

Oasis

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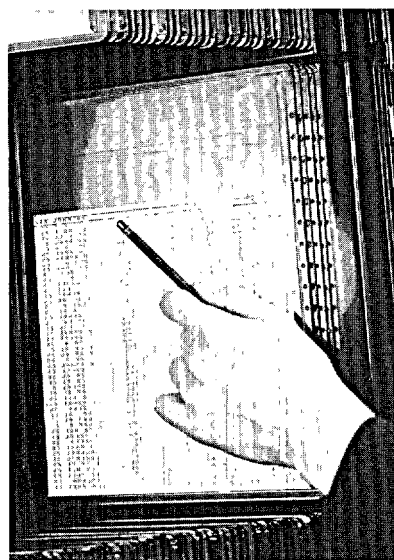
Inside, you can—

- Step back into history
- Get to know your payslip
- Meet the 'invisible people'
- See how SSAers save energy
- Travel with the 'snowbirds'

The Way We Were Filing Little Wooden Sticks

By George Staruch

(As told to an OASIS reporter)



IT'S BEEN GONE for almost 20 years now, but I don't mind telling anyone that I think the flexoline system was an excellent way to keep a record of the names and numbers of those receiving social security cards.

What was flexoline?

Actually, it was called the National Employee Index Flexoline File and was set up in 1937. Each record was printed on a separate, paper-covered wooden strip three-sixteenths of an inch wide and 9 inches long. The strip was almost as thin as the cover on a paperback.

Each little "stick" usually contained six separate items. The first entry was 3 numerals which had to do with the Russell Soundex System (a system where all surnames having the same basic consonants are grouped together). Next came the individual's surname, given name, middle initial, and social security number.

By 1958, there were 160 million of these strips in existence, and an average of 7 million new strips were being added each year as more people received social security cards. Over the years, the strips had been inserted-one by one and in their proper sequence with respect to the strips already in file-in double-faced steel

panels. The panels were hung in special racks (or stands), and each page of strips appeared much as the pages of a large book. I believe we had 750 steel, A-frame stands.

Except for a brief period on the day shift, I worked with the flexoline files in the Candler Building on the night shift from 1946 until they were destroyed in 1959. There were eight units on the night shift, and we worked well together.

Our supervisor would bring in great rolls of strips and rip off about 100 or so at a time for each clerk to file. (Another section-Establishment-received the applications for social security numbers from the field offices, keyed in the information, and ran it off on strips.) Each of us was responsible for posting records in a certain alphabetical portion of the file. Of course, we all used the entire file when we had to search for something. For instance, when a person who lost his card and couldn't recall his number would come into a district office to get a duplicate, we'd be asked to come up with his number.

The flexoline files were located behind a screen fence that was about 7 or 8 feet high, and the area was off limits to everyone else. That was to en-

sure that the records were kept confidential. There was a lot of good-natured "razzing" from the "other side" and sometimes peanuts would be tossed over the fence to let us know that we were considered the peanut gallery. We didn't mind because it was all in fun, and it did a lot to relieve the tension when workloads were heavy.

Filing strips of wood may not have been the most exciting job in the world, but it had to be done.

It was amazing how some people would help the newer or slower employees speed up the filing so that the job got done. Some of those people constantly broke speed records, filing as many as 300 "sticks" an hour. There was a good deal of competition among the units because the one that got the best statistics-most strips filed, least errors, and so forth-received the weekly award for best unit.

The employees on the night shift were a great bunch of people. They seemed glad to have a job and strived to do it well. I certainly don't want to step on anyone's toes, but employees on the day shift-although nice-seemed more sedate and perhaps a bit clannish.

Although we worked hard during our shift, we liked to socialize after work. On Friday nights after work, many of us would go just a few blocks away to the "Little Italy" section of Baltimore and have dinner together. There were always dances and parties going on at the Dug Out nightclub at Falls-way and Front Streets, or at the Emerson Hotel, and people on the night shift often got together at these affairs.

I spent some of my best working years assigned to flexoline. I guess we all knew that the National Employee Index was going to have to be changed eventually. It was just getting too big. There were rumors that the flexoline files would be done away with long before their end actually

came. We had made much progress in the field of electronic bookkeeping, and they were talking about this big complex to be built out in the suburbs to house Social Security. Apparently, there wouldn't be enough room for flexoline.

In early 1958, we got the word. The entire Employee Index would be converted to microfilm and would be updated periodically by means of electronic data processing equipment. The conversion began in August, and by spring 1959, some 1.3 million panels of strips had been microfilmed.

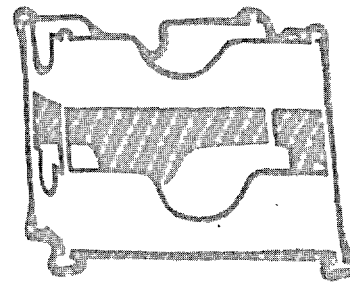
We moved out to Woodlawn when the new building was ready. After a year or so, I had the opportunity to move downtown again, but I chose to accept a promotion instead and have been at Woodlawn ever since.

As I said earlier, I guess we all knew it was to be. But somehow, I never really thought they'd take the sticks off the rack. □

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



GEORGE STARUCH, Accounts and Claims Investigations Clerk, BDP . . . began working at SSA in 1946 as a clerk in BDP . . . also operated teletype equipment linking headquarters with field installations and with the Railroad Retirement Board in Chicago . . . holds degrees in business law and business administration from the University of Baltimore . . . hobbies include participation in all types of sports-particularly bowling, basketball, and softball. Played softball with SSA's American Legion Post team at the time they won the State title . . . also enjoys dancing.



In basket

(Continued from page 2)

At this point, the entire audience started to hoot and holler and shower me with pennies, shouting "Uncle Sam needs these more than we do." When the demonstration subsided, I completed my talk, the crowd applauded good naturedly, the pennies were retrieved and deposited in the Club's Kitty, and I was led down to the refreshments for my fill of ice cream and cake.

-EDWIN FAULHABER

Asst. Regional Rep (Ret.)
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Editor:

In the October issue of the OASIS there was an article entitled "Tips on Dealing with the Deaf, Blind." The article was a good one for the most part, and I, as a blind SR, was especially interested to read that someone (congratulations to Dennis Fisher) is writing about the relationship between employees who are and who are not handicapped.

In the section of the article regarding Norman Dubner, the "elder statesman of blind employees," I was rather shocked to find some of what he said reprinted in the magazine. May I address myself to Mr. Dubner? Yes, Mr. Dubner, I, too, attempt to deal with the anxieties of sighted people humorously, and try to put these people at ease. What disturbs me about your comment is that you say "I didn't have all the mannerisms other blind people do." Who are "other blind people?" Aren't you generalizing, and aren't you guilty of the same error we so deplore in sighted people, or in any group of people, when they generalize about another group? This strikes me a bit