How Far We (Haven’t) Come

Backup and memory were on everyone’s minds in 1988. Who knew they’d be the same topics we’d be grappling with today?

by Vince Ciotti

The following observations are from the November 1988 issue of "Computers in Healthcare" — a precursor to HCI.

Featured Ad — IBM, the King Kong in hardware of the '80s, ran a two-page ad announcing the new AS/400 mini-computer. The successor to the popular System 38, the AS/400 was used by dozens of pioneering vendors for ancillary and total HIS systems. By running the RPG programming language on IBM's OS/400 operating system, the AS/400 offered quite a breakthrough in price/performance, putting competitors on notice that IBM was not satisfied with dominating mainframe and PC markets alone. For proof of its modernity, even today, about a thousand hospitals still use this basic workhorse as a platform, which IBM has modernized and renamed several times, running software from such leading HIS vendors as:

- McKesson’s “Series” — which has probably had more names than any other HIS (Dynamic Control, Delta, Series 4000, etc) running at 300-plus clients.

- Siemens’ “MedSeries IV” — acquired by SMS from GTE, which had acquired it from its author, Intermountain Health Care (IHC), with 300-plus sites today.

- HMS from Nashville, Tenn. — its “Monitor” system now features Java front-end code for a user-friendly GUI. This system is also in use today at more than 300 hospitals.

Feature Article: “Exploring the Benefits of Medical Record Automation” — The University Health Center (UHC) in Burlington, Vt. wrote about its project with nearby IDX Corp., a purveyor of physician billing systems back then, to develop a “problem-oriented medical record.” The authors point out that little had been done to automate data capture in the physician practice and note the benefits of a computerized medical record, such as electronic exchange of lab data and conversion of radiology transcription. The last sentence summarizes the project as a “very complex and highly subjective capital investment.” The UHC project didn’t go very far, but maybe Judy Faulkner read it and got the idea for Epic’s ambulatory EMR?

Contracts: Major deals of the month (20 years ago):

- CliniCom — Announced the installation of a bedside system at Childrens Hospital in Orange, Calif. CliniCom started as a bedside medication verification system in the mid-'80s, using bar coding through a device that looked like an ironing board. Acquired by HBCO, it morphed into a nursing documentation system under the Pathways moniker, becoming Horizon for CliniCom and HBCO.

- SMS’ Turnkey Systems Division — Announced the sale to Multicare of Tacoma, Wash., of its Allegra system. Allegra began as Computer Synergy in San Francisco and was sold on a DG platform and acquired by SMS in the mid-'80s. Originally called “The Spirit Choice”, it sold well until its sunset in the late '90s. An entrepreneur named Rick Opry offered maintenance to the Allegra clients. Today, he offers a stunning new “Sapphire” system through his firm IntraNexus.

PC News:

- Magnetic Tape Controller Card — Overland Data announced a nine-track device to give IBM PS/2 users the chance to read or write nine-track tape from mainframe or minicomputers. How could the puny memory of a PS/2 handle such a flood of data? Read on:

- Memory Expansion Board — Announced by Computer Peripherals Inc., featured a full-length circuit board with an attached card to increase the memory of an IBM PC, XT, AT or PS/2 up to a whopping four megabytes. Wow, when will these servers ever replace mainframes?

Backup and File Management — In case these 4 megabytes of data on your PC didn't seem as secure as they were on your big old mainframe or mini locked behind the data center’s doors, the Finot Group announced version 2.0 of “KeepTrack Plus” to protect hard disk systems against loss by routinely backing them up to secure media such as diskettes. Question is, what's a "diskette?"