Leon Cooper

LEON COOPER was born in Norfolk, Virginia in 1927, the son of Isadore and Dora Cooper. Leon grew up speaking Yiddish with his parents and their extended family and friends, most of whom had come to the United States in the early twentieth century from *shtetls* in eastern Europe. At the age of seventeen, Leon served two years in the Navy from 1945-1946. After, he went to college at Virgina Polytechnic Institute, now commonly known as Virginia Tech. Upon graduating in 1950, Leon served two more years in the Navy, and it was during his travels in the Navy that he learned not all Jews speak Yiddish-- a finding that surprised him greatly having grown up around Jews who all spoke the language. Leon was released from active duty in 1952 and stayed in the Reserves until he retired in 1968 with the rank of Lieutenant Commander.

After leaving the Navy, Leon was hired by IBM as they transitioned from building mechanical card punchers to producing computers. From 1952-1957, Cooper was the lead engineer in developing the mag tapes electric typewriter, which paved the way for the development of word processors.

"It was not a solo operation. There was an army of us working-- working on that. I happened to be the first guy on the scene, and built the first plate model proving that you could record on a tape, and then play it back to the typewriter."

A year later, he moved from IBM headquaters in Poughkeepsie, New York to Lexington, Kentucky. It was important to Leon and his wife, Harriet (nee Rudman), that there be a Conservative synagogue in town, and they were happy to become members of Ohavay Zion Synagogue in Lexington when they moved. They were both deeply involved in the local Jewish community. Leon served as the president of OZS on two occasions and was responsible for establishing the Chevra Kadisha, a burial society in Lexington that prepares bodies for burial according to Jewish tradition. Leon devoted himself to volunteer work within Lexington's Jewish community.

"There are enough people to do everything else. We've got a limited population here. And, uh, I'm not one of the pillars of the community-- of the general community-- so I put my effort where I think they'll do the most good."

During his time at IBM, Cooper also received his master's degree in engineering from Syracuse University in 1962 and an MBA from Xavier University in 1981. After retiring from IBM in 1982, Cooper founded his own company, QED Medical, which develops fiber optic headlight sources for surgeons.

IBM's first magnetic tape storage from 1952.

Cooper passed away on February 18, 2018 at the age of 90. May his memory be for a blessing.