Richard E. Merwin, 1922-1981
A Eulogy

It is a rare human being who can accomplish much in life and yet manage to kindle both respect and love in all those whose lives he touches. Too often, the cost of dedication and achievement is paid for dearly—in the precious coin of human relationships. It is a private, difficult struggle with which we all, more or less imperfectly, must contend.

Dick Merwin was one of those unique men who always seemed able to balance the rigors of a technical discipline and the demands of his profession on the one hand against the gentler but deeper claims of a full, rich personal life on the other. His pioneering contributions to computer science and engineering are well known to all of us in the field and are amply documented elsewhere. What is not so well known—except by those of us who were fortunate enough to work with him—is his warm, genuine personality.

I first knew Dick in 1975 when he took over the editorship of the IEEE Transactions on Computers from Bob Short. The first time I saw his patience and sense of humor put to the test was soon after he assumed his new responsibilities, when he had to deal with an overburdened and seemingly intransigent associate editor. Though he had resigned, the editor not only refused (apparently) to surrender the backlog of some dozen or so unrefereed papers still in his possession but also ignored Dick’s phone calls. As I remember, Dick finally had to call on the gentleman personally to retrieve the papers. It turned out that the former associate editor, who really had performed commendably except for this one incident, had simply gotten overcommitted—as all of us are wont to do. The remarkable thing about it was that Dick got the job done without losing his patience—and without alienating anybody.

That same year, Dick chaired Compon Fall—the second one ever held. We had all been encouraged by the success of the first Compon Fall, which Merlin Smith had initiated and chaired the year before. Even so, we were nervous. It was the first major new conference series to be launched by the society after the original Compon in San Francisco. It represented a significant drain on the society’s manpower resources—both volunteer and staff—as well as a nontrivial financial exposure. But Dick had that peculiar ability to attract good people and infuse them with his own enthusiasm. The team he put together that year brought it off without a hitch, and the nucleus of people he established—and subsequently led as chairman of the Compon Fall Standing Committee—has carried on the tradition ever since.

I probably came to know Dick and his wife Sally-Ann best in 1978 when we traveled together as part of the IEEE delegation to the People’s Republic of China. I remember vividly the scene at the Dragon Well Commune, when he seemed to take so much delight as the kindergartners flocked around him following their presentation before our group. The little Chinese children, for their part, appeared completely captivated by Dick’s charm. Many times during that trip, Dick’s gentle wit and good nature were all that stood between us and the difficult situations that can so easily develop among tired travelers.

In the brief messages and reminiscences that follow, examples of his graciousness and humanity abound. Indeed, if there is one quality that emerges above all others when I think of Dick, it is graciousness under pressure. It is a quality we would all do well to imitate.

We’ll miss you, Dick.

Oscar N. Garcia
Dick and I started together at the Moore School of Electrical Engineering at the University of Pennsylvania in September 1940. In the ensuing years we sought each other’s advice many times. For example, before proposing to my intended bride, Edith, I made it a point to introduce her to Dick and his wife Sally-Ann.

After returning from the Navy following World War II, Dick joined the Eniac staff. He was assigned the job of moving the machine from the Moore School and installing it at Aberdeen Proving Ground. Everyone expected the job to be extremely difficult—and some even believed it was impossible. No electronic device of that size and complexity had ever been disassembled, shipped, and reassembled before. But Dick and his two technicians assembled and debugged the machine in short order—all 18,000 tubes of it. This was the first delivery of an electronic digital computer to a customer. Dick’s approach to the task was characteristically low-key and matter-of-fact.

The ability Dick demonstrated on Eniac so attracted Nick Metropoulis, who headed the Computer Science Department at Los Alamos and had been one of Eniac’s earliest users, that Nick hired him as chief engineer of the Maniac project in early 1949. Then, two years later, IBM made an offer Dick couldn’t refuse, and he and Sally-Ann returned to Poughkeepsie. There they bought a 125-acre farm with two tenant houses. They built a pond on it, raised hay and fattened cattle, and provided their cited friends with a wonderful place to relax. I remember seeing Dick on weekends: he was truly a working farmer, muddy boots and all, hauling hay in a rickety old pickup, and worrying about the health of his cattle.

In the mid-1960’s, Dick was loaned by IBM to the government to serve as advisor to the general who ran the ABM program. The software on this program was immense by any standard. Dick pioneered in software engineering and sponsored exploratory programs in this field.

After several renewals of what was supposed to be a one-year leave of absence, IBM finally told Dick he had to come back or else they couldn’t guarantee a career path for him. He chose, after agonizing debate, to sever his relationship with the company. He continued with the ABM program until, by agreement between the US and the Soviets, the program was closed down. It was also about this time that he became active in the IEEE—a phase of his life described by other contributors.

It always amazed me how Dick was able to keep his technical capabilities honed to a fine edge despite his heavy administrative workload. This was true as he rose through the ranks at IBM, as well as during his period with the ABM program, where he had to supervise several contracts at once.

The industry has lost a pioneer, and we have all lost a beloved friend.

Theodore H. Bonn

Dick Merwin was a lovable man. His transactions, professional and personal, were marked by a warm regard for the people around him and a deep spirit of courtesy that sprang from the fact that he liked people. I was first associated with Dick on the Stretch project where he was manager of engineering under Project Manager Steve Dunwell. The Stretch project was extremely ambitious, and Dick brought to it a gift for encouragement and a faith that the challenging goals could be met. A product of the first computer era, he early developed a good perspective of the opportunities and directions opened by transistors.

In his later roles at IBM, in the Ballistic Missile Defense Program, and in his continuing important work through the years with the Computer Society, Dick displayed the same qualities. His professional work was marked by vigor and enthusiasm. Whatever he was doing, he did forcefully and spared no effort. He cheered and encouraged his co-workers no matter how difficult the task or how strenuous the circumstances at the moment.

We shall miss him, and our hearts go out in sympathy to his family.

Fred Brooks

I first met Dick in 1956 at IBM Poughkeepsie. He had just completed a project to build one of IBM’s first core memory machines and now headed the circuit design group to which I was assigned. Dick had a special kind of leadership: rather than intimidating his people, he made them want to do things. He could gain great insight with his seemingly naive questions and humorous reparte, frequently unraveling very complex issues in the process. He learned by questioning all around him—and he always listened to the answers.

Truly, he saw his fellow professionals as friends, and he served them with a special kind of leadership. Dick was a friend, and in a most important way, he was a teacher—not simply of a technology—but of human understanding.

Michael J. Flynn

I first met Dick Merwin when I joined IBM in 1955. Dick headed the IBM Poughkeepsie Circuit Design Department, a group that was instrumental in developing the first transistor circuits to go into production computers.

His approach to solving circuit problems was a combination of the theoretical and the pragmatic. He seemed to have a natural bent for teaching system designers who were converting either relay or tube systems to transistors. He understood the practical problems they had to deal with as well as the advantages the new technology would bring to them.

Naturally, many engineers were reluctant to venture into the new and unfamiliar world of transistor technology. I can still hear him kidding us:

"Aw, you don’t want to use those unreliable old circuits! Why don’t you try these new goodies we dreamed up for you?"

Rex Rice

Dick, we first met at the Microprogramming Workshop in Buffalo that Bob Rosin chaired. What was that—Micro 5? Then the following May, at the highly successful Sigplan/Sigmicro interface meeting, we shared a room together at Harriman House. That first night you were too exhausted to carouse with us and instead went to bed early. The next day you gave your paper on Fortran enhancements through microprogramming. Isn’t that amazing how years later we still haven’t taken advantage of microprogramming to improve language performance?

Soon your gentle, sensitive, yet persuasive personality was making itself felt. You took over the running of Sigmicro. Those were lean years, remember? If it weren’t for your efforts, the group might have expired. You were the chief representative at the workshop in Chicago, and there were only about 50 people in attendance.

You said the only thing to do was to go out and drink all weekend. But then you resurrectedSigmicro. You chaired the organization and even edited the newsletter. We had better years after that.

We appreciated your efforts. In 1979 we gave you the Sigmicro Award for Outstanding Contributions to Microprogramming. Typically, you accepted it modestly. You were a very gentle, compassionate, and sensitive man.

So long, Dick.

Stanley Habib
I remember the summer of 1951 as being very hot, probably because two weeks of that summer were spent in a small, stuffy, grade school classroom in Poughkeepsie. IBM had hired a number of new employees in the spring of 1951 and we were being educated in IBM products. This is how I came to know Dick Merwin.

I was impressed with Dick from the first day we met. Card equipment and computers were totally new to me, whereas Dick had both practical and theoretical experience in this field. I was there because I had a gut feeling that the field had tremendous potential, whereas Dick was already an experienced professional.

Dick was a warm, friendly person, so he was easy to get to know. On many occasions he was able to answer my questions about computer circuits, Boolean algebra, codes, etc., and somehow he always had the time to answer in depth these questions which to him were old hat. We got to know each other socially as well as professionally. Dick’s wife Sally-Ann and my wife Jeanne became very good friends, and our children established a close relationship. We spent many enjoyable evenings together discussing an extensive range of subjects.

Dick had a number of important assignments at IBM. He rapidly advanced to project engineer in charge of engineering for Electronic Information Storage Systems in 1954. As a result of this work, he published a paper in the December 1956 issue of the *IRE Transactions on Electronic Computers* entitled, “The IBM 705 EDPM Memory System.” Later, Dick became engineering manager of the Stretch computer, a role that again put him in the forefront of computer development. During this period Dick studied at night and on weekends and obtained, in 1960, an MSEE degree from Syracuse University. He followed this accomplishment with a PhD in 1965 from the University of Pennsylvania under an IBM academic fellowship. While performing these outstanding accomplishments Dick and Sally-Ann were raising four beautiful children.

The IEEE, the Computer Society, the computer field, and his many friends will sorely miss Dick. We all wish him well in his new career. I think of your passing as a GOTO rather than an ABEND, old friend.

Joe Logue

I first met Dick Merwin 14 years ago when he was in charge of the data processing effort for the Safeguard Ballistic Missile Defense Program and I was the new kid on the block. Over the following years, Dick made numerous contributions to the BMD community as well as to computer science and engineering. He was largely responsible for utilizing commercial machines in the next-generation BMD system, and he was an avid supporter of software engineering. During the early days I also knew Dick as a tireless supporter of the IEEE Computer Society. I truly believe that his election as president meant as much to him as any of his past professional or personal achievements. During his years at The George Washington University, Dick continued to support the BMD program with research in microprogramming and distributed data processing.

All of the above is just one side of Dick Merwin, however. He was also the valued friend who loved to visit my country home in Alabama. He liked to walk through the woods and fields, and on occasion would talk about the years that he, Sally-Ann, and the children spent on their farm in New York State. You were never left to doubt how much he loved the place. There was also the Dick Merwin that had time to take youngsters on the cog railway to Pike’s Peak when their father was too busy.

What can one say when he loses a friend and associate like Dick Merwin? I know that over the past several days those that knew him have reflected many times on how they touched their lives. He has certainly touched mine, and because of that the memory of him will always be with me.

C. R. Vick

I was greatly saddened to learn of the recent death of Computer Society President Richard E. Merwin. I know that I express the feeling of a number of people in saying that Dick will be greatly missed.

Many people are aware of Dick’s numerous contributions to the computer profession. After being the world’s first electronic computer field engineer (when he installed the Eniac machine), Dick held several industry, government, and university positions. He also made significant contributions to the IEEE and ACM professional societies. But in my mind, Dick’s contributions transcended these accomplishments. It was in his selfless dealing with other people that his true accomplishments should be recognized. Long before he began his association with a university as his principal occupation, he served as a visiting professor. As a teacher he worked closely with students and encouraged them to pursue professional activities of special interest. He guided people in their professional pursuits, and he played an important role in the professional development of several people. As a professional he organized conferences, supported professional activities, and gave presentations, all on a wide variety of technical subjects.

Yes, Dick will be greatly missed. But his influence on organizations as well as individuals will long be remembered and appreciated.

Tomlinson G. Rauscher

I first knew Dick when he and I attended the University of Pennsylvania. However, I didn’t really get to know him well until we worked together for the Computer Society. I remember the enthusiasm with which he took over the job of editor of the *IEEE Transactions on Computers*, his first major Computer Society responsibility. His father had run a newspaper in East Palestine, Ohio, and Dick always had a special feeling in his heart for journalism. That may have been one of the reasons he launched into his new responsibilities with such relish.

“Journalism’s in my blood,” he used to say.

We have lost a good friend, and the profession has lost a true pioneer.

Dick B. Simmons

I worked with Dick Merwin for many years both in Computer Society projects and in private business. Dick always seemed relaxed and genial, despite extreme pressures, and yet he was always productive and to the point. I remember once in particular when he was serving as general chairman for Compcon 80. Dick, Program Chairman Carl Davis, and I worked until 2:00 am finalizing the conference program in order to meet the publication deadline. We were all very tired, but Dick’s good humor and quick wit kept our spirits buoyed up, and we finished our work in time to meet the deadline. Time and again he displayed these qualities.

Dick’s technical expertise was very broad. Many times during technical discussions he displayed a range of knowledge that was impressive and sometimes surprising to me.

Dick was an extraordinary worker and a true friend. His absence will be felt by many people.

Stephen S. Yau
We have lost a great professional society supporter, a remarkable human being, and a wonderful person. To many of us Dick Merwin will remain one of the few persons to whom these words can genuinely be applied. Whatever volunteer task he undertook for the Computer Society—from minor support roles to the presidency—he always devoted his full energy to the task at hand. And yet, he never lost his sense of humor. That’s probably why working with him was always fun as well as productive.

Dick’s contributions to professional activities were often at the expense of personal income. When he worked for the society, he spent his own time—and for a man who earns part of his bread through consulting, time is money. In spite of this, he rarely turned down a request to serve.

Dick Merwin started his Computer Society participation in 1974. He had learned that we were initiating the Compocon Fall conference series in his home area, Washington, DC, so he contacted the newly appointed organizer. His opening words were something like, “I understand you need some help.” To my knowledge Dick never had to volunteer again: we never let him get away.

Dick’s diligent and personal approach to his duties often led to his being asked to do several jobs simultaneously. In 1976, and until his death, he served on the society’s Governing Board, and in 1977 he began service on the Executive Committee. He was responsible for conferences and meetings in 1977 and was an IEEE division director in 1978 and 1979. In 1980 he was the general chairman of Compocon. He was drafted to be society president for 1981.

While holding a couple of these assignments, he was approached to serve as our program chairman for the 1979 National Computer Conference, a major undertaking. After much urging on our part he finally, reluctantly agreed. I remember when he accepted the job, he told me he had two provisos: (1) that I help him explain to Sally-Ann, and (2) that he might have to step down if he had to find a job. Luckily for the Computer Society, Sally-Ann had long since learned to grin and bear it—and The George Washington University kindly furnished a job providing food for our program chairman’s table.

Dick’s legacy to us is a stronger Computer Society upon which we can continue to build.

Merlin Smith

Dick always had the ability to laugh at himself—a quality that put other people at ease. One such event that stands out in my mind occurred just last year during the negotiations between the Computer Society and the National Computer Graphics Association regarding their possible co-sponsorship of our new quarterly IEEE Computer Graphics and Applications. Dick and I met informally with several NCUGA members late the night before, at their conference hotel in Washington, D.C. Following our meeting we enjoyed one or two glasses of wine together before Dick finally dropped me off at my hotel on his way home to Georgetown. I was scheduled on the NCUGA Board agenda the following morning to discuss the possible cooperative effort, and Dick told me he would pick me up in front of the hotel lobby at 8:20 am.

I arrived at the pickup point at 8:00 am in case Dick might be a little early. Eight-twenty came, then 8:30. I began to get nervous. My slot on the agenda had been estimated at 9:00 am.

At 8:35 I called a cab. I ran up the stairs at the NCUGA conference hotel to the mezzanine parlor where the board meeting was going on, and walked a little breathlessly into the room, looking flustered no doubt.

There, seated against the wall with a puzzled look on his face, was Dick!

“Where have you been?” he whispered hoarsely to me as I sat down next to him. “We’ve been calling all over the place for you. I was about to send somebody to look for you.”

“Where have I been? Where have you been?” I said, after I caught my breath.

Then he remembered. I’ll never forget the sheepish smile that broke over his face.

I’m sure the NCUGA Board members thought we were a strange pair to be representing the Computer Society, as the two of us sat and laughed between ourselves. We got many a laugh afterwards as we recounted that story.

The last time I spoke to Dick was on a Wednesday, after the Sunday when he was released from the hospital. I called to see if there was anything I or anyone could do for him.

“Now,” he said, “I feel fine, considering everything. I’m going to take it easy for a while. I probably won’t be going back to work for a few weeks.”

That was on a Wednesday. Two days later he was back in his office. Work was simply too much a part of his life. What a beloved friend we have all lost.

Tse-yun Fung