

Soon We All Will Be Public Records

A PREDICTION was made about 30 years ago that the time was near when each baby would have a lifetime number assigned by birth.

It would be used for documents, education, employment, military purposes, voting, credit, banking, pensions and nearly all other identification needs, imaginative forecasters said.

Individual "branding" is almost here. Numbers aren't yet assigned at birth but a program of fingerprinting children for identification in case they become lost or stolen is in operation.

A proposal has been advanced to have people fingerprinted when they obtain drivers licenses as a crime deterrent.

By the time youngsters reach 16 they may have Social Security numbers. These strings of figures are routinely utilized to number individual drivers licenses, which are routinely used as identification for cashing checks and other purposes of uncertain value.

These and other numbers are entered in government computers, too,

because practically everybody had transactions with Uncle Sam as taxpayer, draft registrant, Social Security contributor or beneficiary, farmer, businessman, welfare client, borrower or public employee.

There the notion of an individual assuming the personality of a number, identifiable by fingerprints and other data, assumes awesome proportions. Or perhaps it is the number that assumes the personality of an individual. Either way, privacy evaporates.

It is reported that federal agencies have an average of 15 files of information on each American. This is a total of more than 1 billion individual files on a population of some 230 million.

Possibly there is someone somewhere who is not yet a number in a government computer but that individual might be hard to find.

In addition, states must keep files on many of their citizens and business firms, organizations and publishers maintain lists with varying amounts of information on customers, members and subscribers.

Everyone who has ordered something by mail from a catalog or sent in a contribution probably is aware that this action will bring more catalogs and more solicitations. Mailing lists are rented and sold.

Recently, federal computers have been used to track down students who failed to repay educational loans, to uncover waste and fraud in federal agencies, and to locate recipients of illegal benefits.

There always have been instances where paper records were wrongfully obtained and misused, both in government and in business. The danger seems greater now. Computers contain larger amounts of information which may be tapped by anyone with access to the electronic monsters and code keys to make them "talk."

Within the years of the past generation the term "private citizen" has lost much of its previous meaning. From birth to death, our successes and failures may be filed away on silicon chips in a government computer that might become a public record.