
WALL STREET JOURNAL 8/26/06
Remembrances / William C. Norris, Computing Innovator (1911-2006)

Super Computer: Tech Guru Tackled Social Ills, Too

*Control Data Founder Took
A Non-Wall Street Approach*

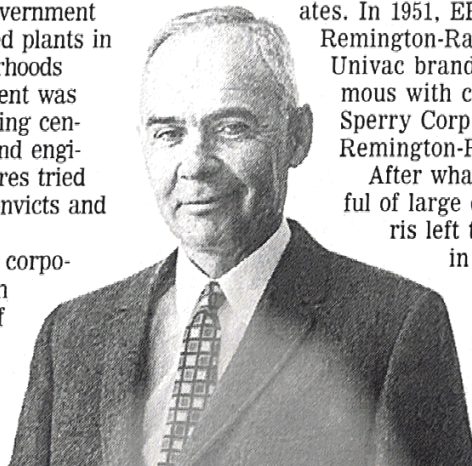
By DON CLARK
And STEPHEN MILLER

WILLIAM C. NORRIS built computers that helped address some of the world's toughest scientific problems. He also used his company to take on social problems, an idea that inspired admirers but irritated Wall Street.

Mr. Norris founded Control Data Corp., whose massive machines in the 1960s were more powerful than those of mighty International Business Machines Corp. He also pioneered computer services in areas such as education decades before the Internet made that commonplace. The company employed 60,000 by 1984, and helped turn the Minneapolis/St. Paul area into a technology hub.

A Nebraska farm boy who lived through the Depression, Mr. Norris's firsthand knowledge of hardship helped shape his belief that Control Data should help people the government couldn't. He located plants in inner-city neighborhoods where unemployment was rife. He built training centers for teachers and engineers. Other ventures tried to help farmers, convicts and entrepreneurs.

"I never met a corporate executive with a broader range of insights into the deficiencies of our political



economy," consumer activist Ralph Nader says of Mr. Norris, who died Aug. 21 at age 95.

The vision fit the spirit of the 1970s, when Control Data was growing briskly. By the mid-1980s, however, the company was beset by competition from Japan and other problems that led to the sale or closing of several businesses. The Control Data name would eventually die, though some of its computer services live on through Ceridian Corp., specializing in human-resources applications.

When his business faltered, Mr. Norris's social ventures came under stiff criticism from the financial community as a waste of time and money. "The external impact was extremely negative," recalls Robert Price, the longtime No. 2 man at Control Data who became CEO upon Mr. Norris's retirement in 1986.

Never a fan of Wall Street, Mr. Norris was unapologetic. "If people didn't scoff, I'd know immediately I was on the wrong track," he said in a 1980 interview, referring to criticism of a company-supported, small-scale farming venture.

Mr. Norris was educated in a one-room schoolhouse and later the University of Nebraska. He was introduced to calculating machines in World War II, helping the U.S. Navy decode enemy communications. In 1946, Mr. Norris and other veterans set up shop in St. Paul as Engineering Research Associates. In 1951, ERA was purchased by Remington-Rand Corp., whose Univac brand became synonymous with computers of the day. Sperry Corp. later purchased Remington-Rand.

After what he called "a bellyful of large companies," Mr. Norris left to form Control Data in 1957. The company began developing the fastest calculating machines on the market.

When IBM responded in part by promising bet-

1968. Mr. Norris emerged the victor 1973 settlement. But Big Blue would the winner in large commercial coners, while Control Data in the 1980s relegated to a high-end niche.

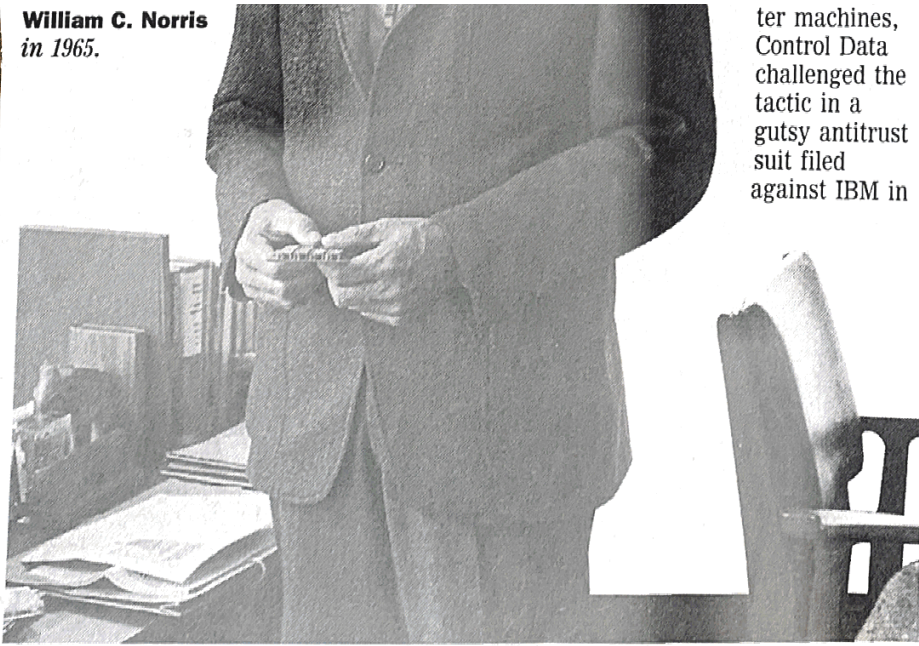
Though Control Data is sometimes described as a "big-iron" dinosaur doomed by the advent of personal computers, Mr. Price notes that Mr. No anticipated such pressures and pushed the company into computer services. He was way ahead of his time in understanding that computer hardware was going to become commoditized," Mr. Price says.

His ideas that generated the most headlines had a social or educational bent. Among them, Control Data Institutes, a network of vocational schools was set up around the U.S. and other tries. That effort dovetailed with what he called his greatest contribution—Plato computerized education system that began in 1963. Though never a moneymaker for Mr. Norris, Plato is widely as one of the first online communities where users could exchange messages and play games as well as learn.

After 29 years at Control Data, he founded the William C. Norris Institute now at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minn., which operates a capital fund focusing on socially beneficial products and services. Despite technical innovations, Mr. Norris simply, eschewing even computers, agreed to move from a modest St. Paul home only after insisting on energy-saving features, including a windmill heat the swimming pool.

■ **Robert Hoffman, a founder of National Lampoon who became a Dallas philanthropist and civic leader.** On three Harvard Lampoon editors who started the irreverent humor magazine in 1969, Mr. Hoffman sold National Lampoon in 1975 and joined his father's Texas bottling firm, which became Coca-Cola Bottling Group (Southwest Inc.). He also led the city's 30-year improvement blueprint adopted in 1999 and last year donated artworks val

William C. Norris
in 1965.



ter machines, Control Data challenged the tactic in a gutsy antitrust suit filed against IBM in

at more than \$150 million, to the D Museum of Art. Died Aug. 20 at age 59.

■ **James T. "Red" Hudson, founder of Hudson Foods, a beef and poultry processor that was once one of the nation's largest publicly held food processors.** In 1996, Hudson, Rogers, had \$1.7 billion in sales, 12,500 employees and 19 plants in 11 states. In 1996, when E. coli contamination was detected in hamburger meat from the firm's Nebraska plant, a major supplier of Burger King, Hudson issued a 2.1 million pound recall, the nation's largest ever beef recall. Shortly afterward, Hudson Foods was broken up and sold to Tyson Foods Inc. and IBP Inc. The episode helped increase support for regulating meat. Died Aug. 20 at age 81.

The William C. Norris Institute

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