there was no arrest, at least there was no more need to mount a search for the truck. That was "Hit" No. 1.

Next day, there was a more impressive demonstration of the system's value. The driver of a car which caused an accident at Oakville leaped out and fled, but a witness was able to describe him to police. A check of the computer proved "negative" — the car was not entered as stolen.

Later that day, a man reported to Hamilton city police that someone had stolen his car. Hamilton entered its licence number in the records by feeding it into the computer. And immediately the computer "recalled" that Oakville police had been asking about that same car four hours earlier.

The Hamilton policeman called Oakville — each computer response ends by ordering the recipient to check with the originator of the record — and as he noted down the description of the driver who had left the scene he realised it fitted the car owner, who was still standing at his desk. Faced with this fact under questioning, the man admitted his guilt.

Built-in "memory"

This "no-hit" feature of the computer, a built-in "memory" for unproductive inquiries which lasts 72 hours is invaluable in police work. In October, 1972, an RCMP patrolman near Regina became suspicious of a truck he was following. He stopped it but everything seemed to be in order and so, in the time-honoured police phrase, "the vehicle was allowed to proceed."

Nevertheless, the patrolman remained suspicious and radioed in to his detachment. The computer was queried and the answer was "negative." But a few minutes later the Regina city police entered the truck as stolen. The computer promptly followed up on its first response to the RCMP and the patrolman was contacted by radio so quickly that he could still see the truck ahead of him on the highway. He arrested its occupants and they eventually confessed to more than 20 break-ins.

As the system demonstrated its usefulness and more forces began to take advantage of it, a second category of information was added to the computer: the names of all those people "wanted or missing" — those for whom a warrant has been issued; those charged with an offence under the criminal code; those out on bail or parole; and those reported missing by relatives or others.

Once again, the value of the new investigational tool was obvious. In September last year, for instance, an OPP constable patrolling Highway 401 near Whitby, east of Toronto, spotted a man drinking beer while driving. He pulled him over and as a routine precaution radioed his name to the officer manning the computer terminal.

The car had Arizona licence plates, and while there is no link between the CPIC computer and its FBI counterpart, the RCMP does have a terminal by which it can request information from the FBI centre in Washington. The man's name was punched into the terminal — and it was found he was wanted for armed robbery in Detroit and Phoenix, Arizona.

The patrolman searched his car and found a loaded revolver and 50 rounds of ammunition. And instead of a mundane offence under the liquor control act the man was charged with possession of a restricted weapon and held for extradition to the US.

Complex inquiries

As CPIC celebrated its second anniversary last July, it had 333,000 "wanted or missing" persons on the computer and 110,000 "stolen vehicles" — a wide category that embraces not only cars, trucks and motor-cycles but stolen licence plates, validation tags, golf carts and even three aircraft. And since it went on line the computer had handled 8·7 million "transactions" in the "wanted or missing" category and 5·5 million inquiries about stolen vehicles.

Some of these inquiries can be complex. For instance, if you see a couple of holdup men escaping in a car but only catch part of its licence number — say the first and last digits — the computer can quickly produce for police a "print-out" of any or all stolen cars which have those digits in those places. If a police station in Quebec punches an inquiry into the computer in French, it will reply in French, even if the requested report originated in English from a force in Alberta.

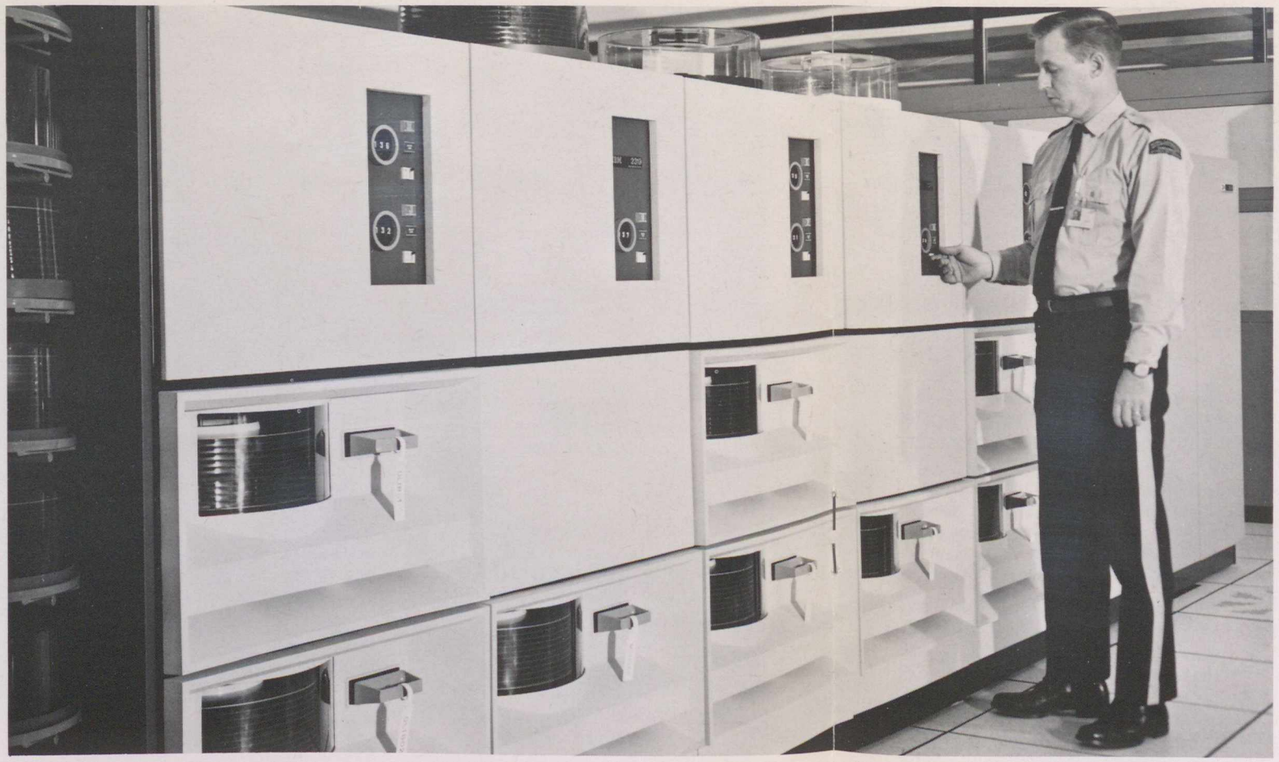
Police are clearly enthusiastic about the new system, but it is too early yet for national statistics to have been prepared to prove its effectiveness — though Statistics Canada has just such a study under way.

"Big Brother" worry

"I'm confident that the next print-out of Statistics Canada will show a marked increase in the recovery rate of stolen vehicles," says RCMP Assistant Commissioner A. C. Potter, CPIC director.

The experience of Penticton would appear to be typical. Within 30 days of a CPIC terminal being installed there in January last year, the police had scored 18 "hits" in the "wanted or missing" category, which resulted in 13 "apprehensions," eight of them arrests. Three stolen cars and a snowmobile were recovered with the help of the computer. Twelve arrests were made at other places as a result of information punched into the system by Penticton police.

The computer as an all-seeing and vindictive "Big Brother" is an image that bothers many, and Assistant Commissioner Potter admits he has had "queries" from civil rights groups about the CPIC system. "But the computer doesn't change anything," he says. "It just makes it quicker for police to get access to records that already exist in some police station somewhere. And if the computer says Philip Smith is wanted, the policeman on the spot still has to make sure you are



The disc storage unit houses the police operational data, which can be retrieved at the rate of 200,000 characters a second.

shared with anyone else. And according to officials of CN/CP Telecommunications, which installed it, it is burglar-proof. "An unauthorised terminal couldn't even develop a hand-shaking arrangement with the computer," one of them told me. Also, the information entered into the computer must follow a set pattern or the computer will reject it. And each force with access of a terminal must adhere to strict rules. For instance, there must be a numbered "case file" opened for anyone entered as "wanted" — and a warrant must have been issued for his arrest. In addition, each case must be followed through and "dead" information — if a wanted man is arrested, for example — must be removed from the computer right away: there are an average of 44,000 "transactions" cancelling or updating information every week.

To ensure the accuracy of the computer record. each force with a terminal is sent a monthly list of its entries which it must "validate" by checking against its own files. And the RCMP or such provincial authorities as the Ontario Police Commission carry out continual surprise "audits" to make sure the information on the computer conforms with the case files in police stations.

One of the complaints about the proliferation of computer dossiers is that you never know if your name is on one — and you can never check the information filed about you. Potter chuckled when I mentioned this. "We'd be grateful if a man came in here to see his record," he said, "because he wouldn't be on there unless he was wanted for something." (The owner's name is not part of the information filed when a vehicle is stolen.)

Potter conceded that there might be more protests about the latest phase of the CPIC system: the filing of the criminal histories of anyone convicted of an indictable offence. As CPIC entered its third year of operation, much concerned discussion was going on in police circles about the nature and extent of the information to be filed in this category, due to be introduced some time this fall. "But this will still be merely an investigational aid," Potter says. "The police will still have to rely on fingerprints for identification — and no one who hasn't been fingerprinted will be on there. If you doubt the accuracy of this system, then you have to doubt the accuracy of the whole police and court system.

"There's no danger in the retention of information; the only danger would be in its dissemination. And our system is more secure than the old one, in which we used the normal surface mail. What we are, really, is one great big filing cabinet for police forces across Canada." ✱

LEFT: A communications officer inserts a portable disc pack in the storage unit. Each pack stores 28m. characters of information. BELOW: Through the terminal in his own office the policeman has direct access to the central computer.

the Philip Smith wanted. The computer doesn't relieve the policeman of the responsibilities he's always had.

"To me it reflects a lack of understanding of this system and computers generally that these criticisms are being made. This is an in-house system between police forces and the information on the computer is not being disseminated to the public at large."

CPIC is a private, "dedicated" system, which means that the computer is not