An Interview with
Alfred Doughty Cavenaugh
OH 245

Conducted by Anne Frantilla
on
2 September 1985
Sausalito, CA

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Center for the History of Information Processing
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Alfred Doughty Cavenaugh Interview
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Abstract

Cavanaugh discusses the work of his grandfather, A. J. Doughty, with William Seward Burroughs and the Burroughs Adding Machine Company.

Subject include: A.J. Doughty's advancement within Burroughs management and his interaction with Stanish Backus.
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Interviewee: Alfred Doughty Cavanaugh  
Interviewer: Anne Frantilla  
Place: A.D. Cavanaugh's home in Sausalito, California  
Date: September 2, 1985

AF: Do you remember any stories that were passed down about your grandfather working with William Seward Burroughs since he was reported to have been his apprentice when he worked on the adding machine?

ADC: I remember what was the famous story, because he used to tell it about himself, about being locked up in the plant for three days. He was doing the machining while Burroughs was doing whatever corrections and so on he had to make to the design of the machine. He told that story over and over again and my mother used to tell the story. That was the single famous family story. One thing that occurs to me and that was that through his whole life he was very proud of having been a machinist.

AF: How did he end up working for the Boyer Machine Company? You said his father was an organist?

ADC: His father had died, that's how I heard the story, and somebody told me, it may have been my grandfather, that he left 35c for the family, all seven kids or whatever there were. He felt that he had to go to work. I noticed in his written biographies that he finished the eighth grade and I remember him saying he finished the seventh grade, he hadn't finished grade school. I think that precipitated that he felt he had to go to work. How he got the job I really don't know. Apparently that's where he met Mr. Boyer originally. He was a machinist there, and I gather that Burroughs had simply come to Boyer with this idea and my grandfather, this is part of the deduction, was assigned to work with him. Does that make
ADC: (cont.) sense to you?

AF: Yes. One of the stories is that Burroughs asked Boyer for someone to work with him and Boyer said, 'Well, I don't have a man but I have a boy.' So, apparently he wasn't very old when he started working there.

ADC: The number 17 fits somehow. It wasn't too surprising because he had a very natural talent for machinery and some math talent. He developed his own system of calculus, without even a grade school education. He could never explain to people how he could do it but he could solve problems in calculus and he could do cube roots in his head. There was some kind of natural talent there which he picked up somewhere in his genes. He like the work too. He really enjoyed working with his hands. That's one of my memories of him is really his hands. Of course, as a kid we were drawn to his hand because he was missing that thumb which he lost in a punch press. He was always working with his hands, in the garden, explaining things. We'd go down to his workshop frequently and he'd show me how to work a jigsaw. In some ways I remember his hands almost as much as I remember his face.

AF: You said he took a correspondence course for his grammar and reading. How old was he when he did this? Was it in the late '90's?

ADC: Yes, he must have been 30 by then. Judging by those notebooks, a few of them were earlier than that, there was nothing basically wrong with his grammar. My guess is that he had become self-conscious about it. By that time, he was obviously making more important decisions in the Company, and
ADC: (cont.) probably dealing more with educated people. He never said anything about it but I suspect that it was something that bothered him. By that time he had married too and his wife and her mother had a college education.

AF: When did he get married?

ADC: It's in the biography, I think it's the early '90's.

AF: So he moved with the Boyer Machine Shop or the Chicago Pneumatic Company to Detroit? And shortly afterward he switched over to Burroughs Adding Machine Company?

ADC: I can't help you too much with that, you know more about the connection more than I do.

AF: You had a brochure about his leaving from 1906.

ADC: 1906 was when he left. I'm not sure of the relationship between the two companies but I think that's just a factor of my being a kid, he just never bothered to explain it. Burroughs came up in the early 1900's and he kind of came with them. And then he was with them until he retired in 1913.

AF: Was he close to the Boyer family?

ADC: I don't know if he was close to the family or even close to Boyer in personal ways although he always talked about him very fondly. But again, that's a deduction.
ADC (cont.): I suppose it makes sense, because Boyer in a sense was the start of the whole thing and my grandfather was just a kid when he went to work for him. If you're talking about people that he was close to or that were close to him, there were other people, like (unintelligible)....

AF: Do you remember anything he ever talked about with respect to his years as factory manager?

ADC: That's a little bit of a blank. If he had possibly been younger when I knew him, I probably would have picked up more from him, but he wasn't and we were real little kids during the 30's. He was kind of at the end of his career.

AF: Do you know why he retired in 1913?

ADC: No, and that's kind of a mystery. There was some kind of dissatisfaction with what was going on at Burroughs at the time but I don't really know what it was related to. But that was a deliberate thing and he was gone for ten years. By that time, because he had some original Burroughs stock, he was independently well off, he didn't have to work. They asked him to go back in 1923. I probably heard about this but I really don't remember it in any kind of coherent form. Except I do remember that there was a real dissatisfaction with Burroughs at that time. I suspect you'll probably find out from different sources about what was going on at the time. That's the only thing that I can offer is that he talked about it and I was very much aware that there was a real dissatisfaction.
AF: How did he spend his time between 1913 and 1923?

ADC: Well, 1913, of course, he took the whole year off and went to Europe and took his family. So that took care of one year right there. That was kind of a classic thing to do. I suspect he would have done that several times, but of course World War I broke out. I'm really not too sure. I don't know of any specific things that he did, I don't think he was particularly active in business, but I haven't heard anything and I don't know...I certainly haven't seen any papers from that period. My suspicion is that he puttered. He had the personality for puttering and enjoying it a lot.

AF: You said he was interested in art and photography?

ADC: Yes. By that time he was buying paintings. He was quite interested in photography. I remember an old crystal radio set, it goes back probably to that time, he was fascinated with it, which he demonstrated to me. That's my guess. Gardening, too, he loved to garden. Some people are like that. Again, it goes back to his being a mechanic rather than an executive. I never thought of him, and I don't think he ever thought of himself, as an administrator or a manager at all. He like to be a mechanic, he liked to work with his hands, he very much enjoyed making money and he loved the company. It's the kind of situation that doesn't happen any more.

AF: So when they asked him to come back in '23, he must have resolved his differences, or his dissatisfaction.
ADC: Right, that seems clear. At that point I do remember more talk about his coming back. The implication of the talk I heard, again this is a kid overhearing adults talk, but I was always kind of nosy about those things, the implication was that "things", whatever "things" were in quotation marks, some "things" that the Company had gotten into were in some kind of a mess and they figured he would be the best man to straighten them out. Which kind of makes me suspect that it had to do with the actual manufacturing process, more than anything else...because that's where his strength was, he knew all the details. Starting at the bottom level, he knew where all the screws went on the adding machines. He had a great memory on top of it. One thing I can remember which might date back from that time, 1913-1923, is he had about a half dozen patents. He had invented things, like automatic pneumatic hammers and so on, and some of that may have gone back to that time, that he did on his own.

AF: After he came back to Burroughs in 1923, one of the projects he was working on was Burroughs Farms with Mr. Backus.

ADC: He was working with Mr. Backus, apparently very closely. That kind of makes sense, now that I think about it, because Mr. Backus' background, so far as I know, was very dissimilar to my grandfather's. He was not a mechanic at all. I don't really know how they got into the Company, but it sounds more like a financial route.

AF: He also married Boyer's daughter.
ADC: That's right. So you could understand why there was a real place for my grandfather at that particular time. The background of the Farms I don't know except that it was continuing attention to just the average working man. I remember he always said these really trite things that only people who were very straightforward could make you believe. He was very proud of the fact that Burroughs was a good place to work. He wasn't talking about the office staff, he was talking about the people in the shops and the factory and so on. He was very, very proud of that, and that was kind of his orientation toward the Company. That was how he had gotten started. The Farms, I think, were really an outgrowth of that attitude.

AF: I don't know how many other companies were doing it at the time but it's kind of a neat idea to spend all that money for just the employees to enjoy.

ADC: Right. It was very paternalistic in terms of industrial relations, but it worked. It worked fine. Even though Burroughs certainly didn't want the unions in for all the traditional reasons they didn't make any effort to keep them out, they simply maintained their traditional policies.

AF: Do you ever remember him talking about unrest on labor related issues?
ADC: I remember him getting very upset. I remember one story, particularly, when he had to cross the picket line, somewhere around 1939, I'm undoubtedly wrong, but it was sometime in the 30's and it was an organized attempt. People shouted at him. He was a very quiet kind of person and he apparently had some kind of a minor stroke and lost the use of one of his eyes. It did bother him, the whole idea of a strike, particularly since he didn't feel, and the elections tended to bear this out, a great desire on the part of the workers for a union. I'm not sure that he ever really understood the politics of the unions making Burroughs a target for organizing. But that did upset him and there were very few things that would upset him.

AF: You mentioned earlier that your grandfather did a lot of work for Backus without really getting credit for it.

ADC: My feeling is that it was progressive. He came back as vice president in charge of the factory and manufacturing and he tended to take more and more of that over. And again, with regard to policy decisions that came up, I really don't know. By this time he was on the Board so I suppose it was a natural thing that whatever problems came up in terms of manufacturing and marketing and so forth and so on that these things would come to the Board. I did get the impression, though he rarely criticized him directly, that he was handling things which he felt the President should handle. And this was progressive. Again this is an impression but I think he was frustrated by it. I don't think he really wanted to be president and that he felt that he was doing more as executive vice president.
ADC (cont.): than he really expected to be doing.

ADC: I don't think he wanted to be President. I think it was kind of like a ripe apple falling off a tree, there was no reason why he shouldn't be. He was virtually running the Company under not too easy circumstances. It was a natural thing for him to become President. But there was almost a revolt on the part of the directors and he must have known that he was expected to retire soon. Perhaps right at the end of the war.

AF: Well, it wasn't too long after that.

ADC: Looking back on that, that part I don't remember too well, but I do remember, maybe this was because I was older myself, that he was very hurt by the pressure put on him to resign in '46. He was very upset about that. But it wasn't in the context of not wanting to lose the job of President, it was more like why have they done this to me after all these years I've been with the Company. He had indicated he was going to retire later that year anyway.

AF: Do you know who was putting pressure on him? Was it member of the Board?

ADC: My understanding was that he had enough votes from the Board to actually stay on for his remaining time but that he didn't want to start a fight. My impression was that it was people within the organization, not necessarily on the Board, executives who were young and had new plans about the Company and wanted to get moving right away.
AF: You said the other day that he had put away a huge amount of cash for the Company. Could you elaborate on that?

ADC: He had a huge amount of cash, almost an irrationally large amount of cash and it just stands to reason that the younger people in the organization had other great ideas about what they wanted to do with the cash. Not aware of the history and not too sensitive to the feelings of an old man who had been with the Company since he had been a kid. They just kind of charged ahead. It happens all the time but it's nonetheless ugly when it happens. I just wish he had gotten out a little earlier so he didn't have to go through it. I didn't see any point in his staying on. It was the end of an era for Burroughs.

AF: Do you think he realized that?

ADC: I don't know whether he realized it or not. He was almost 80, 79. My grandmother was very sick, she had been for some time but she was getting progressively sicker. And he was never physically...I think of words like frail and so on which is not the right word, mainly he had a very low metabolism, which I understand perfectly because I've inherited it. It has nothing to do with health and he was hardly sick a day in his life. But he was tired, he was worn out. He was tired, I think that was it. I don't think he was in a position to be particularly philosophical about it. He thought a lot of Mr. Coleman and thought he was the best of the younger generation. And he made it a prerequisite of his retirement that he be President. It was just an unfortunate thing that he was pushed into doing something that he didn't really want to do.
ADC (cont.): I don't think there is any way you can explain situations like that at all. All you can do is describe them.

AF: Can you think of any specific things or events he was disappointed in? He seems like he was a fairly content man and pleased for the most part with Burroughs.

ADC: That's something I'd have to research myself. I'm curious as to why he resigned in 1913. Beyond being aware what his general feelings were at the time I really don't know the specifics.

AF: What do you think he felt were his greatest accomplishments? And what did you admire him most for?

ADC: There's two different things. There's things that I was proud of him for and there's things that he was proud of himself for. I think, having come from a very poor family, we have some very spotty early correspondence, he was quite pleased about having been successful. That was important to him. I remember in 1940 he built a house in Detroit on Fairway Drive and he very consciously had it designed as an English manor house. He went to the extremes of having no shrubbery near the house because that's the way they did it with great houses in England. This was of course near the end of his life, which meant he had goals about being successful from the time he was probably quite young. So, I think that was important to him, that he had been successful. He was terribly fond of Burroughs, just as a company. And I think that was directly related to the fact that everybody, starting with the workers, got along so well. I think this was probably an extension, again this is a guess, but it was
ADC (cont.): probably an extension of what he had experienced at Boyer's machine shop in St. Louis. Again, the way he talked about those early experiences, that it was a fine place to work with fine people who were serious about their work and good businessmen but at the same time were easy to get along with personally. Of course, I guess I was describing an ideal work situation. I think he tried to maintain that when he came to Detroit as shop superintendant. Possibly in that area you might look for things going on in 1912, 1913, that might have upset him.

Those are two things. There are two more. One would be the actual work he did on the prototype, when he was seventeen. He was very proud of that and he would tell that story periodically. And he was also very proud of the Company building the Norden Bombsight during the Second World War. He was pleased that the Company had been chosen to do something that required very careful work. I think if they had been producing bombers or something it wouldn't have affected him so much. But the fact that they were producing a small, carefully designed, carefully machined instrument, he was pleased with that. I do remember a couple times during the War he made a point of telling me he couldn't tell me what Burroughs was doing but he would tell me after the War. You could tell he really wanted to tell me. But he didn't.
ADC (cont.): I guess the thing I found most interesting about him was his personality. I've never since known anybody who went through life with such a placid manner. Most people attack life and get attacked by it, or they come to some kind of half workable, half unworkable kind of thing. He was just very straight, did everything right down the middle. He never lost his temper. I don't remember ever seeing him lose his temper or even hearing about him losing his temper. He did what he had to do and that was it. I suppose I admire that because I have a strong desire for efficiency which may be part of the genes too. You see so little of that. He was a very nice person to be with, all the time, and he was always the same, no matter who he talked to. I remember he was one of only two relatives I had who were like that. The other was my father's brother-in-law. My grandfather would consistently talk to us when we were little as if we weren't little, not over our heads but just talk to us directly in the same manner that he would talk to an adult. You remember that when you are a kid. As soon as he sensed you were interested in something he was doing he, he would explain it to you. I was interested in gardening and in photography. He showed me a lot of things in his workshop and things like that. He was just a very interesting personality, I thought. Interesting in the sense that he was so undemonstrative, so placid, and then got a lot done. Which probably wasn't easy because he didn't have a lot of energy. For example, he used to come home at lunch because he always lived near the factory and take a nap after lunch. Then he would go back to work. Apparently he needed it. He was very steady and he stayed in good health most
ADC (cont.): of the time. He does not fit the picture of the
dynamic American businessman.

AF: Can you think of any other things that I haven't mentioned?
The Farms?

ADC: Now that you mention the Farms, I should have mentioned that.
He was very proud of the Farms.

AF: You said you used to spend all your summers out there.

ADC: Yes, we spent all our summers out there and he was out there
a surprising amount. I'm not sure that my aunt or my grandmother
were particularly fond of it but he was. He'd be out there every
weekend.

AF: Why do you think they didn't enjoy it?

ADC: I think it was a little too rustic for them. But my
grandfather enjoyed it. And when he was out there he didn't just
enjoy himself, he spent a lot of time just going around looking at
things, with Mr. Brophy and Mr. Bertrand. Looking at all the
things that had to be done and little things that had to be made.
There was a lot of going and coming. It never became a burden to
him. On Saturday morning he might go fishing with Mr. Bertrand and
spend a couple hours in the afternoon with Mr. Brophy and then come
back and cook steaks or something like that for dinner. But he was
out there quite a bit. We tended to be out there the whole summer
and our cottage was right next to his. But the Farms was a very
serious occupation for him. He got a lot of pleasure out of it,
too. I think my whole family has very fond memories of Burroughs
Farms.
AF: Did he pick the land?

ADC: I think he was involved right from the beginning. My understanding is that it was a project of his. He came back from his long sabbatical in '23 and the Farms were underway by '27. I strongly suspect that he used his newfound influence as a director to do something, possibly something he had wanted to do for a long time. My impression is that he actually found the site too.

AF: Is there anything you would like to add that you feel we didn't talk about?

ADC: We certainly covered a lot. I haven't thought this much about the Doughty's in several years.

AF: He didn't seem to have much of a relationship with the Backus family.

ADC: I think you're right. The Boyer's, of course, were old family acquaintances, the old boss and so forth, and the St. Louis crowd. I think you're right.

AF: Were the Backus' out at the Farms much?

ADC: I don't ever remember seeing them at all. I'd see other people from the Company.

AF: From the few notes that I saw in your collection it seems like the employees had fond memories of your grandfather.

ADC: Yes, actually he's the kind of boss I would have liked to have worked for, although I don't think I ever have. He was somebody who was serious about the work and was organized, very reasonable and kind of low pressure. I wish in a way that he'd been younger or I'd been older because I have his name and I have a lot of the same physiology as him. I would
ADC(continuation): have liked to have talked to him more about things.

One thing that I discovered just this morning, I guess this is common when you get older you think about things that happened a long time before. I was over there just about a year before he died, I was in my early twenties, and he asked me, I was majoring in history, and he asked me if I could do some digging around to see where there were any paintings by Paul Harney. I started to look for them and then I saw him a few days later and he cancelled the request saying 'Well, I got carried away,' or something like that. I didn't realize until I looked at this biography that Paul Harney was an artist he had worked for in St. Louis, just before he went to work for the Boyer Machine Shop.

It's been very pleasant recalling all of this.

AF: Well, thank you very much for allowing us to do an oral history with you.