

An Interview with
LYN GARDNER ESBENSON

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Conducted by Thomas J. Misa

on

7 December 2015

By Telephone

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Center for the History of Information Technology
University of Minnesota, Minneapolis
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7 December 2015

Oral History 483

Abstract

Lyn Esbenson describes her career in computing which began in 1959, shortly after her graduation from Colorado College, when she went to work in Pennsylvania for PPG Industries programming a UNIVAC I. Two years later she returned to Colorado and helped develop a magazine fulfillment and addressing system for Esquire Magazine, subsequently reorganized as NeoData and eventually purchased by EDS. Programming and project management are key topics of her career.

This material is based on work funded by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation award B2014-07 “Tripling Women’s Participation in Computing (1965-1985).”

Misa: My name is Tom Misa. It's the 7th of December 2015, and I'm speaking with Lyn Esbenson. We're doing this as part of a Sloan Foundation-funded project to better understand the experiences and careers and perspectives of women who worked in technical and professional capacities in the computing industry during the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. Lyn, I'm wondering if you could take us back to your childhood or high school years. Do you recall having any special hobbies or activities, things that were particularly notable and interested in that may've inclined you toward pursuing a technical [career] later on?

Esbenson: Yes, I was interested in math, and I majored in math in college. And of course during the time — I graduated college in 1959 — they did not have computers in the industry, or they were just beginning. My interest was math and it just is fun for me, so that's why I moved in that area.

Misa: Did you have a notable background in mathematics in high school?

Esbenson: Not really. I went to boarding schools as we did from my town, and it just generally was a good education. I went in the eastern part of the United States, and then I came west to college, to Colorado College. But in boarding school, I don't remember a lot about it. It was a girl's school. I sang, as well; I did a lot of singing when I was in school. But in college, I just loved college. College was great, it was a wonderful place to learn, I made good friends that have been lasting friends, and I got a bachelor of arts, in that I didn't get a bachelor of science. When I graduated college I didn't have a career at

that point, and it took me several months before I decided what direction I was going to go in and where I wanted to find a job.

Misa: Do you remember being particularly attracted to any different parts of mathematics? Was it calculus or algebra?

Esbenson: I think algebra, yes.

Misa: Did you have any notable math teachers at Colorado College, or for that matter, at your boarding school?

Esbenson: I frankly don't remember in boarding school. In college we did have a wonderful math teacher, who I was close to and would go to his home and he'd have some students there, and that kind of thing.

Misa: Was it common for women to be gaining the BA in mathematics? Was that something that a group of women were doing?

Esbenson: I don't remember. I do remember more about the women in the workplace as opposed to the women going for their bachelor of arts in math.

Misa: You said when you were finishing your BA, you didn't have necessarily a specific job in mind. Do you recall what other math majors ended up doing? Might it be teaching, or graduate school?

Esbenson: Teaching. The majority of women who were leaving college were looking at a teaching career, from my perspective if I remember correctly. And I frankly didn't want to teach, so I didn't go towards that kind of a career; except later on I taught some of the computer programming classes.

Misa: You said that it was 1959 that you graduated from Colorado College.

Esbenson: From Colorado College.

Misa: That's really pretty early on. Were there any computing classes offered at all, do you know, at Colorado College?

Esbenson: No, there were none.

Misa: Do you recall when you first heard about the possibility of going to work in the computing profession?

Esbenson: Do you want me to go into that in depth? I can tell you why I went to PPG Industries.

Misa: Oh, I'd love to have a full account of that.

Esbenson: Okay, once again I lived in a town, Sewickley, Pennsylvania, and it was a fairly upper class town. The person who lived down the road from us was Chairman of the Board of PPG Industries. I sort of fell into it. He said we're looking for programmers and I didn't even know what a programmer was, to be honest with you, but I thought here's a real opportunity to learn more about the computing industry. I was hired by PPG Industries, it was in September of 1959, and I started to work on the UNIVAC I. We did computer language programming. We were trained on the job, and I found it fun and challenging and a great way for me to feel productive.

Misa: You said the training was largely on the job, so there weren't special classes at some other facility? It was basically the group of people learning how to run programs and to teach the incoming staff?

Esbenson: There were no formal classes at that time.

Misa: Where was the UNIVAC installed? Was it part of corporate headquarters or in a lab?

Esbenson: Yes, in the basement of the PPG Industries headquarters in Pittsburgh. And it was *huge*.

Misa: The UNIVAC I was one of the early, big mainframe vacuum tube machines. It was hot, I think.

Esbenson: Yes.

Misa: When you were doing early programming, can you describe how you would write the program? You wouldn't be close, necessarily, in the computer room; that was somebody else's job.

Esbenson: No, we had offices off the side of the computer room and we coded with a pencil and paper. And the input to the machine was done on a Unityper. Some of this is coming back, Tom. I'll do the best I can.

Misa: Oh, good.

[Laughter.]

Esbenson: I remember the magnetic tapes we used had 2,000 words on them. This is just bits and pieces.

Misa: 2,000 words.

Esbenson: That's what I remember.

Misa: About how large was the UNIVAC programming group?

Esbenson: We did paint inventory control for PPG Industries, and there weren't more than four or five of us. It was brand new, and it grew of course, but in the beginning it was a very small group.

Misa: In the 1950s, there weren't a lot of people involved with computing. Did you have a sense that this was going to turn into something pretty big?

Esbenson: Yes, I did. I'm not sure that I can elaborate on other than it was something where I could see in the future that it could be so useful to many, many industries. But at that point in time, I didn't know how it could be used.

Misa: Right. Nobody did. That's one of the things.

[Laughter.]

Esbenson: That's right.

Misa: Really nobody had a sense. This is all something that's being created in the 1950s and 1960s.

Esbenson: Right.

Misa: Were there any other women doing programming on that early UNIVAC I?

Esbenson: I can remember when I worked in Denver I was the only woman, but I cannot remember at PPG who the others were. And the reason I remember in Denver is because that was the time in the early 1960s when women were looked at as being beneath the men as far as most jobs were concerned. I certainly felt that. It was difficult for me. I felt like I was fighting an uphill battle and trying to win the battle of women's rights in industry. But that wasn't until Denver; I cannot remember how it was at PPG Industries.

Misa: You worked for PPG Industries for a couple of years?

Esbenson: Yes, in 1961 I moved to Denver. So I worked for PPG Industries for two years.

Misa: Can you say something about your move to Denver?

Esbenson: I'm a fairly adventurous person and I, at the time I had an old Corvair — it was new then — and I drove across the country by myself with all my worldly goods, and my life savings of \$900, arriving in Colorado in a snowstorm which they still talk about it — this is 1961— they still talk about that major snowstorm as I arrived in Colorado. I did not have a job and it took me a while to find a job. I stayed with friends in Colorado Springs, and ultimately got a job with Univac in Denver. It was Remington Rand at the

time, and I was hired as a systems analyst. And I was the only woman at that time who was a systems analyst. I traveled around various firms in the Denver area, helping them make decisions about their computer, the computer they chose. I worked on a Solid State 80 and 90, and they didn't have a UNIVAC I. I think it was a Solid State 80 at that time. I worked with federal customers of Remington Rand, and then Remington Rand turned into Univac, and then, along with being sexually harassed by my boss with no one to support me, I felt I wasn't making enough money. I think I was making about \$350/month and it was difficult to live on that low an income in 1961. So I applied for a job at a subscription fulfillment center in Boulder, Colorado. It was then called Esquire Magazine, and it became NeoData, and then EDS bought it several years later. I wanted to become a programmer for them. We didn't have a noncompete kind of a document so it was okay if I transferred and took the job with Esquire Magazine. Honestly, I think it was a solid state computer that we worked on. I stayed with *Esquire* for years, taking time off to move to Houston to have a baby, and then come back to Denver.

Misa: You mention that you had worked earlier for Univac Remington Rand as a systems analyst, but you wanted to move into work as a programmer.

Esbenson: Right.

Misa: Could you just briefly characterize both of those two? What did you find intriguing about each and maybe why programming was of note.

Esbenson: The fun thing about working for Univac was the fact that I could visit different customers and I hadn't had that opportunity before. I went into the offices, I taught programming languages, I worked with them when they had problems, and found it was really fun for me but I felt I wasn't paid enough for what I was doing. I also was the systems analyst with the firm in Boulder that I finally went to work for. My clients were banks and other places. I worked with a beer distributor in Denver; and banks, and then the subscription fulfillment center in Boulder. They really liked me so they asked me — or I asked them and I can't remember which — I'd like to see if I could get a job with you. They weren't interested in having a woman programmer at the time because they had two men programmers, as they said to me — they couldn't get away with it now — 'you're going to get married and you're going to have children, then we lose you.' But they said I could take a qualifying test and compete for the job with three other men. I aced the test and they said we'll hire you.

Misa: So you must have done pretty well.

Esbenson: Yes.

Misa: Was that one of those programming aptitude tests?

Esbenson: I've been thinking about this, and I cannot remember. It was probably like a programming aptitude test.

Misa: IBM was one of the companies that formalized a programming aptitude test early on, but I think many companies ended up following their lead.

Esbenson: Makes sense, yes.

Misa: So the job at *Esquire* was more connected then to actual computer programming?

Esbenson: Yes, computer programming. I was also project leader there. I became a manager there in later years, but I always stayed connected to IT.

Misa: Can you tell us a little bit more about what you found interesting about each one of those? You said project management, and then as a line manager. Can you just describe your early programming work for *Esquire*?

Esbenson: We were building a system where we could do the labels for the magazines. It was brand new in the industry, and actually, the one that they developed was a very terrific package. However, other people came in and said they could do a better job. One was EDS, and the company went downhill, and now the company is no more. But for me, it was a challenge and we worked with systems people who were helping to design the program — the whole package — and I got to help with the designing and some of my ideas were kept in the package. They liked them and it was a very successful package. And then — I'm not sure of the years — but I did get married, and did move to Houston, but after I came back from Houston I did go back to work for what was then NeoData.

And I stayed with them off and on for many years, becoming project leader for the same package that I helped develop. So the people who were programming and working on the same package that I helped to develop, and I really enjoyed that. That was fun. And then I became a manager in the IT department. And that was tough for me. I think I felt more comfortable working with programming, and working with systems, and working with the projects and that kind of thing.

Misa: Can you go back to the subscription fulfillment and say a bit more about your work there? Was it making databases and printing?

Esbenson: It was very complicated, as it turns out. We were developing the labels for multiple magazines, and each magazine had its own issues and concerns. Can't even remember some of the magazines that we worked with. I don't think my mind's working well today. I just know that the ultimate output was the labels for the magazine and the billing, of course, we did the billing.

Misa: Billing, too.

Esbenson: Yes. The whole package for a magazine like *The New Yorker*, or a magazine like *Time*. But *Time Life* had their own package and we had 30 different publications we were working for, a long time ago.

Misa: This wasn't *Esquire* alone, but it was a more general package, then.

Esbenson: It started as *Esquire* alone, then other people heard about this and we had people, of course, in sales trying to get new clients, and we did. It grew exponentially, because we had to move to a different place. We moved to Louisville, Colorado, and had our own building there. The production was in another building, so it grew fairly quickly.

Misa: Well you've got a first-hand experience in answering the question what computers can be useful for, both in PPG Industries as well as this magazine fulfillment work. We think of that as second nature today, but you were building one of the early ones. It's quite notable.

Esbenson: Yes.

Misa: When you were putting together, say working in the project manager, you were putting teams together that would be involved with aspects of building the system?

Esbenson: Correct.

Misa: What kinds of things did you look for in the people either that you were hiring or that you were choosing for teams? What made an effective member of the team?

Esbenson: We'd grown so much that we had a lot of the people in-house, and when we had talented systems analysts, we moved them into working on projects, major projects,

and ultimately we started to develop an online project, which we called Step. But I wasn't connected to that, I stayed with the old software, as opposed to moving into the new online system. That was in later years.

Misa: What kinds of things made for a valuable either systems analyst or a programmer? Again, kind of characteristics, being a team member or technical skills?

Esbenson: Technical skills, attention to detail, certainly from a programming perspective, the ability to look at the overall picture, certainly being logical people, being able to analyze, being analytical as well as logical.

Misa: Lyn, can I ask you roughly again, the proportion of women that you may have been working with at NeoData?

Esbenson: Okay. In the beginning, I was the only woman. And in later years there were more women than men. The women, I think they discovered, had some kind of a talent that some of the men did not, and I can't describe what it is, but they hired a number of women in the technical area and in the systems and in management. They didn't have as many female managers as they had male managers, but they did have more women working in both systems and programming. And it seemed to me, as I look back on it, that there weren't nearly as many men and I guess I didn't realize that at the time.

Misa: Interesting.

Esbenson: Yes.

Misa: So these were women then who were working in technical capacities?

Esbenson: Yes.

Misa: In other words, doing technical work, not clerical work or secretarial work, but technical work.

Esbenson: Technical work. Doing programming, learning new languages, most of the new system had mostly women working on it, so that would've been technical and all of them analytical, logical, yes.

Misa: You said that you hired mostly from in-house. Were there universities that you would hire graduates from as well?

Esbenson: I'm just looking back at the people that I worked with and certainly, Boulder, we have the University of Colorado. I'm not sure if they hired people from the University of Colorado and I'm not sure how the hiring was done at that point in time. The company was growing. In the beginning it was a very small company so I was aware of all that was going on, but not as it got bigger and bigger. I was in the trenches more than in the management end of it.

Misa: It sounds like that was an exciting time for you.

Esbenson: It was fun. It's something — I don't know if this is unique about me — but when I do something I love to do it if it's challenging and fun. I don't know if you want me to talk a little bit about retirement, but may I?

Misa: Yes, sure.

Esbenson: Okay. After I retired, I thought what am I going to do? I want to be able to have something that's fun, so I started sewing. I made quilts; I've made over 40 quilts. I do pet therapy with my dog at a local hospital. I'm a chair of a pet therapy program, and it's fun for me. I remember saying to my father, life is just a bowl of cherries. And he used to say to me oh, no, Lyn, no it isn't; you've got to be serious. But life is just a bowl of cherries and I wanted to have fun, and enjoy my life. And by George, I will be 79 in April and I *have* had fun and enjoyed my life.

Misa: [Laughs.] That sounds like a nice result. Lyn, can you see any connections between sewing and quilting, and the work you did in computing?

Esbenson: Yes, I'm a perfectionist with my sewing. Exactly. If I don't get a perfect point and straight lines, and those kinds of things, I'm not happy. I'll tear out something and

redo it. Yes, there's a real connection and I know that's why I went to sewing as a new hobby.

Misa: Do you think there's any connection in terms of spatial thinking, or patterns, that sort of thing?

Esbenson: I think so. I've got some paper, and I wanted to draw a quilt that I had found that had different angles on it, and it had different kinds of patterns and they weren't necessarily at 90 degrees, they were at maybe 45 degrees. And I found it was difficult to be able to place these different patterns on the sheet, and I found it a real challenge, which I resolved, and it was fun for me.

Misa: So it's that kind of problem solving, and tinkering, and trying to fit things together.

Esbenson: Yes. And have them look right when they're done.

Misa: That's right, and to be pleasing and actually to, well, work. A quilt is not supposed to have gaps in the middle. [Laughter.] It's not going to be functional if there's a gap between the patterns. I wonder if we could step back for just a minute. Some people have found notable the women's movement that occurred in the middle of your career. Of course, the 1970s was a notable decade. Was that an important influence for you?

Esbenson: I felt I was sexually harassed by my boss at Univac. I know this isn't really what you're asking me, but it was during the early 1960s when this was such a major issue. I felt that I couldn't stay with Univac because of that situation with my boss. And I didn't feel very adept at handling it but I thought the best way to do was to leave the situation. He was very difficult for me, and that's one of the reasons that I moved on to Esquire Magazine.

Misa: That would've been in the 1960s.

Esbenson: That was in the 1960s. Actually yes, that would've been about 1962, 1963, something like that. I can't remember the exact date.

Misa: Yes. Did the 1970s and the discussions that many women had give you better insight or some tools for thinking about issues of sexual harassment or other workplace issues?

Esbenson: Well I understood that I had some options in the 1970s that I didn't have in the 1960s. But it wasn't an issue in the 1970s, and I wasn't a bra burner or any of that kind of thing. In my college, this is just before all of the uprisings of the young when I graduated from college. It was more in the 1960s that all of that happened. I was there in 1959 and the worst thing that I did in college was climb out of the dorm in the middle of the night to do something stupid. It was a much stricter environment than a couple of

years later, so it just wasn't a major issue with me, so it didn't affect me the way it might've affected other people.

Misa: For whatever reasons, the work at NeoData ended up becoming quite filled with women.

Esbenson: Yes, it was. I don't know whether they found that women did a better job; I'm not sure why that happened. We certainly had men, but the majority of the people that I remember were women. I don't know, Tom, that I can answer these questions in depth because I feel like I'm more of a fighter now than I was at that time.

Misa: Oh, interesting.

Esbenson: I have grown so much, and been on my own, and done some very challenging things that many women don't. In 1997, two years after my husband died, I decided I wanted to find out just what kind of courage I had so I bought myself a 26-foot trailer and towed it to Alaska. Just me and two dogs. And it was an incredible experience, and I think what's happening is I'm growing so much more, much deeper in my old age than I ever was in my youth.

[Laughter.]

Misa: That's interesting. Well that gives us inspiration to think that we have lots of growth in our senior years, that's nice to hear.

Esbenson: I believe that completely. Essentially, I've been alone since my husband died, other than dogs. And I have grandchildren, and I have a child, but I live alone and I'm happy just to be learning more.

Misa: Yes. This goes a little bit beyond the narrow confines, but what kinds of things might you look forward to learning in the next few years?

Esbenson: Well, I joined a different church; it's a church that is unique in its beliefs. We accept all people, we accept all faiths, we accept everybody. Everybody can come to the church. It's a church based on love. That's where I feel we need to move in the world in order to have peace. We need to be able to love our enemy and because everybody has good somewhere in their hearts, that's been a huge thing for me. I decided to do Landmark training a couple of years ago. Have you heard of it?

Misa: No.

Esbenson: Landmark training teaches you to accept what you have been in your life and let it go so that you can begin anew right now, and find a purpose, and build a life. Essentially what it does is if you have old stuff that you're carrying around, it helps you let go of that and move on. And it gives you a whole basis for happiness and joy, starting now. It's been extremely helpful. I've done some grief counseling with people. I learned

that through my church; that was extremely helpful. I love to do puzzles; I love to do things like that. It's a good life.

Misa: It sounds like you probably get some of that with the pet therapy, too.

Esbenson: Oh my gosh. It's all about the dog and what the dog does for patients. I've done pet therapy since 1999. I've had three dogs in the program: two Newfoundlands and a Corgi. When I go to the hospital and I walk in with my dog — her name is Truffles, she's a brown Newfoundland — people say, 'Hi, Truffles, how are you?' And it's all about the dog, and it's all about what the dog can bring to these people who are down. Certainly I do a lot of hospice training. We have a psych hospital on our campus and Truffles goes there, they love her. It's a gift that I didn't know existed. What I can get from watching what my dog gives to other people is unbelievable. My heart is full of joy.

Misa: Then you've certainly have had a notable, long, extensive and varied career, and it still sounds like you're doing all kinds of interesting and learning experiences. Any other questions that I might've asked, or any other topics that you'd like to speak to today?

Esbenson: I actually think I've spoken to you about the things that are the most important to me. I'm grateful for my life with computers. It certainly gave me a new challenge in my life and one that I still use to this day. I have an iPad and I have a smart phone, and smart TV, and a PC, and I know at my age, almost 79, there are a lot of women who have no idea what it's like to work on any of those. So I've stayed active

with computers. I stay interested in what technology is today, and try to stay ahead — I'm not as good as I used to be — but it's not my major thrust at this time. I hope I've answered your questions that you wanted me to. I know that I took us on another path for a while, but I think it's interesting even from my perspective to look back. I was born in London, England. I grew up in Pennsylvania. I've been in many places in this country, in school in Andover, Massachusetts, and Greenway, Virginia. And I went to Colorado College in Colorado Springs, a wonderful college. I've lived several places. I've been a lucky woman. I certainly had my ups and downs but I'm probably as happy as I've ever been right now at 78 years old.

Misa: Well I hope that I'll be able to say the same thing.

[Laughter.]

Esbenson: I hope you will, too. I'm sure that some of these interviews are giving you some inspiration, and that's about what path you're taking, and how you're doing it, and that kind of thing. Do they?

Misa: I talked with one woman who's 95 years old. She just turned 95 a month or so ago. It's rare to have somebody in their mid-90s as alert and engaged as she was. That was very inspiring.

Esbenson: Oh, wow. That's wonderful!

Misa: So thank you so much for your time today, it was a real pleasure to have a chance to talk with you.

Esbenson: I hope I answered the questions the way you wanted them answered.

[Laughs.]

Misa: I learned a lot, Lyn, thank you.

Esbenson: Okay, super. Thanks, Tom, it was so nice meeting you.