

# Still a Woman's Work

by Margie Wylie

It's hard to believe the polite little tea party held in Santa Clara (California, USA) early this June was a gathering of women technologists. From the report released at the third annual Women in Technology International (WITI) conference, you'd think women who work in the computer industry might have more to be angry about. Women aren't getting their due in the computer industry, today or in the annals of history.

The technology sector pays almost double what jobs in other U.S. industries do, but only about a third of the lucrative computer sector jobs go to women. Even when a woman lands a technology job, on average, she makes 25 percent less than her male counterpart, according to a study released at the WITI conference.

The whole conference felt a little other-worldly to someone who grew up in the glory of the women's movement. Like my mother, who always admonished me to beat the boys but keep my legs crossed while doing it, WITI attendees seemed preoccupied with getting ahead without offending or appearing "too militant."

That's what the first programmers did, and history forgot them.

In 1946 the world's first electronic computer, the ENIAC, was programmed exclusively by women. In fact, it was they who coined the term "programming." This year, WITI honored the forgotten ENIAC programmers, Jean Bartik, Betty Holberton and Marlyn Meltzer. The award was accepted on behalf of the six women "com-

puters" who strung cables, and eventually wrote the first lines of code, developing languages like Fortran. Now in their 70s and 80s, these women's elan and *esprit de corps* seemed out of place at the WITI event.



Maybe it's just a luxury of age, but their clear, tough talk, their lust for life, and their utter disregard for the establishment and its foolishness made me fall in love with them. Bartik and Holberton, both brilliant mathematicians who had long computer careers after the ENIAC, admitted freely that throughout their careers they kept their heads down. "We were doing everything we could to try to make the men look good," Holberton said.

In accepting her CEO recognition award, Autodesk's Carol Bartz said that women are sometimes their own worst enemies. I'd rephrase that to say that we are often one another's worst enemies, in the most thoughtless ways.

We don't often think of ourselves as a group with common in-

terests worth sticking out our collective necks to win. It's a sentiment that women's groups from the suffrage movement to the National Organization for Women have fought against.

I asked several women why they had come to the conference. Most said, "I'm looking for a new job," or "my company sent me." They were quick to add that their companies were perfectly even-handed with women, while glancing nervously at my tape recorder.

There was no talk at this ostensibly international conference of making more opportunities for Indian or Irish women, or anyone else but American women, for that matter. No mention of a single agenda item that WITI should fight for, not even equal pay for equal work, though there were plenty who said that we ought to somehow encourage girls in math and science. It could be that everyone at the conference was truly lucky, well-paid and well-regarded, but I suspect it was more the numbing effect of corporatocracies at work. Women learn early to keep their heads down and "work the system." And the tenor of the conference reinforced the notion that in the corporate world, it's every woman for herself.

Maybe that's true, but I'd like to hope that today's women in technology could organize to change the system, not just work it. With so little to hold them together, you have to wonder how history, and the future, will treat the accomplishments of this group of women.

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