plugged in here and there just so. Well, computers ended the days of the tab machines (and everyone, of course, has noticed the splendid improvements in data processing since then). This poem is about a tired, about-to-be-retired old IBM machine on a special night of the year. An old IBM 407 Accounting Machine remembers. . .

THE NIGHT BEFORE CHRISTMAS

'Twas the night before Christmas,
When all through the facility,
Not a diode disturbed the scene of tranquility.
The disks and tapes were tucked 'way with care,
In hopes that no operator soon would be there.
The sorters and collators were all quiet now
And I was as still as that night would allow,
As I sat dreaming of Facility Heaven
Where there is a place for an old 407. . .
When out in the hall I heard a key: click CLACK!
I thought that the Manager might have come back;
Instead there came in a right jolly old elf
With a pipe in his teeth; I said to myself,
“You bearded old goat with countenance merry,
Cheeks like roses, nose like a cherry,
I don't care if you're full-stuffed with cheer,
Dammit man, there's no smoking in here!”
No Ivy League cut of coat hid his belly
But soot-covered fur enwrapped middle-aged jelly;
No attaché case he had on his back,
Not even a briefcase, but a grimy old pack!
He passed me on by and headed straightway
For the computer; not a word did he say.
He brought up power and started his job,
But after a time I heard him sob,
“Undefined subroutine! And no debug time!
There's absolutely no reason or rhyme
For this lousy kind of work!”
Then he whistled and shouted and turned with a jerk:
“Hey Rudy! Get in here!” he gruffly said,
And in came a reindeer whose nose was red.
At the shiny sight of poor Rudy's nose,
He scowled, “You're drunk again, I suppose!”
(I knew Rudy was a programmer by my intuition. . .
And also because that's their usual condition.)
“Now, how am I supposed to deliver these toys
Without distribution curves of good girls and boys!”
He kicked the computer, nothing more to say,
And, to my surprise, he headed my way.
Laying a finger aside of his nose,
He sighed, “Old ways are best, goodness knows.”
So I ground out his reports—in my sluggish way—
And, as he left, I heard him say:
“A word of advice from this old lard:
Don't fold, spindle or mutilate your Christmas card!”