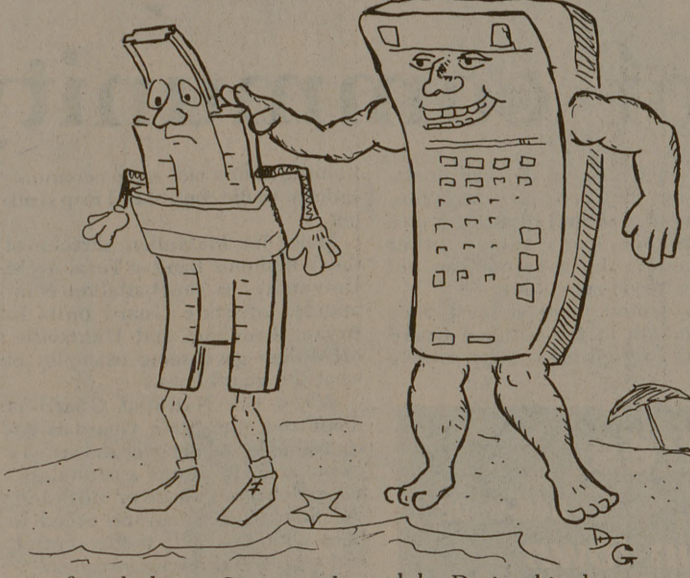


# Slide rules obsolete?

By LINDA SULLIVAN  
I thanked my parents graciously when I received a pocket calculator this Christmas. "May your checkbook always balance," the card read. I wonder what my reaction would have been to a slide rule?

As with several other liberal arts majors, I have an acute aversion to anything overly mathematical. Therefore, when my high school peers spoke of upcoming slide rule meets, I ignored them lest I'd go into fits of algebraic convulsions. After completing my high school math requirement, I felt reborn. No more undue stress attributed to unproven proofs or uncomplementary angle pairs. By the end of my senior year, while I tuned out many arithmetic conversations, I didn't seem to have as many slide rule freaks to dodge.



Advancing in leaps and bounds, technology has placed yet another mechanical device on the endangered species list: the slide rule.

The emergence of the inexpensive pocket calculator seems to be the slide rule's major predator. The calculator boom has had a definite effect on area merchants, many of whom are now caught with quantities of slide rules that no one seems to be demanding.

Mrs. Frank W. Ish, an employee of the Memorial Student Center (MSC) Bookstore since 1956, says she's sold "thousands and thousands" of slide rules in her career, but within the six years she has stocked calculators, her calculator sales have surpassed those of the slide rules. Ish said the calculator price drop is the main reason for the sagging slide rule market.

"Calculators offer the kids an instant answer with the correct data," Ish says, "and it's nearly impossible to complete lots of homework each night without one. The calculator is just a revolution in math and the students are compelled to get one."

price for calculators. Camp says her slide rule buyers are usually university students who purchase them not for classes, but for fun.

"It's the best mental activity you can buy," Camp said.

Most students welcome the demise of the slide rule. Sophomore chemical engineering major Annette Grimsrud recalls her experience with a slide rule from sixth grade. Then, students competing in University Interscholastic League (UIL) Slide Rule had to meet after school to learn slide rule technique from their junior high school math teacher. Grimsrud's father, a civil engineer, also helped her master the device for the competition.

"There were only two from our whole school in the competition," says Grimsrud, "even back then (1970) it was getting obsolete; that's why nobody tried out." Calculator or slide rule? Grimsrud opts for the calculator. Easier, perhaps?

"No, not really," she answers, "it's called lazy."

Sophomore civil engineering major Jeff Mueller also prefers a calculator to a slide rule. Mueller values the speed of the calculator and says there is "less memory work required." Mueller was also once a UIL Slide Rule competitor. At his high school, the slide rule competitors were members of the math

club. During his three-year membership, Mueller says the number of slide rule competitors gradually decreased from 25 percent club participation his sophomore year, to six percent his senior year.

Dr. C. A. Rodenberger, assistant dean of the College of Engineering, doesn't seem too concerned over the slide rule-calculator debates. Students turning to the calculators don't bother him.

"We're teaching students to use their minds," he said. "The calculation method doesn't really matter." Rodenberger said that with a slide rule more time is spent in analysis than with a calculator. The primary drawback of the slide rule is keeping track of the decimal point, he added. Whether the students use a slide rule or a calculator, Rodenberger only wants the students "to get a feel for the answer."

"I don't care whether they use longhand or a machine to speed it up," Rodenberger said.

Consequently, planned obsolescence might be making the slide rule into collector's item of tomorrow.

"It's kind of like the space age now," said MSC Bookstore employee Ish. "I think it's perfectly marvelous that kids can work calculators. It gives them more time to do something else if they're through with their homework."

Pat Messarra, in business for the past six years at Advanced Business Equipment, Inc., said calculators are "just plain easier to use." Messarra said her slide rule business has never been tremendous. She said she sells two or three slide rules a year, mainly to high school students. The biggest slide rule sale she remembers was to an out-of-towner who bought her entire stock of slide rules which was six, for his high school class.

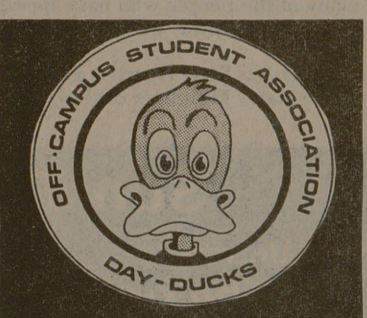
Ellen Dyer of the Texas Aggie Bookstore declares that the slide rule market is just dead. She received a stock of them two years ago, and still had 30 slide rules last spring. Dyer said the slide rules cost \$30 retail, but she sold them for \$5 "to get rid of them."

"Slide rules were going out for less than cost. They're not very profitable," she said. Dyer said she does not plan to stock slide rules any longer.

In contrast, however, Martha Camp of the University Bookstore still has slide rules and will continue to have them. But she admits calculators have their advantages.

"Calculators are easier and more accurate," she said, "there's no chance of interpretation." But she feels there will always be a market for slide rules because of the higher

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