

What's in a box?

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February 2015

As well as having their own interesting evolution, slide rule boxes can sometimes yield clues to the early development of a manufacturer's slide rule output, where details are often sketchy at best. However, beyond their place in this history, each slide rule/box has its own history entwined with that of its owner(s), if only we would know it. We know the story for a rule we have had from new, but for those we acquire we can only surmise from any small clues we can find.

A pristine slide rule may have spent its life stored away, forgotten, or it may have been well looked after, but even a fastidious owner may have inscribed a name or a date. A worn electro rule was obviously a much used working tool, whereas a grimy one may have languished unused at the back of a workshop. And what of the nicks, knocks, scratches and marks, or the cryptic calculations and handwritten notes and mnemonics found usually on the box? They may all have had (perhaps important) meaning to the owner or author, but are impossible for us to decipher and put in any context. Even a carefully inscribed owner's name will probably mean nothing to us collectors.



However, in rare occurrences we may find something that we might understand, something which gives a personal glimpse into a hidden history. I have a boxed AW Faber model 367 from about 1906 that has 2 names written on it. On the front of the box inner sleeve is written "R.M. DAVIES.", "U. of MINN." (University of Minnesota), and on the back in a different hand "K.M. DAVIES '39", "HARVARD", "H-53 ELIOT" "CAMBRIDGE, MASS." ("39" could be "31" or "37"). The back of the slide rule also has "R M DAVIES" written and "RMD" scratched on the left and right ends respectively. Potentially, this is a slide rule owned and inscribed by "R" whilst at the University of Minnesota, and then passed on to their child "K" who took it to Harvard and similarly inscribed it around thirty years later (Eliot Street is just round the corner from Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts). This is a lovely notion, which I would like to believe, but would be difficult to corroborate. Nevertheless, some personal history has apparently emerged, which I think makes this slide rule a little more special for it.

I would urge everyone to scrutinise their boxes as thoroughly as the slide rules, and delight in any unexpected insight they give up, whatever it may be.