

She Shuns Computers For Her Beaded Board

Cars and trucks headed for the world's third busiest airport move by outside her office.

Down the hall, computers designed to help man with an ever-increasing number of calculations silently flash.

Nearby, adding machines mechanically total long columns of figures.

In the midst of this electronic age, Matsumi Toji silently works her fingers across rows of beads, checking lines of typed figures which lie before her.

MATSUMI, of 22515 Hall-dale Ave., is an accounting clerk for Western Airlines.

The rows of beads are part of a "soroban," a time-tested computer which does its work without the aid of electronic instruments. The soroban is a Japanese derivation of the ancient Chinese abacus.

Various forms of the abacus have been used by people

in many lands, including the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and other Europeans. The soroban was first used in Matsumi's homeland of Japan in the 16th Century and today is still a dependable, swift and frequently used instrument, despite the popularity of electronic devices.

MATSUMI'S job is to check station boarding figures in the statistics section of the

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airline's revenue accounting department. She says the soroban is easier and faster to use than an adding machine. Her co-workers claim that she can add, subtract, multiply, and divide on the beaded

board faster than they can do the same calculations on an adding machine.

In a contest staged a number of years ago in Tokyo, a skilled abacus operator was matched against a person using a computer. In problems of addition and subtraction, the abacus won—possibly because much of the abacus computing work is done mentally and not recorded on beads.

JAPANESE students of soroban work from the tenth

grade to the first grade. Matsumi, who began her soroban training in grammar school, has worked up to the second grade. Students must pass tests as they move upward to a new grade.

"The tests to pass each grade are very difficult, but it is similar to learning to use a typewriter — it just takes practice," Matsumi said.

A native of Nachikatsura-Cho, located south of Osaka, Japan, Matsumi moved to Seattle in 1959.

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