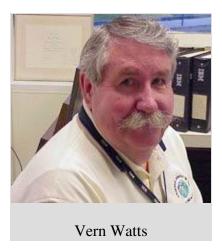# Godfather of DB2, Mr. IMS – Vern Watts

I have been very fortunate in my career to have known many of the founders of database and DB2. One of the most interesting and intriguing individuals is Vern Watts, Mr. IMS. Vern has worked 53 years for IBM. That's not a typo. He started working for IBM in 1956. He worked on the prototype, and continued to lead the team which invented the first commercial database, the IBM Information Management System, IMS. IMS was first used to track parts for the Apollo space program and is used by the vast majority of Fortune 500 companies worldwide.

Vern Watts

The early days of IMS required database pioneers to do what few (if any) had done before. As Vern recalled in an article available at vcwatts.org/ibm_story.html, "One of the problems with being early in the programming business is that there was nobody around with more experience than you, and a fairly simple program was still complex, because you didn't have any systems support." Vern would often go home with a book, consume it, and overnight become the expert on the topic. (Watch the YouTube clip.)

IMS has continued to evolve, and recently celebrated its 40th birthday with a new IMS 11. Vern Watts attributed the product's successful evolution to a sharp focus on how to get where the businesses want to go. "We don't want to jump on new fads and be kept busy chasing rainbows," Watts explains. To get a sense of just how far IMS has come in 40 years, you have to remember where it all started. See how the story continues (and add your own recollections) in the IBM Database Magazine wiki.

The IMS and DB2 for z/OS DBMS organizations work together often, and share two adjacent towers at Silicon Valley Lab. In the early part of my IBM career, DB2 was going to be IMS Version 2. The objective for DB2 Release 2 was to be able to use SQL directly on an IMS database and DL/I on the DB2 data. That effort was not successful, but most joint projects succeeded. Data sharing challenges were similar for IMS and DB2, but more rework was needed in DB2, as IMS already had block level data sharing. IMS and DB2 still share one component, the lock manager, which began as an IMS component and is now developed in the DB2 organization.

Every week or two, I'd find my way over to Vern's lunch table. He always had a thought for the challenge I was working on, and sometimes a bit of humor to help me keep on digging. We'd swap stories and ideas. "I think about my job in the car on the way home," he said. "I dream about it at night. I find it totally consuming and fascinating." Those dreams were often fruitful.

I still remember the first time one of the new programmers noted that they were not born yet when I was working. I've gotten used to that remark, and so has Vern. "When people find out what year I started working here, apart from commenting -- 'but I wasn't even born yet!' -- what impresses them most is that I'm still interested in my work, I'm still creative and I have no trouble keeping up with them." I've never seen Vern have trouble keeping up with anyone.

Bob Gilliam, a former manager of IMS noted, "What's remarkable is not just that he's been with IBM for so long, it's that he has continued to make contributions of all sizes, from developing new applications to everyday things like writing computer code."

Semi-retired after more than 50 years at IBM, Watts stayed involved with development efforts, including those for IMS 10 and 11, which brought XML, Web services, and SOA capabilities to the platform, even as they expanded the scalability. As they have from the beginning, customers drive the approach to adding new functions, Watts explains. "We always try to stay on top of the new technologies. We started it off with IMS being pretty much a closed system, and that was based on the experience of our customers, whose corporate systems needed to be closed and protected. We've tried to stay in the forefront."

Vern continued to invent new techniques through his career, and became a Distinguished Engineer Emeritus in retirement. He got to keep his office and his ThinkPad, while IBM paid his retirement. Lately, he has been working two days a week. We were working together on a YouTube video to encourage customers to use the Information Center two weeks ago. So we mark with sadness his passing. Watts suffered an aneurysm while enjoying a picnic lunch with his wife of many years during a sightseeing trip celebrating his recent 77th birthday. Vern lived as he wanted, and I'm sure that heaven for Vern is a new programming challenge.

Vern L. Watts
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x98hgieE08o
http://www.ibmdatabasemag.com/shared/printableArticle.jhtml?articleID=211300235

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