NAMES, SHORT STORIES AND OTHER TIDBITS
(Submitted by Bobby Berrier)

NAMES

- “Snake-Pit” – room under the control room that was so named because of the many cables that were routed all over the ceiling of the room.

- “Graveyard Shift” – work shift that started at midnight and lasted until 8:00 am. Two shifts (sometimes three) were typically run at 16’TT – dayshift and graveyard.

- “Computers” – name used for a group of female math aids that converted manometer photographs and visicorder thermal traces to digital values, manually integrated areas using planimeters, hand computed equations set up on spreadsheets by engineers, hand plotted data, etc. before digital computers were in use. Mechanical calculators and trigonometric tables were used during most of their careers.

- “Monroe” – name of an electro-mechanical calculator

- “Frieden” – name of an electro-mechanical calculator that could take a square root.
• “Wang” – name of the first distributed electronic calculator system (four machines operating off of a central CPU unit).

• “Beckman System” – data acquisition system that transmitted data over telephone lines from the tunnel to the ACD building where it was recorded on digital tapes.
• “Modcomp” – first on-site computer for data acquisition system; later used for facility control and data reduction functions (over ACD objections).


SHORT STORIES AND HAPPENINGS

• In the early days of NACA, many of the single engineers lived in the same apartment house in Hampton. It had the reputation of a fraternity house. One night, they were showing “girlie” movies and there was a knock on the door. Upon answering the door, a policeman requested that they quit showing them on the window shade – it was showing through the shade and was visible from the street. (From oral history)

• In 1950, the battleship USS Missouri ran aground while sailing into Chesapeake Bay and was stuck in the mud for about 2 weeks. Blake Corson (would later be Branch Head) rowed a rowboat out to the scene just to take a look. (From oral history)

• In the 60’s/early 70’s, bridge was the game of choice at lunchtime in the computers (math aids) office. Enough players were often available for two tables. Some of the players that I remember were math aids Margaret Hurt, Phil Brown, Liz Patterson and engineers Bobby Berrier and Laurence (Elwood) Putnam.

• As electronic computers took over from human “computers”, the math aids were not replaced and the bridge games gradually died out. After that, the game of choice at lunchtime became knock poker (25 cents a game) in the upper shop. Most of the tunnel technicians (Bo Montgomery, Charlie Poupard, Keith Lupton, Virgil Justice and others) and some of the engineers (Bobby Berrier, Larry Leavitt and others) played in these games. These games were enjoyed so much that plans were sometimes made to come to work an hour early and play before graveyard shift started.
• The top of the tunnel elevator building (tallest part of the tunnel building) was a great place to watch USAF Thunderbird shows and car races.

• In the 50’s, one of the engineers found a way to distract others during a discussion. He would secretly insert a thin wire into a cigarette (over 50% of the engineers/technicians smoked when I came in 1963). As he smoked his cigarette, the ash would get longer and longer without falling off; soon everyone was mesmerized by the long ash and not by what he was saying (from oral history).
A water tunnel was installed in the Jet Exit Test Facility (Building 1234) to add a flow visualization capability to the Branch. The water tunnel had a vertical test section made out of Plexiglas walls bolted together. One morning, the tunnel water pressure blew off one side of the test section with such force that it also blew off a side door of building 1234 that was in line with the test section and about 6 feet away. In a way, this was fortunate since the door and water were ejected away from the facility work area and most of the water went outside the building through the blown off door.

On graveyard shift one night, Fran Capone (who used to sign his Christmas cards – “The Capone Mob”) got so mad (I don’t remember about what) that he threw a box of computer punch cards across the control room. Unfortunately the cards came out of the box and flew all around the control room. Computer punch cards (which were read by a card reader) give the computer instructions on what to do but
they have to be in the correct order. Fran had to spend a lot of the
night sorting cards into the correct order.

- Christmas parties up into the 80’s were not what they are today.
  When I came to work in 1963, they were held at one of the area hotels
  with a live band. Sometimes after that, they were moved into the shop
  area of the tunnel. The Assistant Branch Head, Jack Runckel, was in
  charge of making the punch (in this case 90 proof!). Alcoholic
  beverages were the norm at all Christmas parties on the field during
  this time. Most of the parties were held on the same day and I would
  walk around the field going from party to party. This may sound like a
  waste of government time but at least it was a morale booster unlike
  the day or half-a-day the President regularly declares now.

- Like many places today, the technicians got their mail delivered to a
  mail slot. One day, Virgil Justice had a message in his mail slot that
  said he had a telephone call from someone who had a box for him and
  that Virgil should call them back. A telephone number was provided.
  When Virgil called the number, the funeral home answered.

- Mary Mason was a female engineer at 16”TT who was known for her
  different attitude and did not like to be singled out or shown any
  deference for being a woman. For example, Langley management
  decided they would hold a series of seminars on women’s problems
  (PMS for example). Mary was heard on the phone yelling at the
  seminar coordinator (a woman) – “I’ll attend a seminar on PMS when
  they have a damn seminar on jock itch for men”.

  One night Mary was on graveyard shift when the phone rang. It was
  someone from the Air Force side of the field who said, "The general
  said for you to shut the tunnel down, it’s making too much noise”.
  (Note: the Air Force had restricted flying after 11:00pm to hold down
  noise complaints). Mary’s response was “I don’t work for the general”
  and she hung up. I don’t remember any consequences (some have
  said that the MP’s came over but could not get in the building).

Note on noise (I always called it music): We got many complaints
about tunnel noise during graveyard shift, sometimes even when we
were not running! The noise group was called in on several occasions
to make noise measurements and we were always within regulations
in the areas where complaints were made. However, the tunnel was
extremely loud when running at top speed; it had 95000 HP on line at
top speed.
In 1970, Oran Nicks became the Deputy Director of the NASA Langley Research Center. Right after he arrived at Langley, he must have been working VERY late because as he was leaving work, he saw the lights on in the 16'TT during graveyard and decided to stop by to see what was happening. He must have been issued a passkey because we always kept the building doors locked at night. We were working on a model installation in the test section when Oran walked in. I recognized him but before I could say anything, Paul Trent, a huge technician who didn’t recognize him, noticed that he didn’t have a badge on and demanded to know who he was. To my dismay, when Oran answered that his name was Oran Nicks, Paul replied that he didn’t care who he was and that he would have to leave because he didn’t have a badge and promptly escorted him to the door. The next day, Oran called Paul’s supervisor and commended Paul for doing the right thing!