

Original Votomatic on way to Smithsonian

By William Brand
STAFF WRITER

BERKELEY — The original Votomatic voting machine — recently discovered in a dusty closet at the University of California, Berkeley — and its infamous offshoot, a machine that contributed to the cliffhanger 2000 Presidential election in Palm Beach, Fla., are headed for the Smithsonian.

Retired UC Berkeley engineering professor William Rouverol, who built that first machine for the late Berkeley government professor Joseph K. Harris, also has provided the Smithsonian with an oral history of the machine, which dominated American elections 30 years.

"Joe Harris would like this," Rouverol said. "He believed strongly in punch cards, and really, he was the father of computerized voting. His Votomatic, first used in 1962, got to be used by 44 percent of all voting precincts in the U.S. at its peak," he said.

"Votomatic only lost ground after our patents expired and people came into the market with knockoffs," Rouverol said. The two inventors sold the company long ago and pocketed the cash. When he died, Harris donated \$2.7 million to the UC Berkeley Institute of Governmental Studies.

The Votomatic prototypes went to the Institute after his

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death.

"They must have been sitting there since then," said director Marc Levin.

"We cleaned the closet for the first time in 15 years," said his assistant, Liz Wiener. "There they were. It was a great find."

The Votomatic is truly history, said Dr. William L. Bird, political history curator at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History.

"Every four years we go on the campaign trail looking for political items that tell about an election," Bird said.

"Naturally, the Votomatic for obvious reasons is something we would have to have in a collection about the 2000 election," he said. "We're delighted to have it."

He said he hopes to include both machines in a show planned for three years from now at the Washington institution called "The Machinery of Democracy."

But forget about "hanging chad" jokes.

The partially punched holes on voting punch cards and misaligned fold over ballots known as "butterfly ballots" fouled up the vote count in Palm Beach and other Florida counties. The election — which hinged on hundreds of votes — went to George W. Bush after the U.S. Supreme Court refused 5-4 to allow the disputed ballots to be counted.

Rouverol hastens to point out that mostly it was not Votomatic machines that created the hanging, or dimpled, chads controversy.

"I've talked to Palm Beach and two-thirds of the machines used in the 2000 election were Votomatics. But one-third were

so-called knockoffs of our machine. But five times as many disputed ballots came from the knockoffs as came from Votomatic machines," he said.

The difference is that Votomatic machines have a light above the ballot, so voters can clearly see that they have completely punched through the holes in the punch card opposite their candidates. The copies do not have lights, Rouverol said.

He has a patent pending on a new punch-card machine he calls the Verimatic. The new machine has a light under the ballot so that all the holes are clearly illuminated. Rouverol plans a ballot with white print and white holes on a black background for more contrast.

More and more counties are switching to optical scanning and computerized voting machines. Alameda County will use Votomatics for the last time in the March primary. Registrar of Voters Brad Clark said the county hopes to buy a \$12 million electronic touch screen system.

Results from each machine go to a diskette, which is inserted in a computer at election headquarters for rapid counting, Clark said.

"Bill Rouverol has been talking to us," he said.

"I don't want to knock the Votomatic system. We've been using it since 1968. It works relatively well; it's accurate if it's used properly. But it's been harder and harder to find parts."

However, Rouverol thinks touch screens and optical scanners are too advanced for many voters.

"There's still a place for the Votomatic," he said.