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# The Reactor

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## A relic from the age of linotypes

Today, Wednesday, March 20, is my 65th birthday. Besides triggering things like Medicare, it reminds me all the kids in my senior class at Santa Rosa High School are now about 65, give or take a year. (Some may still be in their fifties, if they're far enough from Santa Rosa to keep it plausible.)

Besides graduating in 1949, those 65-year-old kids and I have something else in common. Either we're grossly ignorant about a lot we should know, or we learned it after we got out of school.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to know rocket science was extremely primitive in 1949. The U.S. imported German scientists who had produced the buzz bombs so damaging to England. They were just starting the process that put men on the moon and sent probes to the planets. My high school texts had little about rockets.

My geology teacher in junior college, besides being memorably boring, taught out of a text, one of a long series produced by a daisy chain of Yale professors, that belittled continental drift. Alfred Wegener was called mistaken, discredited and outdated. Slowly in the fifties, then faster in the sixties, the texts gave continental drift and plate tectonics more plausibility. The Yale professors finally came around as the evidence piled up. I was in my thirties when the geological revolution took hold. I'm a complete amateur, but I know more about geology's big picture now than the most knowledgeable American teacher did in 1949.

If I knew anything about computers in 1949, it was about a few monster machines in large rooms. Air condi-

tioning cooled thousands of vacuum tubes. They used punch cards by the thousands. Even in the mid-sixties, there were only about 22,000 computers in this country. I was in my forties before computers were common and cheap enough to use in most businesses. I laid out a whole plan for putting Tribune circulation on computers, but I was told bookkeeping had priority. Knowing what I know now, I wonder if I would've been completely frustrated trying to run Tribune circulation on TRS 80's (also known as Trash eighties) from Radio Shack.

In 1949, I worked after school for the Santa Rosa Press Democrat, where 15 or 20 Linotypes on the third floor put the building in danger of collapse. Those magnificent, complicated dinosaurs, which molded lead alloy into lines of type, weighed substantially more than most automobiles. The men who ran them were highly skilled, well-paid union craftsmen. They would've been horrified if you'd told them in 1950 that within 35 years their skills would be obsolete, their linotypes museum pieces or scrap metal, their unions faded shadows.

There is no reason to think the speed of change and new knowledge will slow down. If you turn 65 in 2046, you will have seen at least as much change from 1996 as I have since 1946. If you're in high school, plan now to keep on learning all your life. If you don't make a habit of using libraries and every information source available and continually keeping up with new knowledge, you'll soon be left behind. You could be as out of date in a few years as linotypes, slide rules or fedoras.