

History

Joseph D. Chapline: Technical Communication's Mozart

By Ed Malone

Did you know that the man who wrote the first user manual for a computer was one of the founders of the IEEE Professional Communication Society? In 1957, he helped to start the IRE's Professional Group on Engineering Writing and Speech (PGEWS), which eventually became the IEEE-PCS.

The First Computer Manual



Joseph D. Chapline, Jr.
Chairman

Joseph D. Chapline, who celebrated his 87th birthday last August, worked for the Eckert-Mauchly Computer Corporation in Philadelphia from 1947 to 1955 [1]. He was a lone technical writer when he started working on the documentation for the BINAC, an early electronic computer. Later, he was a manager of technical writers at EMCC and Philco [2].

About eight years ago, in a documentary film about John Mauchly's life, Chapline compared his writing of the *BINAC* manual to Mozart's composition of the opera *Don Giovanni*: "[Mozart] knew everything about it at once in his brain -- which is an amazing thing to say. But I had an experience just like it with that BINAC. I came out of there saying I know exactly how to write that book. And I sat down. I wrote it long hand [over a number of days]" [3]. (Chapline, by the way, published an English-language version of Mozart's *Regina Coeli* in 1958 [4]).

R. John Brockmann describes the BINAC manual as "the first computer user manual" [5, p. 40] and refers to Chapline as "Technical Communication's Odysseus" because "his work was the prototype for many technical communication

careers" [2, p. 313].

Active in PGEWS

The founders of PGEWS included Eleanor M. McElwee (1924-), a technical editor at RCA; Charles Meyer (1908-2001), her boss at RCA; Herbert B. Michaelson (1916 -), an editor at IBM; and Joseph Chapline (1920-), who by then had left EMCC for Philco [6]-[7]. Chapline -- along with several others -- attended a "founders' meeting" on March 19, 1957 [8].

During his time with the organization, Chapline accomplished the following:

- sat on the first administrative committee [9]
- presented a paper at the first national symposium in October 1957 [10]
- chaired PGEWS for one year [11]
- published several articles in the Transactions [10], [12]-[13]
- chaired a major colloquium and edited its proceedings [14]

Recollections of PGEWS

Recently, in our e-mail correspondence, Chapline made these comments about PGEWS:

We, the guiding force, felt that we were attacking something bigger than our poor effort; the group was supposed to stir the whole tribe of thousands of engineers into improving their style of writing.... It was well-intended, but my conclusion this far into the future was that our efforts were really superficial.

One of the main problems was that we couldn't get lots of engineers in a room and teach them... the typical engineers couldn't be made to realize that they didn't write very well... As a result we tended to look to the various 'cells' of the IEEE to sponsor local branches of the main society to work with small local groups in bettering the skill of writing. It was never a howling success. We did get a few such efforts to operate, but I always felt that our drive, though strong and clear, was not in tune with the typical electrical engineer [15].

More than 200 Courses

After he left Philco in the 1960s, Chapline developed an effective-writing course that he taught more than 200 times at such places as the Philadelphia Electric Company, the Aberdeen Proving Ground, Drexel University, RCA, and Campbell Soup. This 10-week course covered such topics as definitions, verbs, organization of material, editing and style, dictionaries, and language types, and the sentence. "A good sentence," Chapline wrote, "is like a taut string: it vibrates and builds tension" [16, p. 2].

"By This Still Hearth"

Tennyson wrote that "Old age hath yet his honour and his toil" [17, p. 417]. In his old age, Chapline builds fine furniture from exotic woods. Among his recent creations are two side tables and a case to display a friend's valuable book [18]. He is also the proud builder of approximately thirty organs, including a 15-foot-high pipe organ that sits majestically in his home in New Hampshire [19]-[20]. Listen to the organ at the end of the documentary film about Mauchly, and you will know how it sounds -- "some work of noble note" [17, p. 417].

Post Script

McElwee celebrated her 83rd birthday last May at her home in Oregon. She had not communicated with Chapline since the 1960s. A few months ago, I passed along Joe's e-mail address, and the two old friends have been "catching up on all those missing years" [21].

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