

PODCAST ATM STORIES – EPISODE N°3 TABULATING MACHINE OPERATORS: WOMEN WHO TRANSFORMED THE BANKING SYSTEM

ARCHIVES & HISTORY DEPARTMENT

<https://histoire.bnpparibas/en>

December 2021



BNP PARIBAS

The bank
for a changing
world

ATM Stories – Always Telling More by BNP Paribas – the podcast that goes behind the scenes to bring you some little-known stories about the bank. Those moments that have shaped the character and culture of a 200-year-old group, to be enjoyed anywhere and at any time!

In this episode, let's rediscover a group of women who made their mark on the history of banking – tabulating machine operators.

From the start of the last century, their involvement and expertise in transforming banks' working methods made them icons of the mechanical revolution and mass information processing.

Between the two World Wars, women made up more than a third of the working population. This made them major players in the technological transformation that occurred, particularly in tabulating machines.

The end of the 19th century saw the emergence of electromechanical machines in France. Initially used in the field of official statistics, their use expanded into the banking sector from the 1920s. Innovative electronic accounting machines from the United States began to be used, particularly those produced by IBM.

However, electromechanical machines really had their heyday in the post-war period after 1950.

The term was originally used to refer to typewriters, but naturally evolved during this period into a generic term encompassing all machines intended for accounting.

These included the punched card machine, certainly one of the most common and most advanced, which provided huge added value in the management of tasks.

It provided a form of reusable memory for calculating staff payroll each month or for storing each customer's static data for account statements, for example. This machine also made it possible to automate sequences of basic operations.

This eliminated many human operations, reducing errors and thereby saving valuable time.

To take part in this machines race, it was vital to have qualified employees. Most of these staff were women, trained by the manufacturers themselves, for weeks or even months, in how to use the new equipment.

This inter-war period was an opportunity for them to learn about typing and accounting in particular.

Young girls were recruited to work in banks from the age of 16, once they had received their leaving certificate from school and with permission from their parents.

Intelligent, determined and spirited, even at that young age some already had employment experience.

After undergoing a general knowledge and dictation test, they were recruited to work at the Comptoir National d'Escompte de Paris or the Banque Nationale pour le Commerce et l'Industrie.

Like Mademoiselle Andrée, for instance, born in 1928 and employed at the Comptoir National d'Escompte de Paris in Saint-Quentin (France) from 17 years old. A letter of recommendation sent to the branch director mentions that she had already previously worked for two years as a typist.

The writer praises her education and robust health, qualities which made her particularly well-suited to working at the bank.

These operators mainly worked on tabulating, sorting and coupon-cutting machines. Many of them developed skills specific to a particular machine. This made them very fast and incredibly skilled.

These exceptional employees set the rhythm and the pace for all banking operations at the time, in response to the quest for productivity.

This rhythm and pace could be heard as you approached the tabulating machine rooms, vast halls where our operators bustled about in a mesmerizing whirl of activity, punctuated by the incessant sound of machines. Everything was orchestrated to perfection by these virtuosos.

Some of these emblematic machines, which remained in use for several decades, are preserved at the BNP Paribas Historical Archives in Brittany.

Particular attention was paid to these employees of the banks which went on to form BNP Paribas, both in terms of their well-being and achieving their goals.

Some documents in the archives reveal the quality of their education and the determination they showed in carrying out their duties.

This is evident, for instance, in many of their supervisors' appreciative comments in praise of this virtue:

"An agent driven by the desire to do well."

"This young girl already has some good theoretical knowledge about securities and coupons. Driven by a strong desire to learn her profession and eager to tackle more complicated work."

These technical and technological transformations led by women made a significant contribution to the productivity and stature of the banking sector. Through their commitment and expertise, each of them helped to achieve this transition in the management and centralisation of data.

That transition culminated in the arrival of computer systems which, almost 100 years later, now enable everyone to manage their accounts online and access banking services in just a few clicks.

And this period also marked a first step for women in the tech world, a first step on a long journey, as demonstrated by the work of "Women and Girls In Tech", an international organisation which aims to achieve progress for women through technology professions – a goal to which a large number of BNP Paribas employees are proud to make an active contribution!

Another fascinating story from the ATM Stories – Always Telling More. We will be back again very soon with more interesting stories from the history of BNP Paribas.