

Bar code's co-inventor N. Joseph Woodland dies, 91 (Update)

December 13 2012, by Emery P. Dalesio



This undated family photo taken in the 1950s shows bar code co-inventor N. Joseph Woodland. Woodland, who with Bernard Silver invented the bar code that labels nearly every product in stores and has boosted productivity in nearly every sector of commerce worldwide, died Sunday, Dec. 10, 2012.. He was 91. (AP Photo/Courtesy the Woodland Famly)

(AP)—Norman Joseph Woodland, the co-inventor of the bar code that labels nearly every product in stores and has boosted productivity in nearly every sector of commerce worldwide, has died. He was 91.

Woodland died Sunday in Edgewater, New Jersey, from the effects of Alzheimer's disease and complications of his advanced age, his daughter,

Susan Woodland of New York, said Thursday.

Woodland and Bernard Silver were students at what is now called Drexel University in Philadelphia when Silver overheard a grocery-store executive asking an engineering school dean to channel students into research on how product information could be captured at checkout, Susan Woodland said.

Woodland notably had worked on the Manhattan Project, the U.S. military's atomic bomb development team. And having already earned a mechanical engineering degree, Woodland dropped out of graduate school to work on the bar code idea. He stole away to spend time with his grandfather in Miami to focus on developing a code that could symbolically capture details about an item, Susan Woodland.

The only code Woodland knew was the Morse Code he'd learned in the Boy Scouts, his daughter said. One day, he drew Morse dots and dashes as he sat on the beach and absent-mindedly left his fingers in the sand where they traced a series of parallel lines.

"It was a moment of inspiration. He said, 'instead of dots and dashes I can have thick and thin bars,'" Susan Woodland said.

Woodland and Silver submitted their patent in 1949 for a code patterned on concentric circles that looked like a bull's eye. The patent was issued in 1952, 60 years ago this fall. Silver died in 1963.

Woodland joined IBM in 1951 hoping to develop the bar code, but the technology wasn't accepted for more than two decades until lasers made it possible to read the code readily, the technology company said. In the early 1970s, Woodland moved to Raleigh to join a team at IBM's Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, facility. The team developed a bar-code-reading laser scanner system in response to demand from

grocers' desires to automate and speed checkout while also cutting handling and inventory management costs.

IBM promoted a rectangular barcode that led to a standard for universal product code technology. The first product sold using a UPC scan was a 67-cent package of Wrigley's chewing gum at a supermarket in Troy, Ohio, in June 1974, according to GS1 US, the American affiliate of the global standard-setting UPC body.

Today, about 5 billion products are scanned and tracked worldwide every day.

Woodland was born Sept 6, 1921, in Atlantic City, New Jersey.

Woodland and Microsoft founder Bill Gates were among those honored at the White House in 1992 for their achievements to technology, four months after President George H.W. Bush appeared amazed at a demonstration of a grocery checkout machine.

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