VISIT TO ROCHESTER

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We attended a three-day medical meeting at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, at the end of May. It was our first visit to that famed establishment, and, among other things, we were impressed with the administrative know how that keeps such a massive undertaking operating on schedule and so efficiently.

A side attraction during the visit was a tour through the new IBM plant in Rochester. The plant itself, an ultramodern building designed by the late Finnish architect, Eero Saarinen, covers more than fifteen acres of floor space and is a far cry from the dreary machine shops of half a century ego. Built in 1956, this plant with its Development Laboratory is engaged in the research and manufacture of data processing equipment.

There is something spooky about watching an outsized, glass-enclosed machine busily at work, placing and boring holes with micrometer precision in a steel base plate under the direction of another adjacent machine, which, in turn, is activated and instructed by long rolls of shiny, perforated metal tape. Two such machines we saw were attended by a lone human whose job seemed to be only that of observation and brushing away the filings and debris. When we asked the attendant, who made the specialized tapes that directed the energies of the complex machines, his answer was, "the computing machines." Undoubtedly other machines also make the computing machines.

There must be some human intelligence and activity involved somewhere along the line in this modern system of manufacturing, but it is kept well hidden and apart from the processes themselves. IBM has found over the years that the best attendants and most efficient workers in plants such as this one are those of limited knowledge and ability. Attendants with more than a certain low level of intelligence and education eventually progress to the point where they think they are smarter than the machines, and invariably foul up production when they attempt to help out or interfere.

A moral lesson for humanity lurks here somewhere, but we are not exactly sure of what it is or how to find it. If we could just feed the information on this into one of IBM’S electronic computers, we know it could come up with the answer in a matter of seconds.

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