

Across the Pacific and Back: UNIVAC Commercial Products



Above: Women assembling antenna couplers at ERA's plant 3 along University Avenue in St. Paul, mid-1950s. Women accounted for over 70% of the workforce at the company's assembly plants during the 1950s.

Below, right: The family of antenna couplers. In 1956, UNIVAC began making couplers for the President's Air Force One planes. Proving to be one of the company's more successful programs, the antenna coupler profits enabled UNIVAC to open a new plant on West 7th Street in St. Paul.

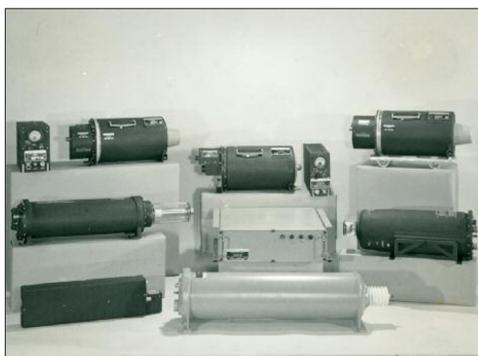
While other products did not enjoy the success of the antenna coupler program, UNIVAC produced a number of other commercial items including its Flight Plan Reservation System – one of the first of its kind. The system used the company's magnetic drum memory.

Numerous airline companies, including Minnesota-based Northwest Airlines (NWA), used this UNIVAC-designed technology. Beginning in 1947 the company began marketing themselves as "Northwest Orient" and offered many transpacific flights to Asian countries. This golden era for NWA ran through the 1970s, all helped along by UNIVAC technology.

Below: A map illustrating the extent of Northwest Airlines' transpacific flights and the UNIVAC technology used by the airliner. The two units in the center of the image are data entry terminals.

While UNIVAC continued to produce many products for the U.S. government under contract, sometimes the commercial world was more profitable. Beating RCA out of its contract with the Military, (then) ERA began producing antenna couplers for the Air Force in 1953. Later, ERA was awarded a contract with Boeing to produce the devices for their 707 commercial jet.

Designed to connect the external antenna to a plane's internal radio, they were installed in the tail or wing tip and could withstand temperatures down to -65 °F. Immensely profitable, between 1953 - 1970, the company produced over 12,000 antenna couplers; in the mid-1950s the couplers accounted for more than 25% of the company's profits.



[Bill] Norris would say it [the new plant] wouldn't have been built but for the coupler profits.

Marc Shoquist
UNIVAC
Engineer

From the VIP Club
(retired employees)
website

