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on the
lighter
side

Actuarial antiques

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Do you brake for garage sales or shop at flea markets for nostalgic memorabilia? Actuaries, through the years, have collected artifacts that may be considered junk to some but are “junque” to them.

Recently, a discussion on Actuaries Online revealed several bulletin board subscribers’ treasures. From slide rules to old PCs, these artifacts of the past grace office walls and desk tops and occupy dusty shelves in storage bins and basements.

In Vienna, Virginia, at Milliman and Robertson, Inc., Adrien LaBombarde has a 20-year-old retired hand stamp, entitled “Assumptions,” on his desk. The stamp is embossed with categories for Mortality, Interest, Normal Form, Funding Method, Turn over, Salary Scale, and D.B. Interest.

Alan Finkelstein, of Swiss Re Life Company America in New York, and John Brake, Mercantile and General Reinsurance Company in Toronto, still have their trusted slide rules. Joanne Janssen, consulting actuary, Livonia, Michigan, says she has not used a slide rule since her high school days. But, she would treasure a giant classroom slide rule like those her teachers used for instruction. So, if you chance upon one, call Joanne; she may be interested. Don’t ask Matthew Hassett,



Photo supplied by Northwestern Mutual

Like rare copies of the Gutenberg Bible, this antique instrument at Northwestern Mutual is one of Elizur Wright’s four remaining arithmeters. The others are at the Smithsonian, the Society of Actuaries, and New England Mutual. Wright invented it in the late 1860s and manufactured 15 or 16, which sold for \$600. The arithmeter is a variation of the cylindrical slide rule and was the first device used in the mechanization of actuarial work.

associate professor at Arizona State University, to part with his six-foot slide rule he rescued from the trash can in the 1970s. “I use it for fun when I teach logs to freshmen. They like it, but it’s an awkward thing for an aging professor to carry to class.”

Harry Panjer, professor of actuarial science at the University of Waterloo and director of research and education of the SOA Foundation, has an old Marchand mechanical calculator and claims it still works. Finkelstein also recalls using obsolete calculating tools from the 1980s, of which two are in a Smithsonian Museum of American History exhibit: the TI SR-50, Apple computers II+

and IIe, the TRS 80 Model 3, and Kaypro and IBM PCs.

Mike Rice, First Penn-Pacific Life Insurance, Hoffman Estates, Ill., visited a local computer store whose owner has a “museum” of obsolete machines. “Yes, in all their glory, sat such machines as the Trash-80, the CoCo, the Apple II, the TI — all equipped with state-of-the-art amber monochrome monitors. Data cartridges, cassette tapes, an immense external floppy drive, with a 300-baud modem hooked up on one. But the piece de’ resistance was an IMSAI 8080:

huge case (made of 1/8” steel), front plate covered with lights and switches, no disk drives, ancient 50 pound keyboard, only 8K of RAM.”

