



US00RE39227E

(19) **United States**
(12) **Reissued Patent**
Lien et al.

(10) **Patent Number:** **US RE39,227 E**
(45) **Date of Reissued Patent:** **Aug. 8, 2006**

(54) **CONTENT ADDRESSABLE MEMORY (CAM) ARRAYS AND CELLS HAVING LOW POWER REQUIREMENTS**

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(21) Appl. No.: **10/403,581**

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(22) Filed: **Mar. 31, 2003**

U.S. Appl. No. 10/106,420, filed Mar. 26, 2002.

Related U.S. Patent Documents

Reissue of:

- (64) Patent No.: **6,128,207**
- Issued: **Oct. 3, 2000**
- Appl. No.: **09/185,057**
- Filed: **Nov. 2, 1998**

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(57) **ABSTRACT**

U.S. Applications:

(62) Division of application No. 10/246,586, filed on Sep. 18, 2002, now abandoned.

(51) **Int. Cl.**
GI1C 15/00 (2006.01)

(52) **U.S. Cl.** **365/49; 365/156; 365/189.07; 365/190**

(58) **Field of Classification Search** **365/49, 365/156, 189.07, 190**

See application file for complete search history.

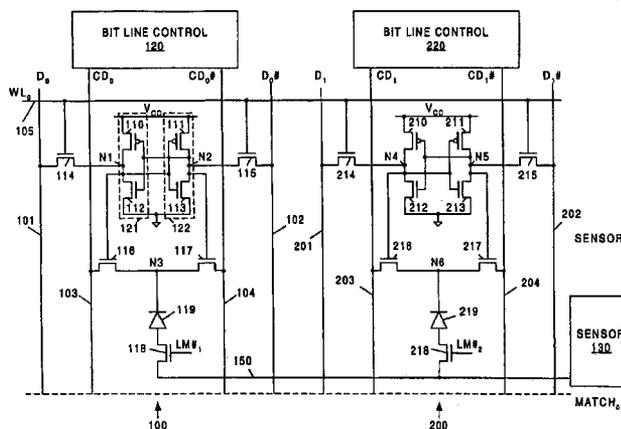
A content addressable memory (CAM) cell that includes a static random access memory (SRAM) cell that operates in response to a V_{CC} supply voltage. A first set of bit lines coupled to the SRAM cell are used to transfer data values to and from the SRAM cell. The signals transmitted on the first set of bit lines have a signal swing equal to the V_{CC} supply voltage. A second set of bit lines is coupled to receive a comparison data value. The signals transmitted on the second set of bit lines have a signal swing that is less than the V_{CC} supply voltage. For example, the signal swing on the second set of bit lines can be as low as two transistor threshold voltages. The second set of bit lines is biased with a supply voltage that is less than the V_{CC} supply voltage. A sensor circuit is provided for comparing the data value stored in the CAM cell with the comparison data value. The sensor circuit pre-charges a match scan line prior to a compare operation. If the data value stored in the CAM cell does not match the comparison data value, the match sense line is pulled down. The signal swing of the match sense line is smaller than the V_{CC} supply voltage. For example, the signal swing on the match sense line can be as low as one transistor threshold voltage.

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68 Claims, 14 Drawing Sheets



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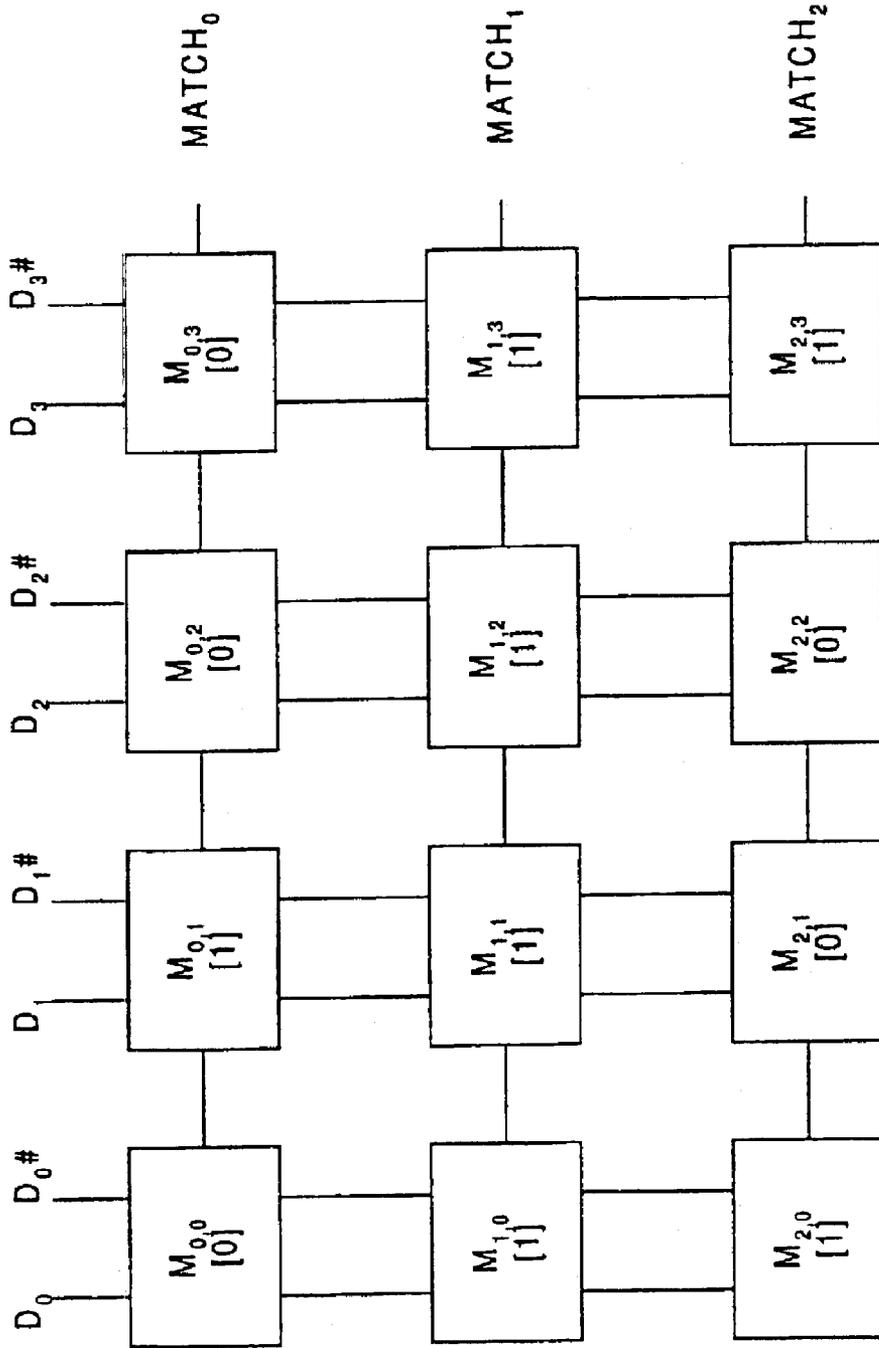


FIG. 1
(PRIOR ART)

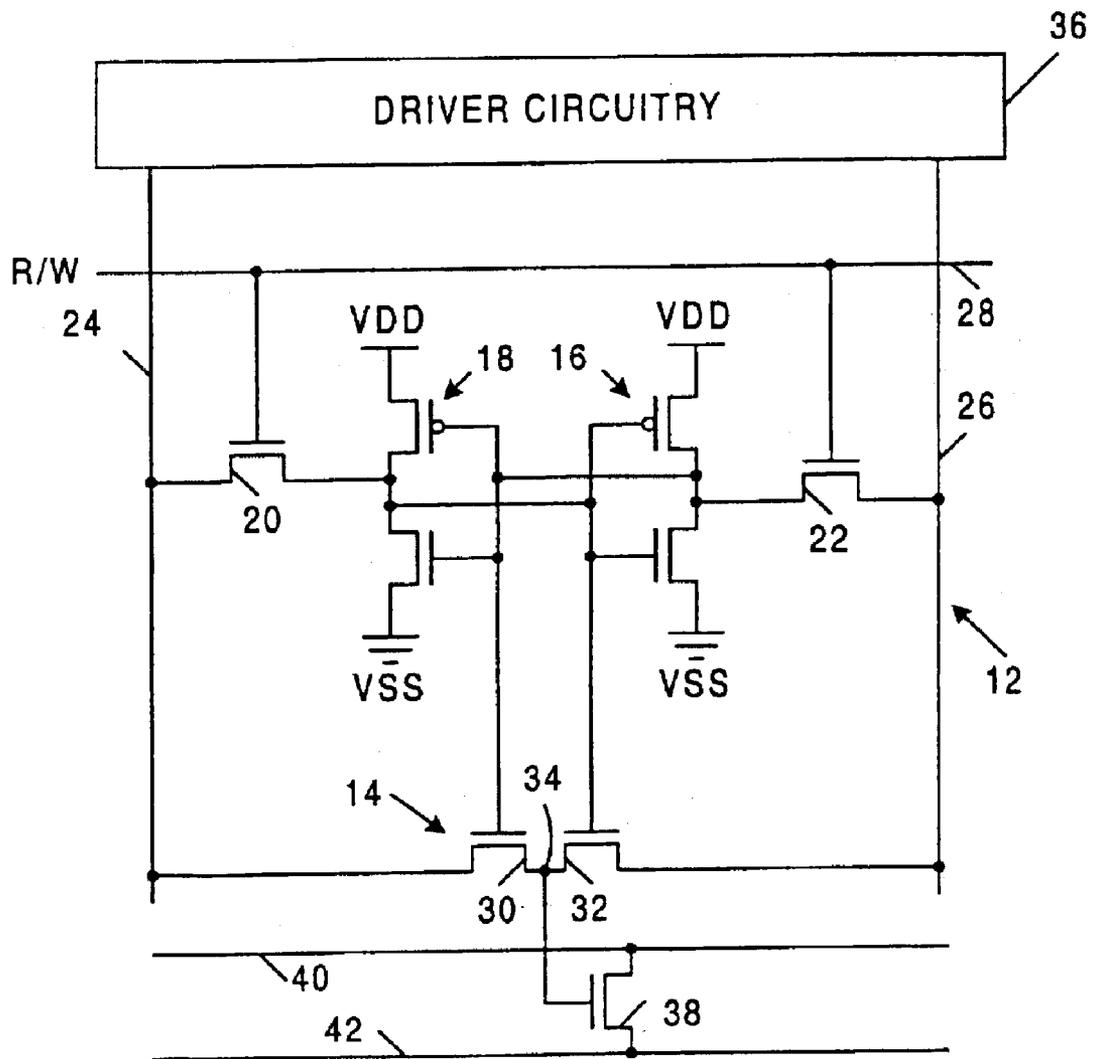


FIG. 2
(PRIOR ART)

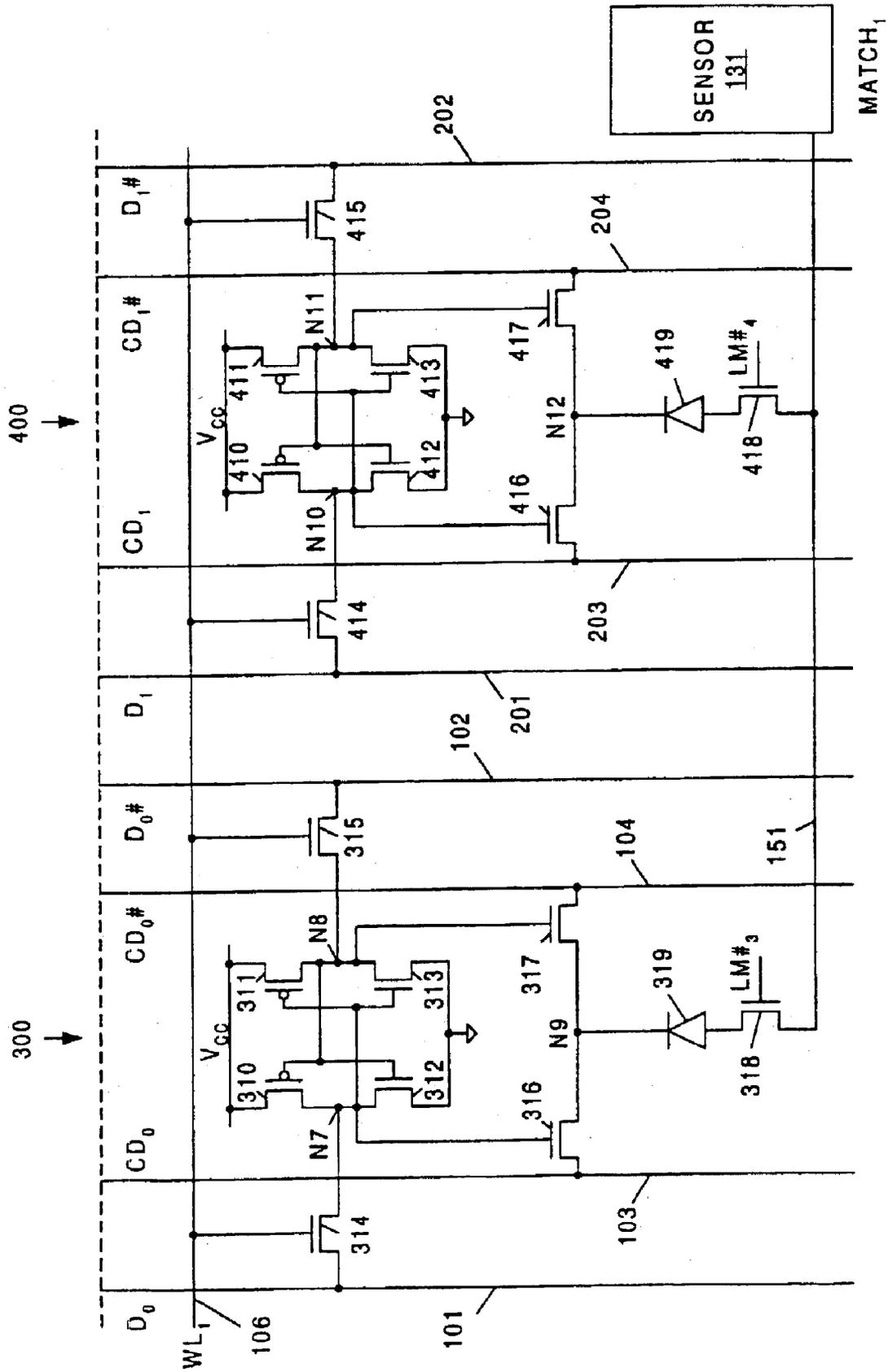


FIG. 3B

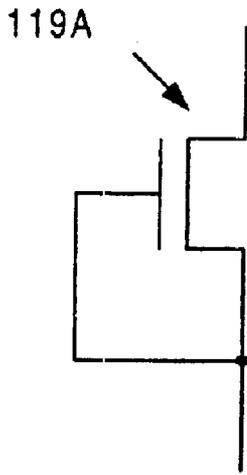


FIG. 4A

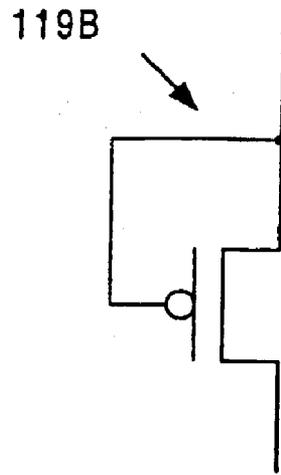


FIG. 4B

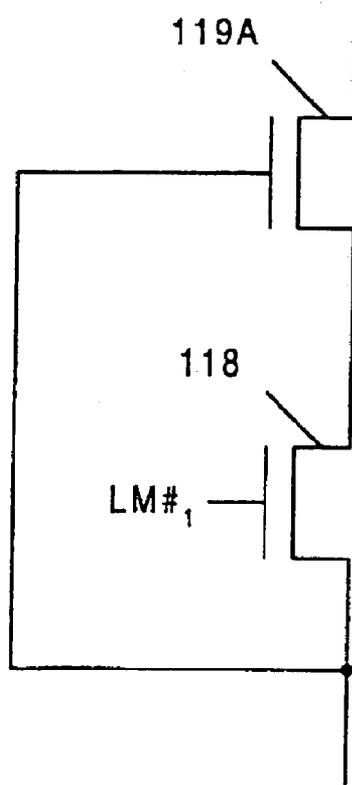


FIG. 4C

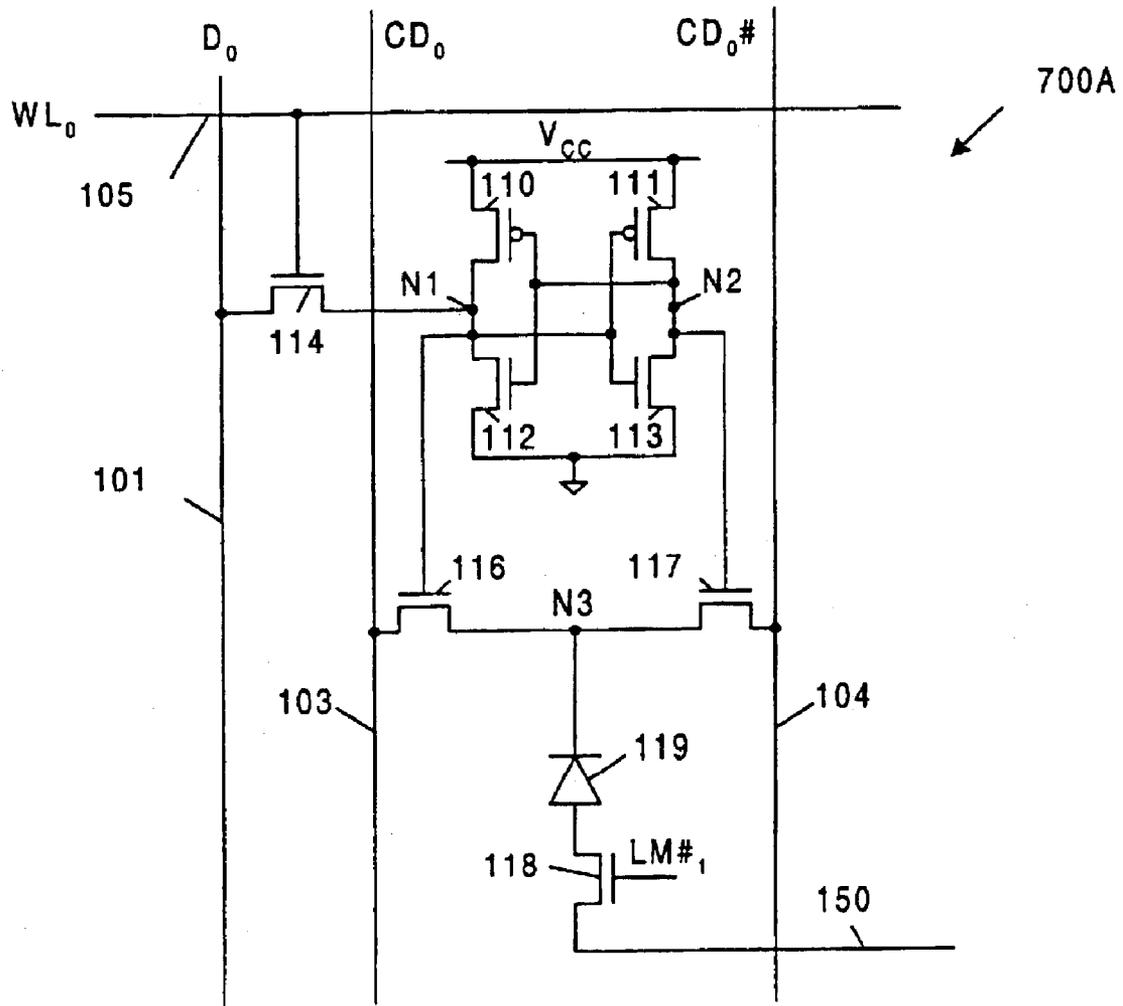


FIG. 7A

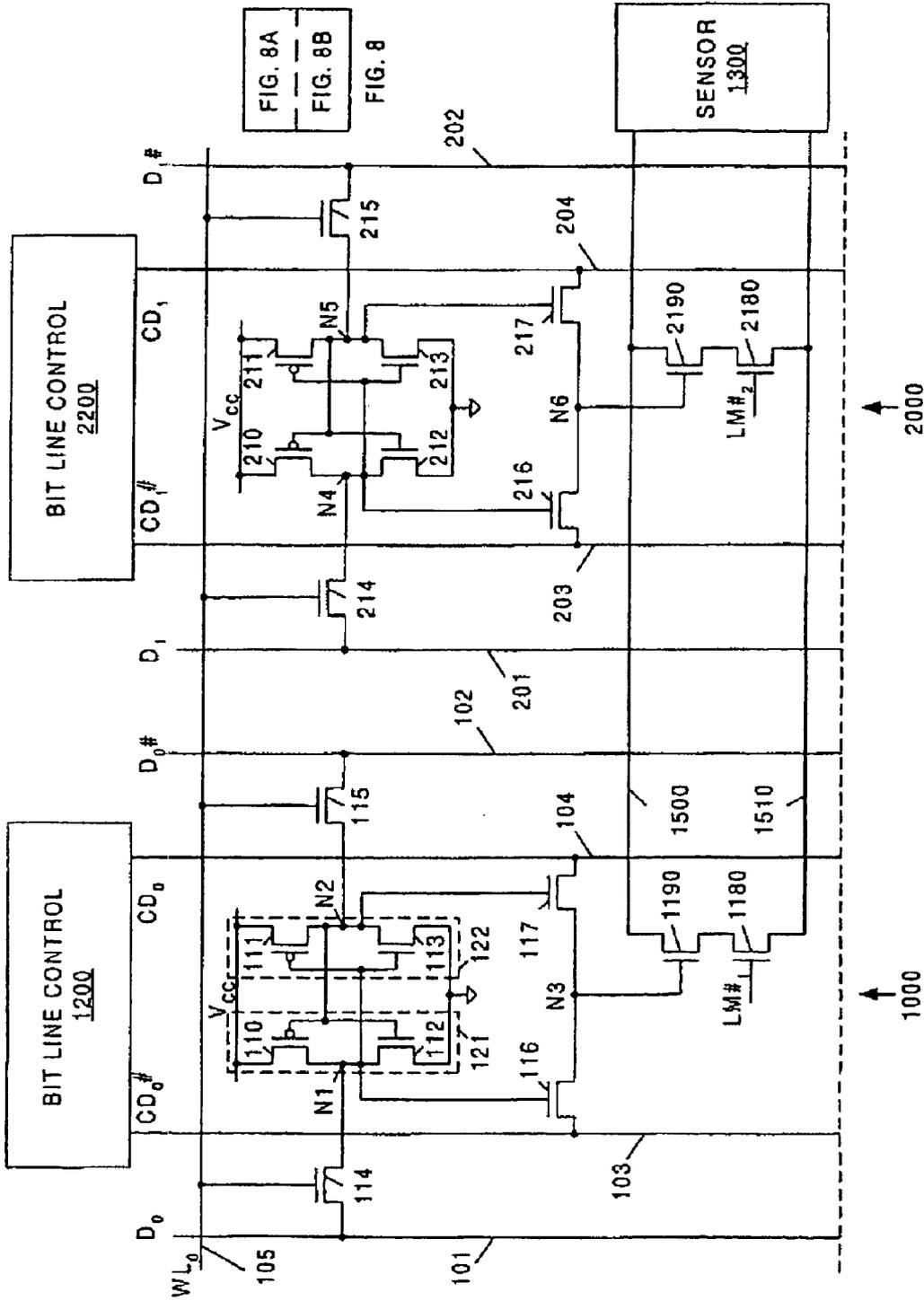


FIG. 8A
Amended

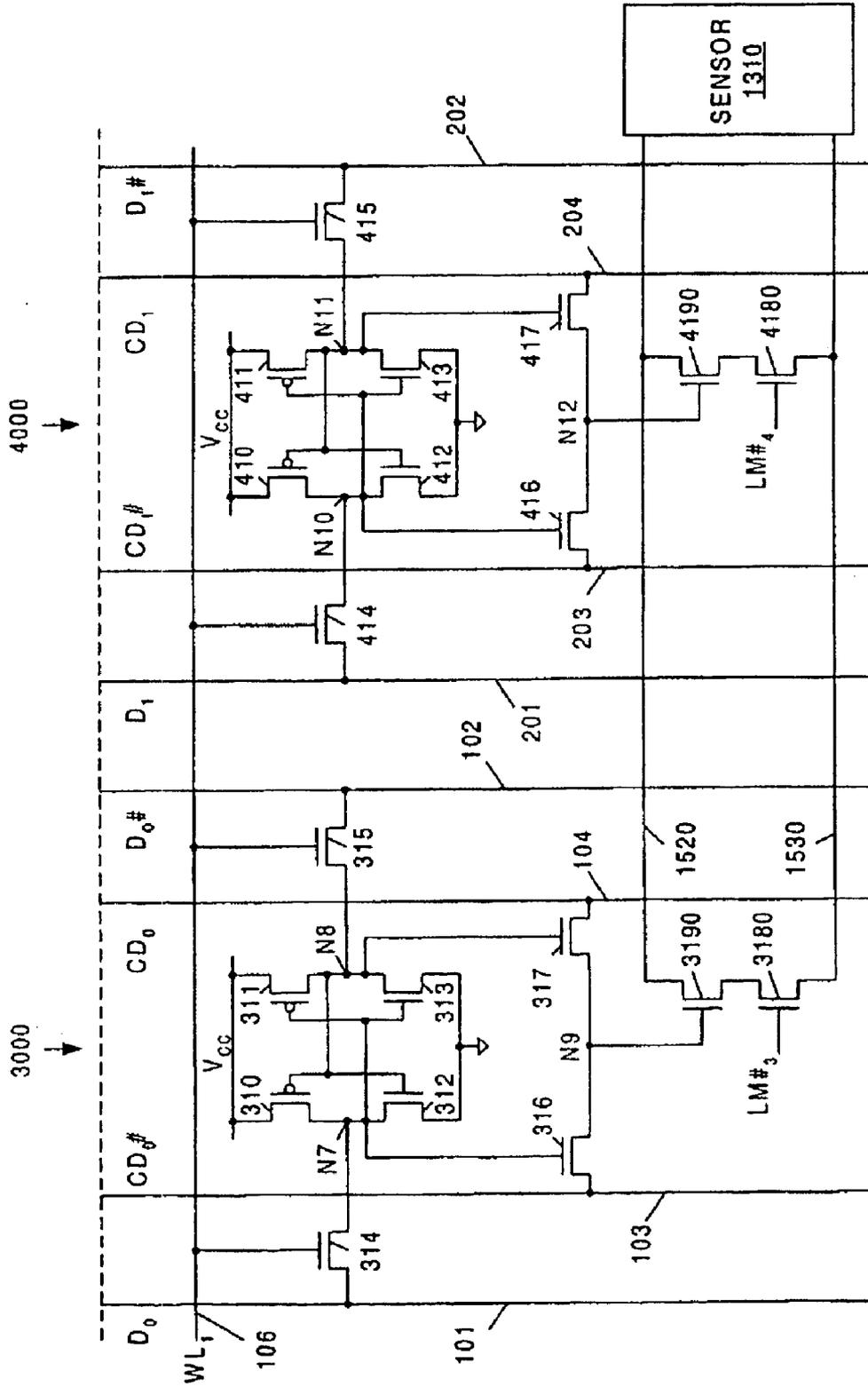


FIG. 8B
Amended

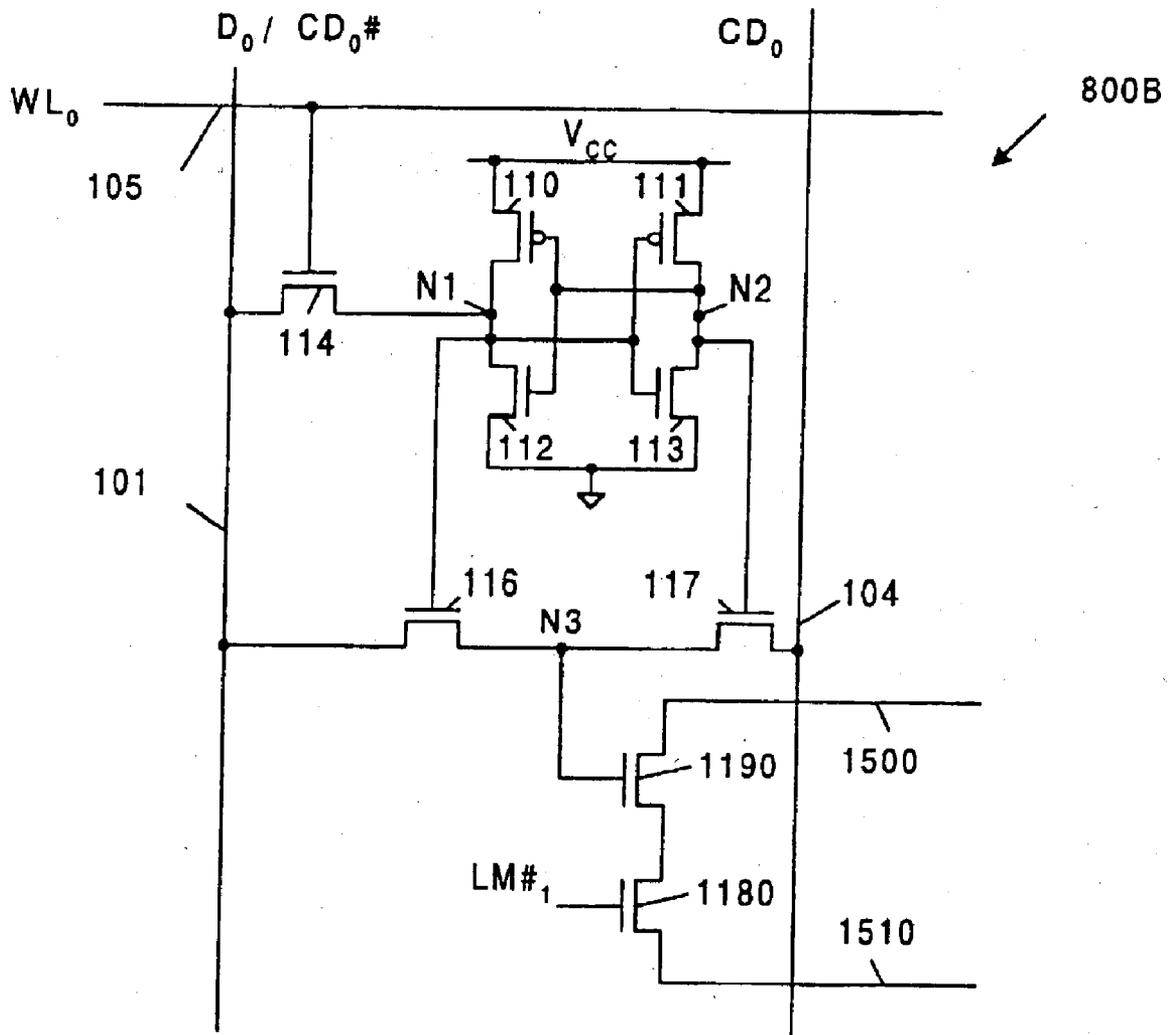


FIG. 10B

**CONTENT ADDRESSABLE MEMORY (CAM)
ARRAYS AND CELLS HAVING LOW POWER
REQUIREMENTS**

Matter enclosed in heavy brackets [] appears in the original patent but forms no part of this reissue specification; matter printed in italics indicates the additions made by reissue.

This application is a divisional of U.S. application Ser. No. 10/246,586, filed Sep. 18, 2002, now abandoned, which is a reissue of U.S. application Ser. No. 09/185,057, filed Nov. 2, 1998, now U.S. Pat. No. 6,128,207.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

1. Field of the Invention

The present invention relates to content addressable memory (CAM) cells. More specifically, the present invention relates to nine transistor CAM cells and methods for operating these cells in an array.

2. Discussion of Related Art

CAM cells are defined as memory cells that are addressed in response to their content, rather than by a physical address within an array. FIG. 1 is a block diagram of a conventional memory array formed using twelve CAM cells. The CAM cells are labeled $M_{X,Y}$, where X is the row of the array, and Y is the column of the array. Thus, the array includes CAM cells $M_{0,0}$ to $M_{2,3}$. Each of the CAM cells is programmed to store a data value. In the described example, the data value stored in each CAM cell is indicated by either a "0" or a "1" in brackets. For example, CAM cells $M_{0,0}$, $M_{0,1}$, $M_{0,2}$ and $M_{0,3}$ store data values of 0, 1, 0 and 0, respectively. Each row of CAM cells is coupled to a common match line. For example, CAM cells $M_{0,0}$, $M_{0,1}$, $M_{0,2}$ and $M_{0,3}$ are coupled to match line MATCH₀.

The array of CAM cells is addressed by providing a data value to each column of CAM cells. Thus data values D_0 , D_1 , D_2 and D_3 are provided to columns 0, 1, 2 and 3, respectively. Note that complementary data values $D_0\#$, $D_1\#$, $D_2\#$ and $D_3\#$ are also provided to columns 0, 1, 2 and 3, respectively. If the data values stored in a row of the CAM cells match the applied data values D_0 – D_3 , then a match condition occurs. For example, if the data values D_0 , D_1 , D_2 and D_3 are 0, 1, 0 and 0, respectively, then the data values stored in the CAM cells of row 0 match the applied data values. Under these conditions, the MATCH₀ signal is asserted high. Because the applied data values D_0 , D_1 , D_2 and D_3 do not match the data values stored in the CAM cells of rows 1 or 2, the MATCH₁ and MATCH₂ signals are de-asserted low. The match signals Match₀–MATCH₂ can be used for various purposes, such as implementing virtual addressing, in a manner (known to those skilled in the art).

Many different types of CAM cells have been designed. Important considerations in the design of a CAM cell include: the number of transistors required to implement the cell, the power required to operate the CAM cell, and the speed of the CAM cell. In general, it is desirable to have a CAM cell that is implemented using a relatively small number of transistors, such that the layout area of the CAM cell is minimized. It is also desirable for the CAM cell to have a low power requirement and a fast operating speed.

FIG. 2 is a circuit diagram of a conventional nine transistor (9-T) CAM cell 10. CAM cell 10 is described in detail in U.S. Pat. No. 4,723,224. CAM cell 10 includes a conventional static random access memory (SRAM) cell 12 and as exclusive OR (XOR) gate 14. SRAM cell 12 includes access transistors 20 and 22, and cross-coupled inverters 16

and 18. Access transistors 20 and 22 are coupled to word line 28 and bit lines 24 and 26, as illustrated. Driver circuitry 36 provides a data value (D) and the inverse of the data value (D#) to bit lines 24 and 26, respectively, during write and compare operations.

SRAM cell 12 is written like a conventional SRAM cell. That is, a logic high value is applied to word line 28, and data values D and D# are applied to bit lines 24 and 26, respectively. As a result, the data values D and D# are latched by inverters 16 and 18, such that the data value D is provided as the output of inverter 18, and the inverted data value D# is provided at the output of inverter 16.

XOR gate 14 includes n-channel transistors 30 and 32, which are connected in series between bit lines 24 and 26. The output terminal of inverter 16 is connected to the gate of transistor 30, such that the inverted data value D# stored in SRAM cell 12 is provided to the gate of transistor 30. Similarly, the output terminal of inverter 18 is connected to the gate of transistor 32, such that the data value D stored in SRAM cell 12 is provided to the gate of transistor 30. Transistors 30 and 32 are commonly connected at node 34, which forms the output terminal of XOR gate 14. Node 34 is connected to the gate of n-channel transistor 38. Transistor 38 has a source coupled to ground line 42, and a drain coupled to match line 40.

CAM cell 10 performs a compare operation as follows. Driver circuitry 36 applies a comparison data value (C) and its complement (C#) to bit lines 24 and 26, respectively. If the comparison data value C matches the data value D stored in SRAM cell 12, then node 34 is connected to receive a logic "0" signal. As a result, transistor 38 is turned off, thereby isolating match line 40 from ground line 42. Under these conditions, match line 40 retains a pre-charged logic high value.

Conversely, if the comparison data value C does not match the data value D stored in SRAM cell 12, then node 34 is connected to receive a logic "1" signal. As a result, transistor 38 is turned on, thereby coupling match line 40 to ground line 42. Under these conditions, match line 40 is pulled down toward ground.

CAM cell 10 exhibits relatively high power consumption because the same driver circuitry 36 is used to supply the write data values as well as the comparison data values. Driver circuitry 36 is powered by the V_{CC} supply voltage, such that both the write and comparison data values have logic high values of V_{CC} . Moreover, the compare operation of CAM cell 10 is relatively slow because the capacitance of SRAM cell 12 is coupled to bit lines 24 and 26 during the compare operation.

It would therefore be desirable to have an improved CAM cell which allows a compare operation to be carried out using a supply voltage less than the V_{CC} supply voltage. It would also be desirable for the improved CAM cell to have bit lines that are not coupled to the capacitance introduced by an SRAM cell during a compare operation. It would also be desirable for the improved CAM cell to be implemented using fewer transistors than conventional CAM cell 10. It would further be desirable for the improved CAM cell to have global and local masking capabilities.

SUMMARY

Accordingly, the present invention provides a CAM cell that implements a match line having a signal swing equal to one transistor threshold voltage, or about 0.3 Volts. The operating power of the CAM cell of the present invention is relatively low because the match line only undergoes a small voltage swing during a compare operation.

A CAM in accordance with the present invention includes an SRAM cell that operates in response to a V_{CC} supply voltage. One or more read/write bit lines are coupled to the SRAM cell, thereby allowing read and write data values to be transferred to and from the SRAM cell. The V_{CC} and ground voltage supplies provide signals to the read/write bit lines. That is, the signals applied to the read/write bit lines vary between a high voltage of V_{CC} and a low voltage of 0 Volts.

One or more comparison bit lines are coupled to receive a comparison data value. The signals transmitted on the comparison bit lines have a signal swing that is less than the V_{CC} supply voltage. In one embodiment, the signal swing on the comparison bit lines is equal to two times the transistor threshold voltage. Thus, if the transistor threshold voltage is equal to 0.3 Volts, then the signal swing on the comparison bit lines is equal to 0.6 Volts. Because the comparison bit lines are not directly connected to the SRAM cell, the capacitance of the SRAM cell is advantageously not coupled to the comparison bit lines. This improves both operating speed and power consumption of the CAM cell.

Moreover, the signals transmitted on the comparison bit lines are generated by a bit line control circuit that is powered in response to a supply voltage V_{CC1} that is significantly lower than the V_{CC} supply voltage. In one embodiment, the supply voltage V_{CC1} can have a value as low as 0.9 Volts. By lowering the supply voltage required to perform a compare operation, the power of operating the CAM is advantageously reduced.

A sensor circuit is provided for comparing the data value stored in the CAM cell with the comparison data value provided on the comparison bit lines. The sensor circuit pre-charges the match line prior to a compare operation. If the data value stored in the CAM cell does not match the comparison data value, the match line is pulled down. The signal swing of the match line is smaller than the V_{CC} supply voltage. In one embodiment, the signal swing on the match line is equal to transistor threshold voltage, or 0.3 Volts.

The sensor circuit monitors the voltage on the match line to determine whether the comparison data value matches the data value stored in the CAM cell (a match condition), or whether the comparison data value fails to match the data value stored in the CAM cell (a no-match condition). The sensor circuit converts the small swing signal on the match line to a large swing output signal. This output signal has a signal swing equal to the V_{CC} supply voltage.

In one embodiment of the invention, a bit line control circuit is provided to control the voltages on the comparison bit lines. The bit line control circuit equalizes the voltages on the comparison bit lines to an intermediate voltage prior to each compare operation. As a result, less power is consumed during the compare operation. In one embodiment the intermediate voltage is equal to a transistor threshold voltage (e.g., 0.3 Volts).

The present invention will be more fully understood in view of the following description and drawings.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIG. 1 is a block diagram of a conventional array of CAM cells;

FIG. 2 is a circuit diagram of a conventional nine transistor CAM cell;

FIG. 3, which consists of FIGS. 3A and 3B as illustrated, is a schematic diagram of a 2x2 array of nine-transistor CAM cells in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention;

FIGS. 4A and 4B are schematic diagrams of diode connected transistors that can be used in various embodiments of the invention;

FIG. 4C is a schematic diagram of a diode-connected transistor and a local masking transistor in accordance with another embodiment of the invention;

FIG. 5 is a schematic diagram of the sensor circuit of FIG. 3 in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 6 is a schematic diagram of the bit line control circuit of FIG. 3 in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 7A is a schematic diagram of an 8-T CAM cell in accordance with one variation of the present invention;

FIG. 7B is a schematic diagram of an 8-T CAM cell in accordance with another variation of the present invention;

FIG. 8, which consists of FIGS. 8A and 8B as illustrated, is a schematic diagram of a 2x2 array of nine-transistor CAM cells in accordance with another embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 9 is a schematic diagram of the sensor circuit of FIG. 8 in accordance with one embodiment of the present invention;

FIG. 10A is a schematic diagram of an 8-T CAM cell in accordance with one variation of the present invention; and

FIG. 10B is a schematic diagram of an 8-T CAM cell in accordance with another variation of the present invention.

DETAILED DESCRIPTION

FIG. 3, which consists of FIGS. 3A and 3B as illustrated, is a schematic diagram of an array of nine-transistor CAM cells 100, 200, 300 and 400. CAM cell 100 includes read/write bit lines 101–102, compare bit lines 103–104, word line 105, p-channel transistors 110–111, n-channel transistors 112–118, and diode element 119. P-channel transistors 110–111 and n-channel transistors 112–115 are connected as a six-transistor SRAM cell. More specifically, transistors 110 and 112 are connected in series between the V_{CC} supply terminal and the ground supply terminal to form a first inverter 121. Similarly, transistors 111 and 113 are connected between the V_{CC} supply terminal and the ground supply terminal to form a second inverter 122. Inverters 121 and 122 are cross-coupled, thereby forming a storage latch that stores a data value D_0 . The output terminal of inverter 121 is labeled node N1, and the output terminal of inverter 122 is labeled node N2.

N-channel transistor 114 is coupled as an access transistor between node N1 and read/write bit line 101. Similarly, n-channel transistor 115 is coupled as an access transistor between node N2 and read/write bit line 102. Read/write bit lines 101 and 102 are coupled to receive read/write data values D_0 and $D_0\#$, respectively, from column decoder circuitry (not shown). Read/write data value D_0 has a logic high value of V_{CC} and a logic low level of 0 Volts during a write operation. Similarly, read/write data value $D_0\#$ has a logic high value of V_{CC} and a logic low level of $V_{CC}-CV$ during a read operation (where CV is about 300 mV). The gates of access transistors 114 and 115 are commonly connected to word line 105. Word line 105 is coupled to receive word line signal WL_0 from row decoder circuitry (not shown). The word line signal VL_0 has a logic high value of V_{CC} and a logic low value of 0 Volts.

Comparison bit lines 103 and 104 are coupled to receive comparison data values CD_0 and $CD_0\#$ from bit line control circuit 120, which is described in more detail below in

connection with FIG. 5. Comparison data value CD_0 has a logic high value of 0.6 Volts, a logic low value of 0 Volts, and a pre-charge value of 0.3 Volts. Thus, the voltages used during a comparison operation are much lower than the V_{CC} supply voltage. Moreover, bit line control circuit **120** operates in response to a supply voltage V_{CC1} , which is much less than the V_{CC} supply voltage. In the described embodiment, the V_{CC1} supply voltage is about 0.9 Volts. As a result, the power requirements of CAM cell **100** are much less than a conventional 9-T CAM cell. In addition, the bit lines **103–104** used to perform a comparison are not coupled to the 6-T SRAM cell. As a result, the comparison operation is not burdened by the capacitance introduced by the 6-T SRAM cell. N-channel transistors **116** and **117** are connected in series between bit lines **103** and **104**. Transistors **116** and **117** are commonly connected at node N3. The gates of transistors **116** and **117** are connected to nodes N1 and N2, respectively. Node N3 is coupled to a match sense line **150** through diode element **119** and n-channel transistor **118**. Match sense line **150** is coupled to sensor circuit **130**.

Diode element **119** can be implemented in various ways, including a conventional p-n junction or a diode-connected transistor. FIGS. 4A and 4B are schematic diagrams of diode connected transistors **119A** and **119B**, respectively, that can be used to implement diode element **119** in accordance with various embodiments of the invention. Thus, diode element **119** is counted as one of the nine transistors of CAM cell **100**. As described in more detail below, n-channel transistor **118** is an optional local masking transistor. Because local masking transistor **118** is optional, this transistor is typically not included in determining the transistor count of CAM cell **100**. Local masking transistor **118** is coupled to receive a local mask enable signal $LM\#_1$. FIG. 4c is a schematic diagram illustrating local masking transistor **118** coupled to diode connected transistor **119A** in accordance with another variation.

CAM cell **200** includes read/write bit lines **201–202**, comparison bit lines **203–204**, word line **105**, p-channel transistors **210–211**, n-channel transistors **212–218**, and diode element **219**. The elements of CAM cell **200** are connected in the same manner as the elements of CAM cell **100**. CAM cell **200** is connected to word line **105** in the same manner as CAM cell **100**. Similarly, CAM cell **200** is connected to match sense line **150** in the same manner as CAM cell **100**. Read/write bit lines **201** and **202** of CAM cell **200** are coupled to receive read/write data values D_1 and $D_1\#$ from column control circuitry (not shown). Comparison bit lines **203** and **204** of CAM cell **200** are coupled to receive comparison data values CD_1 and $CD_1\#$ from bit line control circuit **220**.

CAM cell **300** includes read/write bit lines **101–102**, comparison bit lines **103–104**, word line **106**, p-channel transistors **310–311**, n-channel transistors **312–318**, and diode element **319**. Similarly, CAM cell **400** includes read/write bit lines **201–202**, comparison bit lines **203–204**, word line **106**, p-channel transistors **410–411**, n-channel transistors **412–418**, and diode element **419**. The elements of CAM cells **300** and **400** are connected in the same manner as the elements of CAM cell **100**. CAM cells **300** and **400** are coupled to a second word line **106** in the same manner that CAM cells **100** and **200** are coupled to word line **105**. Similarly, CAM cells **300** and **400** are coupled to a second match sense line **151** in the same manner that CAM cells **100** and **200** are coupled to match sense line **150**. Match sense line **151** is coupled to a sensor circuit **131**, which is identical to sensor circuit **130**. Note that CAM cells **100** and **300** share bit lines **101–104**. Similarly, CAM cells **200** and **400** share bit lines **201–204**.

Although the array illustrated in FIG. 3 only has two rows and two columns of CAM cells, it is understood that this array can be expanded to include many more rows and columns of CAM cells. The manner of expansion is obvious in view of the 2x2 array of CAM cells **100**, **200**, **300** and **400** shown in FIG. 3. In a particular example, an array of CAM cells includes eight rows and seventy-two columns of CAM cells.

Data values are written to a row of CAM cells (e.g., CAM cells **100** and **200**), as follows. The voltage WL_0 on word line **105** is pulled up to the V_{CC} supply voltage (e.g., 2.5 Volts) by the row decoder circuitry. As a result, access transistors **114–115** and **214–215** are turned on, thereby coupling bit lines **101–102** and **201–202** to the storage latches in CAM cells **100** and **200**. The voltage WL_1 on the second word line **106** is pulled down to 0 Volts, thereby turning off access transistors **314–315** and **414–415** in CAM cells **300** and **400**. As a result, bit lines **101–102** and **201–202** are isolated from the storage latches in CAM cells **300** and **400**.

The column decoder circuitry applies write data values D_0 , $D_0\#$, D_1 , and $D_1\#$ to bit lines **101**, **102**, **201** and **202**, respectively. These write data values have a logic high value equal to the V_{CC} supply voltage and a logic low value of 0 Volts. In the described example, data values D_0 , $D_0\#$, D_1 , and $D_1\#$ have values of V_{CC} , 0, 0 and V_{CC} , respectively. The write data values D_0 , $D_0\#$, D_1 , and $D_1\#$ are transmitted through turned on access transistors **114–115** and **214–215** to the storage latches in CAM cells **100** and **200**. The word line signal WL_0 is then de-asserted low, thereby turning off access transistors **114–115** and **214–215**, and latching the write data values D_0 , $D_0\#$, D_1 , and $D_1\#$ in the storage latches of CAM cells **100** and **200**. Write operations are therefore performed in the same manner as in a conventional six-transistor SRAM array. In the present example, nodes N1, N2, N4 and N5 store voltages of V_{CC} , 0 Volts, 0 Volts and V_{CC} , respectively.

Data values are read from a row of CAM cells (e.g., CAM cells **100** and **200**), as follows. The column decoder circuitry applies the V_{CC} supply voltage to read/write bit lines **101**, **102**, **201** and **202**. The voltage WL_0 on word line **105** is pulled up to the V_{CC} supply voltage (e.g., 2.5 Volts) by the row decoder circuitry. As a result, access transistors **114–115** and **214–215** are turned on, thereby coupling bit lines **101–102** and **201–202** to the storage latches in CAM cells **100** and **200**. The voltage WL_1 on the second word line **106** is pulled down to 0 Volts, thereby turning off access transistors **314–315** and **414–415** in CAM cells **300** and **400**. As a result, bit lines **101–102** and **201–202** are isolated from the storage latches in CAM cells **300** and **400**.

In the present example, nodes N2 and N4 are pulled down through transistors **113** and **212**, respectively. When access transistors **115** and **214** are turned on, bit lines **102** and **201** are pulled down by transistors **113** and **212**, respectively. Nodes N2 and N4 are pulled down to $V_{CC}-CV$ at this time, where CV is approximately 300 mV. Bit lines **101** and **202** are not pulled down in this manner. Sense amplifiers (not shown) coupled to bit lines **101–102** and **201–202** sense the different voltages on these bit lines to identify the data values stored by CAM cells **100** and **200**. Read operations are therefore performed in the same manner as in a conventional six-transistor SRAM array.

During standby conditions, word lines **105** and **106** are maintained at 0 Volts, thereby isolating the CAM cells **100**, **200**, **300** and **400** from read/write bit lines **101–102** and **201–202**. Read/write bit lines **101–102** and **201–202** are held at either V_{CC} or 0 Volts during standby conditions.

A compare operation is performed as follows. During a compare operation, word lines **105** and **106** are maintained at a voltage of 0 Volts, thereby isolating the CAM cells **100**, **200**, **300** and **400** from bit lines **101–102** and **201–202**. Read/write bit lines **101–102** and **201–202** are held at either V_{CC} or 0 Volts during a compare operation. A compare operation is simultaneously performed within each CAM cell of the array, unless there is global or local masking that inhibits the compare operation within the CAM cell. For purposes of clarity, a compare operation within CAM cell **100** is described in detail. The compare operations performed within CAM cells **200**, **300** and **400** are identical to the compare operation performed within CAM cell **100**.

The compare operation within CAM cell **100** is controlled by bit line control circuit **120** and sensor circuit **130**. In general, the data value in the storage latch of CAM cell **100** turns on one and only one of transistors **116** and **117**, thereby coupling one of the comparison bit lines **103–104** to node N3. Prior to the comparison operation, node N3 and comparison bit lines **103–104** are maintained at 0.3 Volts (assuming there is no global masking enabled by bit line control circuit **120**). Local masking transistor **118** is turned on (assuming there is no local masking enabled within CAM cell **100**). Sensor circuit **130** maintains match sense line **150** at a voltage of 0.6 Volts. A 0.3 Volt forward voltage drop therefore exists across diode-connected transistor **119A**.

To initiate the comparison operation, bit line control circuit **120** applies comparison data values CD_0 and $CD_0\#$ to comparison bit lines **103** and **104**, respectively. The logic high comparison data value has a voltage of 0.6 Volts, and the logic low comparison data value has a voltage of 0 Volts. If the comparison data value matches the data value stored in CAM cell **100**, then a voltage of 0.6 Volts is applied to node N3. Under these conditions, the voltage on match sense line **150** remains at 0.6 Volts. If the comparison data value does not match the data value stored in CAM cell **100**, then a voltage of 0 Volts is applied to node N3. Under these conditions, the voltage on match sense line **150** is pulled down to 0.3 Volts. Sensor circuit **130** senses the voltage on match sense line **150**, and indicates a match condition if match sense line **150** is maintained at 0.6 Volts, and indicates a no-match condition if match sense line **150** is pulled down to 0.3 Volts. Because the full signal swing on match sense line **150** is equal to 0.3 Volts, and because the comparison bit lines are operated at voltages much less than the V_{CC} supply voltage, the power requirements of a compare operation are advantageously very low in CAM cell **100**.

Local masking signal $LM\#_1$ is an active low signal. If the local masking signal $LM\#_1$ has a logic low value, local masking transistor **118** is turned off, thereby isolating node N3 from match sense line **150**. Under these conditions, match sense line is maintained at 0.6 Volts, regardless of the results of the comparison within CAM cell **100**. CAM cell **100** therefore performs as if a match condition exists, regardless of the results of the comparison within CAM cell **100**. In this manner, local masking transistor **118** enables CAM cell **100** to be effectively masked from the comparison operation. Although FIG. 3 indicates that local masking transistor **118** is coupled between diode **119** and match line **150**, it is understood that local masking transistor **118** can be coupled between diode **119** and node N3 to achieve similar results. FIG. 4C is a schematic diagram illustrating another possible arrangement of diode-connected transistor **119A** and local masking transistor **118**. Other variations are apparent to those of ordinary skill in the art.

Bit line control circuit **120** and sensor circuit **130** will now be described in more detail. FIG. 5 is a schematic diagram

of sensor circuit **130**. Sensor circuit **130** includes inverters **501–502**, current sources **503–504**, NAND gate **505** and n-channel transistors **311–511**, which are connected as illustrated. During a pre-charge period before the compare operation is performed, the CLK1 and CLK2 signals have logic low values. The logic low CLK2 signal causes transistor **511** to turn on, thereby coupling the V_{CC1} supply voltage to the drain of transistor **513**. In the described example, the V_{CC1} supply voltage is equal to approximately three times the threshold voltage of an n-channel transistor, or about 0.9 Volts. The logic low CLK1 signal causes NAND gate **505** to provide a logic high output signal (e.g., 2.5 Volts) to the gate of transistor **512**, thereby turning on this transistor. As a result, transistor **512** also helps to pull up the voltage on the drain of transistor **513** to the V_{CC1} supply voltage.

Under these conditions, transistors **514** and **515** are turned on by current source **504**. Each of transistors **514** and **515** has a threshold voltage of 0.3 Volts. As a result, the voltage on match sense line **150** is held at 0.6 Volts. At this time, the voltage on node N3 is equal to 0.3 Volts, or one threshold voltage below the voltage on match sense line **150**.

The compare operation begins when the CLK2 signal goes high. The CLK2 signal transitions to a logic high state shortly before the CLK1 signal transitions to a logic high state. As a result, the output signal provided by NAND gate **505** remains high for a short time after the CLK2 signal goes high. This ensures that transistor **512** remains on while the CLK2 signal goes high, thereby preventing noise conditions from pulling down the voltage on match sense line **150**. The CLK1 signal then transitions to a logic high value, such that the output voltage provided by NAND gate **505** is determined by the state of the voltage on match sense line **150**. At this time, node N3 is either pulled up to 0.3 Volts (if a match condition exists) or pulled down to 0 Volts (if a no-match condition exists).

As described in more detail below, during a match condition node N3 will be coupled to a comparison bit line having a voltage of 0.6 Volts through either transistor **116** or transistor **117**. Under these conditions, no current flows through transistor **513**. As a result, the gate of transistor **513** is maintained at about 0.6 Volts. This 0.6 Volt signal represents a logic low input signal to NAND gate **505**. As a result, NAND gate **505** provides a logic high output signal to transistor **512**. Transistor **512** therefore remains on (even though there is no current flow). If the signal on match sense line **150** is pulled low by noise, then current source **503** will pull the voltage on match sense line **150** back up to 0.6 Volts through turned on transistor **512**.

The logic high output of NAND gate **505** is also provided to inverter **502**. In response, inverter **502** provides a logic low output signal having a voltage equal to the ground supply voltage (e.g., 0 Volts). This output signal is used to indicate a match condition to an encoder circuit (not shown). As described in more detail below, during a no-match condition node N3 will be coupled to a comparison bit line having a voltage of 0 Volts through either transistor **116** or transistor **117**. As a result, node N3 is pulled down to 0 Volts. Under these conditions, current will flow through transistor **513**. This current is greater than the current provided by current source **503**. As a result, the voltage of match sense line **150** is pulled down to 0.3 Volts (i.e., one threshold voltage greater than the voltage on node N3). The 0.3 Volt signal on match sense line **150** causes the voltage on the gate of transistor **513** to be pulled up to the V_{CC} supply voltage (e.g., 2.5 Volts) by current source **504**. This V_{CC} supply voltage represents a logic high input signal to NAND gate

505. Consequently, NAND gate 505 provides a logic low output signal to the gate of transistor 512. As a result, transistor 512 is turned off, thereby preventing DC current flow through transistor 513.

The logic low output of NAND gate 505 is also provided to inverter 502. In response, inverter 502 provides a logic high output signal having a voltage equal to the V_{CC} supply voltage (e.g., 2.5 Volts). This output signal is used to indicate a no-match condition to an encoder circuit (not shown).

Although the operation of sensor circuit 130 has been described in connection with a single CAM cell 100, it is understood that a match condition must exist in all of the CAM cells coupled to match sense line 150 in order for sensor circuit 130 to provide a logic high output signal to the encoder. Conversely, if a no-match condition exists in any one of the CAM cells coupled to match sense line 150, then sensor circuit 130 will provide a logic low output signal to the encoder.

FIG. 6 is a schematic diagram of bit line control circuit 120. Bit line control circuit 121 is identical to bit line control circuit 120. Bit line control circuit 120 includes inverters 601–609, NAND gates 611–612, n-channel transistors 621–630 and current source 631, which are connected as illustrated. In general, bit line control circuit 120 provides voltages on comparison bit lines 103–104 in response to a comparison data input value D_{IN} , the clock signal CLK2, and a global masking signal GM#.

Bit line control circuit 120 operates as follows. Transistors 628–630 and current source 631 are connected to form a regulated voltage source 640. Current source 631, which operates in response to the V_{CC} supply voltage, turns on transistors 629 and 630. Each of transistors 629 and 630 has a threshold voltage of 0.3 Volts. As a result, the voltage on voltage supply line 650 is held at 0.6 Volts. Transistor 628, which is coupled to the V_{CC1} voltage supply (0.9 Volts), is turned on to help pull up voltage supply line 650 to 0.6 Volts. In the described embodiment, the voltage on voltage supply line 650 is selected to be equal to two times the threshold voltage of an n-channel transistor (i.e., 0.3 Volts).

Global masking signal GM# is an active low signal. When the global masking signal GM# has a logic low value, inverters 602–604 provide a logic high signal to transistors 621 and 622, thereby turning on these transistors. The logic low GM# signal causes transistors 623–626 to be turned off. Transistor 627 is either turned off or turned on, depending on the state of the CLK2 signal. Under these conditions, both of comparison bit lines 103 and 104 are connected to receive a voltage of 0.6 Volts from voltage supply line 650. If both of comparison bit lines 103 have a voltage of 0.6 Volts, then all of the CAM cells in the column served by bit line control circuit 120 will indicate a match condition during a compare operation. As a result, the entire column is effectively masked during such a compare operation.

When the global masking signal GM# is de-asserted high, transistors 621 and 622 are turned off. During this time, the CLK2 signal can have a logic low or logic high value. A pre-charge operation is performed if the CLK2 signal has a logic low value, and a compare operation is performed if the CLK2 signal has a logic high value. If the CLK2 signal has a logic low value, transistor 627 is turned on, thereby connecting comparison bit lines 103 and 104. The logic low CLK2 signal further causes transistors 623–626 to turn off, thereby isolating comparison bit lines 103 and 104 from voltage supply line 650 and the ground voltage supply. As a result, the voltages on both bit lines 103 and 104 are equalized at 0.3 Volts by sensor circuit 130 during the

pre-charge operation. Note that the comparison data input value D_{IN} does not have any effect on transistors 623–627 when the CLK2 signal has a logic low value.

A compare operation occurs when the CLK2 signal transitions to a logic high value (and the GM# signal is de-asserted high). Under these conditions, transistors 621–622 and 627 are turned off. Comparison data input value D_{IN} is asserted at this time. A comparison data input value D_{IN} having a logic high state will turn on transistors 623 and 624 (and turn off transistors 625 and 626), thereby applying 0.6 Volts to comparison bit line 103 and 0 Volts to comparison bit line 104. Conversely, a comparison data input value D_{IN} having a logic low state will turn on transistors 625 and 626 (and turn off transistors 623 and 624), thereby applying 0.6 Volts to comparison bit line 104 and 0 Volts to comparison bit line 103.

Although the present invention has been described in connection with particular embodiments, other embodiments are possible and are considered to be within the scope of the present invention. FIG. 7A is a schematic diagram of an 8-T CAM cell 700A in accordance with one variation of the present invention. Similar elements in CAM cell 100 (FIG. 3) and CAM cell 700A are labeled with similar reference numbers. CAM cell 700A includes the same elements as CAM cell 100, with the exception of access transistor 115 and bit line 102, which are not present in CAM cell 700A. CAM cell 700A is written and read through bit line 101 and access transistor 114. The compare operation of CAM cell 700A is identical to the compare operation of CAM cell 100. CAM cell 700A advantageously uses one less transistor and one less bit line than CAM cell 100. Note that the above-described variations of CAM cell 100 can also be applied to CAM cell 700A.

FIG. 7B is a schematic diagram of an 8-T CAM 700B in accordance with another variation of the present invention. Similar elements in CAM cell 100 (FIG. 3) and CAM cell 700B are labeled with similar reference numbers. CAM cell 700B includes the same elements as CAM cell 100, with the exception of access transistor 115 and bit lines 102 and 103, which are not present in CAM cell 700B. CAM cell 700B is written and read through bit line 101 and access transistor 114. The compare operation of CAM cell 700B is similar to the compare operation of CAM cell 100. However, the comparison data value CD_0 is provided on bit line 101 in this variation. Selection circuitry (not shown) is provided to selectively couple bit line 101 to the above-described column select circuitry (not shown) during a read or a write operation, or to the bit line control circuit 120 during a compare operation. CAM cell 700B advantageously uses one fewer transistor and two fewer bit lines than CAM cell 100. Note that the above-described variations of CAM cell 100 can also be applied to CAM cell 700B.

FIG. 8, which consists of FIGS. 8A and 8B as illustrated, is a schematic diagram of an array of nine-transistor CAM cells 1000, 2000, 3000 and 4000. Because CAM cells 1000, 2000, 3000 and 4000 are similar to CAM cells 100, 200, 300 and 400 (FIG. 3), similar elements in FIGS. 3 and 8 are labeled with similar reference numbers. CAM cell 1000 replaces diode element 119, local masking transistor 118 and match sense line 150 of CAM cell 100 with match transistor 1190, local masking transistor 1180 and match sense lines 1500 and 1510. Transistors 1180 and 1190 are connected in series between match sense lines 1500 and 1510. The gate of match transistor 1190 is coupled to node N3. Both of match sense lines 1500 and 1510 are connected to sensor circuit 1300.

CAM cells 2000, 3000 and 4000 include similar match transistors 2190, 3190 and 4190 and similar local masking

transistors **2180**, **3180** and **4180**. CAM cells **3000** and **4000** share match sense lines **1520** and **1530**, which in turn, are connected to sensor circuit **1310**.

Bit line control circuits **1200** and **2200** are connected to comparison bit lines **103–104** and **203–204**, respectively.

Although the array illustrated in FIG. **8** only has two rows and two columns of CAM cells, it is understood that this array can be expanded to include many more rows and columns of CAM cells. The manner of expansion is obvious in view of the 2x2 array of CAM cells **1000**, **2000**, **3000** and **4000** shown in FIG. **8**.

Because CAM cells **1000**, **2000**, **3000** and **4000** are identical, only CAM cell **1000** is described in detail. Similarly, because sensor circuits **1300** and **1310** are identical, only sensor circuit **1300** is described in detail.

CAM cell **1000** reverses the polarity of the comparison data values CD_0 and $CD_0\#$ provided by bit line control circuit **120**, such that comparison data value $CD_0\#$ is applied to comparison bit line **103**, and comparison data value CD_0 is applied to comparison bit line **104**. In addition, voltage supply line **650** is directly connected to the V_{CC1} supply voltage of 0.9 Volts ($3V_T$) instead of to regulated voltage source **640**. Otherwise, the bit line control circuit **1200** is identical to bit line control circuit **120** (FIG. **6**).

Read, write and standby operations are performed within CAM cell **1000** in the same manner described above in connection with CAM cell **100**.

A compare operation is performed within CAM cell **1000** as follows. During a compare operation, word lines **105** and **106** are maintained at a voltage of 0 Volts, thereby isolating the CAM cells **1000**, **2000**, **3000** and **4000** from bit lines **101–102** and **201–202**. Read/write bit lines **101–102** and **201–202** are held at either V_{CC} or 0 Volts during a compare operation. A compare operation is simultaneously performed within each CAM cell of the array, unless there is global or local masking that inhibits the compare operation within the CAM cell. For purposes of clarity, a compare operation within CAM cell **1000** is described in detail. The compare operations performed within CAM cells **2000**, **3000** and **4000** are identical to the compare operation performed within CAM cell **1000**.

The compare operation within CAM cell **1000** is controlled by bit line control circuit **1200** and sensor circuit **1300**. In general, the data value in the storage latch of CAM cell **1000** turns on one and only one of transistors **116** and **117**, thereby coupling one of the comparison bit lines **103–104** to node N3. Prior to the comparison operation, node N3 and comparison bit lines **103–104** are maintained at 0.3 Volts (assuming there is no global masking enabled by bit line control circuit **1200**). Local masking transistor **1180** is turned on (assuming there is no local masking enabled within CAM cell **1000**). Sensor circuit **1300** maintains match sense lines **1500** and **1510** at 0.3 Volts.

To initiate the comparison operation, bit line control circuit **1200** applies comparison data values CD_0 and $CD_0\#$ to comparison bit lines **104** and **103**, respectively. The logic high comparison data value has a voltage of 0.9 Volts (i.e., V_{CC1} or $3V_T$), and the logic low comparison data value has a voltage of 0 Volts. If the comparison data value matches the data value stored in CAM cell **1000**, then a voltage of 0 Volts is applied to node N3. Under these conditions, match transistor **1190** is turned off, thereby allowing the voltage on match sense line **1500** to remain at 0.3 Volts. If the comparison data value does not match the data value stored in CAM cell **1000**, then a voltage of 0.9 Volts is applied to node N3. Under these conditions, 1 match transistor **1190** turns

on, thereby pulling down the voltage on match sense line **1500** down to 0 Volts. Sensor circuit **1300** senses the voltage on match sense line **1500**, and indicates a no-match condition if match sense line **1500** is pulled down to 0 Volts, and indicates a match condition if match sense line **1500** remains at 0.3 Volts. Because the full signal swing on match sense line **1500** is equal to 0.3 Volts, and because the bit line control circuit **1200** is powered by the V_{CC1} supply voltage, the power requirements of a compare operation are advantageously very low in CAM cell **1000**.

Local masking signal $LM\#_1$ is an active low signal. If the local masking signal $LM\#_1$ has a logic low value, local masking transistor **1180** is turned off, thereby isolating match sense lines **1500** and **1510**. Under these conditions, match sense line is maintained at 0.3 Volts, regardless of the results of the comparison within CAM cell **1000**. CAM cell **1000** therefore performs as if a match condition exists, regardless of the results of the comparison within CAM cell **1000**. In this manner, local masking transistor **1180** enables CAM cell **1000** to be effectively masked from the comparison operation. Although FIG. **8** indicates that local masking transistor **1180** is coupled between match transistor **1190** and match sense line **1510**, it is understood that local masking transistor **1180** can be coupled between match transistor **1190** and match sense line **1500** to achieve similar results.

FIG. **9** is a schematic diagram of sensor circuit **1300**. Because sensor circuit **1300** is similar to sensor circuit **130** (FIG. **5**), similar elements in FIGS. **5** and **9** are labeled with similar reference numbers. Sensor circuit **1300** eliminates transistor **515** of sensor circuit **130**, such that the source of transistor **514** is connected to ground. Sensor circuit **1300** further includes n-channel transistor **516**, which is connected in series across match lines **1500** and **1510**. The gate of transistor **516** is connected to the output terminal of inverter **501**. Sensor circuit **1500** also includes n-channel transistor **517**, which is connected between match sense line **1510** and the ground supply terminal. The gate of transistor **517** is coupled to receive the CLK2 signal.

During a pre-charge period before the compare operation is performed, the CLK1 and CLK2 signals have logic low values. The logic low CLK2 signal causes transistor **511** to turn on, thereby coupling the V_{CC1} supply voltage to the drain of transistor **513**. In the described example, the V_{CC1} supply voltage is equal to approximately three times the threshold voltage of an n-channel transistor, or about 0.9 Volts. The logic low CLK1 signal causes NAND gate **505** to provide a logic high output signal (e.g., 2.5 Volts) to the gate of transistor **512**, thereby turning on this transistor. As a result, transistor **512** also helps to pull up the voltage on the drain of transistor **513** to the V_{CC1} supply voltage.

Under these conditions, transistor **514** is turned on by current source **504**. Transistor **514** has a threshold voltage of 0.3 Volts. As a result, the voltage on match sense line **1500** is held at 0.3 Volts. The logic low CLK2 signal causes transistor **516** to turn on, thereby coupling match sense lines **1500** and **1510**. Consequently, match sense line **1510** is also held at 0.3 Volts.

The compare operation begins when the CLK2 signal goes high. The logic high CLK2 signal causes transistors **511** and **516** to be turned off. The CLK2 signal transitions in a logic high state shortly before the CLK1 signal transitions to a logic high state. As a result, the output signal provided by NAND gate **505** remains high for a short time after the CLK2 signal goes high. This ensures that transistor **512** remains on while the CLK2 signal goes high, thereby preventing noise conditions from pulling down the voltage

on match sense line **1500**. The CLK1 signal then transitions to a logic high value, such that the output voltage provided by NAND gate **505** is determined by the state of the voltage on match sense line **1500**. At this time, node N3 is either pulled up to 0.9 Volts (if a no-match condition exists) or pulled down to 0 Volts (if a match condition exists).

As previously described, during a no-match condition node N3 will be coupled to a comparison bit line having a voltage of 0.9 Volts through either transistor **116** or transistor **117**. Under these conditions, match transistor **1190** turns on, and current flows through transistor **513**. This current is greater than the current provided by current source **503**. As a result, the voltage of match sense line **1500** is pulled down to 0 Volts. The 0 Volt signal on match sense line **1500** causes the voltage on the gate of transistor **513** to be pulled up to the V_{CC} supply voltage (e.g., 2.5 Volts) by current source **304**. This V_{CC} supply voltage represents a logic high input signal to NAND gate **505**. Consequently, NAND gate **505** provides a logic low output signal to the gate of transistor **512**. As a result, transistor **512** is turned off, thereby preventing DC current flow through transistor **513**.

The logic low output of NAND gate **505** is also provided to inverter **502**. In response, inverter **502** provides a logic high output signal having a voltage equal to the V_{CC} supply voltage (e.g., 2.5 Volts). This output signal is used to indicate a no-match condition to an encoder circuit (not shown).

As described above, during a match condition node N3 will be coupled to a comparison bit line having a voltage of 0 Volts through either transistor **116** or transistor **117**. As a result, no current flows through transistor **513**. Consequently, the gate of transistor **513** is maintained at about 0.3 Volts. This 0.3 Volt signal represents a logic low input signal to NAND gate **505**. As a result, NAND gate **505** provides a logic high output signal to transistor **512**. Transistor **512** therefore remains on (even though there is no current flow). If the signal on match sense line **1500** is pulled low by noise, then current source **503** will pull the voltage on match sense line **1500** back up to 0.3 Volts through turned on transistor **512**.

The logic high output of NAND gate **505** is also provided to inverter **502**. In response, inverter **502** provides a logic low output signal having a voltage equal to 0 Volts. This output signal is used to indicate a match condition to an encoder circuit (not shown).

Although the operation of sensor circuit **1300** has been described in connection with a single CAM cell **1000**, it is understood that a match condition must exist in all of the CAM cells coupled to match sense line **1500** in order for sensor circuit **1300** to provide a logic low output signal to the encoder. Conversely, if a no-match condition exists in any one of the CAM cells coupled to match sense line **1500**, then sensor circuit **1300** will provide a logic high output signal to the encoder.

Although the present invention has been described in connection with particular embodiments, other embodiments are possible and are considered to be within the scope of the present invention. FIG. **10A** is a schematic diagram of an 8-T CAM cell **800A** in accordance with one variation of the present invention. Similar elements in CAM cell **1000** (FIG. **8**) and CAM cell **800A** are labeled with similar reference numbers. CAM cell **800A** includes the same elements as CAM cell **1000**, with the exception of access transistor **115** and bit line **102**, which are not present in CAM cell **800A**. CAM cell **800A** is written and read through bit line **101** and access transistor **114**. The compare operation of CAM cell **800A** is identical to the compare operation of

CAM cell **1000**. CAM cell **800A** advantageously uses one less transistor and one less bit line than CAM cell **1000**. Note that the above-described variations of CAM cell **1000** can also be applied to CAM cell **800A**.

FIG. **10B** is a schematic diagram of an 8-T CAM cell **800B** in accordance with another variation of the present invention. Similar elements in CAM cell **1000** (FIG. **8**) and CAM cell **800B** are labeled with similar reference numbers. CAM cell **800B** includes the same elements as CAM cell **1000**, with the exception of access transistor **115** and bit lines **102** and **103**, which are not present in CAM cell **800B**. CAM cell **800B** is written and read through bit line **101** and access transistor **114**. The compare operation of CAM cell **800B** is similar to the compare operation of CAM cell **1000**. However, the comparison data value $CD_0\#$ is provided on bit line **101** in this variation. Selection circuitry (not shown) is provided to selectively couple bit line **101** to the above-described column select circuitry (not shown) during a read or a write operation, or to the bit line control circuit **120** during a compare operation. CAM cell **800B** advantageously uses one fewer transistor and two fewer bit lines than CAM cell **1000**. Note that the above-described variations of CAM cell **1000** can also be applied to CAM cell **800B**.

Although the present invention has been described in connection with several embodiments, it is understood that this invention is not limited to the embodiments disclosed, but is capable of various modifications which would be apparent to one of ordinary skill in the art. Thus, the invention is limited only by the following claims.

What is claimed is:

1. A content addressable memory (CAM) cell comprising:
 - a static random access memory (SRAM) cell that operates in response to a V_{CC} supply voltage, the SRAM cell storing a data value;
 - a first set of one or more bit lines coupled to the SRAM cell, wherein the data value is written to and read from the SRAM cell on the first set bit lines, the first set of bit lines having a signal swing equal to the V_{CC} supply voltage; and
 - a second set of bit lines coupled to receive a comparison data value, the second set of bit lines having a signal swing less than the V_{CC} supply voltage.
2. The CAM cell of claim 1, further comprising a circuit for comparing the data value with the comparison data value to determine whether a match exists.
3. The CAM cell of claim 2, wherein the circuit comprises:
 - a first transistor having a gate coupled to receive a signal representative of the data value;
 - and
 - a second transistor having a gate coupled to receive a signal representative of the inverse of the data value.
4. The CAM cell of claim 3, wherein the second set of bit lines comprises:
 - a first bit line coupled to a source region of the first transistor; and
 - a second bit line coupled to a source region of the second transistor.
5. The CAM cell of claim 4, wherein a drain region of the first transistor is coupled to a drain region of the second transistor at a first node.
6. The CAM cell of claim 5, further comprising a diode element coupled to the first node.
7. The CAM cell of claim 6, further comprising a local mask transistor coupled in series with the diode element.

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8. The CAM cell of claim 6, wherein the diode element comprises a diode-connected transistor.

9. The CAM cell of claim 6, wherein the diode element comprises a P-N junction.

10. The CAM cell of claim 6, further comprising a match line coupled to the diode element, wherein the diode element is forward biased from the match line to the first node.

11. The CAM cell of claim 10, wherein the match line has a signal swing equal to a transistor threshold voltage.

12. The CAM cell of claim 10, further comprising a sensor circuit coupled to the match line, the sensor circuit pre-charging the match line to a voltage less than the V_{CC} supply voltage.

13. The CAM cell of claim 12, wherein the sensor circuit comprises a logic gate for providing an output signal that indicates whether a match or a no-match condition exists, the output signal having a signal swing equal to the V_{CC} supply voltage.

14. The CAM cell of claim 1, further comprising a bit line control circuit for biasing the second set of bit lines.

15. The CAM cell of claim 14, wherein the bit line control circuit comprises a first transistor for coupling the second set of bit lines during a pre-charge operation.

16. The CAM cell of claim 14, wherein the bit control circuit comprises one or more transistors for coupling the second set of bit lines to a voltage supply line during a global masking operation, the voltage supply line having a voltage less than the V_{CC} supply voltage.

17. The CAM cell of claim 14, wherein the bit line control circuit comprises a plurality of transistors for selectively coupling the second set of bit lines to a voltage supply line and a ground supply line, whereby the second set of bit lines receive voltages representative of the comparison data value from the voltage supply line and the ground supply line, the voltage supply line having a voltage less than the V_{CC} supply voltage.

18. The CAM cell of claim 17, wherein the voltage supply line has a voltage of two times a transistor threshold voltage.

19. The CAM cell of claim 14, wherein the bit line control circuit is powered by a supply voltage less than the V_{CC} supply voltage.

20. A content addressable memory (CAM) cell having a match line that carries a signal to indicate whether a match or a no-match condition exists within the CAM cell, wherein the difference between a voltage on the match line during the match condition and a voltage on the match line during the no-match condition is equal to one transistor threshold voltage.

21. A method of operating a content addressable memory (CAM) cell that includes a static random access (SRAM) cell, the method comprising:

operating the SRAM cell in response to a V_{CC} supply voltage, the SRAM cell storing a data value;

writing a data value to the SRAM cell on a first set of one or more bit lines, the first set of bit lines having a signal swing equal to the V_{CC} supply voltage;

reading data values from the SRAM cell on the first set of bit lines;

controlling the signal swing on the first set of bit lines to be equal to the V_{CC} supply voltage;

providing comparison data values to the CAM cell on a second set of bit lines; and

controlling the signal swing on the second set of bit lines to be less than the V_{CC} supply voltage.

22. The method of claim 21, further comprising the step of comparing the data value stored in the CAM cell with the

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comparison data value to determine whether a match condition or a no-match condition exists.

23. The method of claim 22, further comprising the step of indicating a match condition and a no-match condition by providing a signal having a signal swing equal to one transistor threshold voltage.

24. The method of claim 22, wherein the step of comparing comprises the step of coupling one of the bit lines in the second set of bit lines to a match line in response to the data value stored in the CAM cell.

25. The method of claim 24, further comprising the step of pre-charging the match line to a voltage less than the V_{CC} supply voltage.

26. The method of claim 25, further comprising the step of discharging the match line when a no-match condition exists.

27. The method of claim 23, further comprising the step of converting the signal having the signal swing of one transistor threshold voltage to a signal having a signal swing equal to the V_{CC} supply voltage.

28. The method of claim 21, further comprising the step of equalizing the second set of bit lines prior to providing the comparison data values to the CAM cell on the second set of bit lines.

29. The method of claim 21, further comprising the step of connecting the second set of bit lines to a voltage supply line during a global masking operation, the voltage supply line having a voltage less than the V_{CC} supply voltage.

30. The method of claim 21, further comprising the step of selectively coupling the second set of bit lines to a voltage supply line and a ground supply line, whereby the second set of bit lines receive voltages representative of the comparison data value from the voltage supply line and the ground supply line, the voltage supply line having a voltage less than the V_{CC} supply voltage.

31. The method of claim 30, wherein the voltage supply line has a voltage of two times a transistor threshold voltage.

32. The method of claim 21, further comprising the step of biasing the second set of bit lines with a supply voltage less than the V_{CC} supply voltage.

33. *A method of operating a content addressable memory (CAM) array, comprising the steps of:*

precharging first and second match sense lines that are electrically coupled to compare circuitry within a row of CAM cells to first and second positive voltage levels, respectively, said second voltage level having a maximum value that is less than V_{CC} , where V_{CC} is a power supply voltage supplied to the row of CAM cells;

applying a plurality of comparison data values to a plurality of comparison data lines that are electrically coupled to the row of CAM cells; and

detecting a match/no-match condition between the applied comparison data values and data stored in the row of CAM cells by sensing a voltage on the first match sense line in-sync with discharging the second match sense line from its precharged second positive voltage level.

34. *The method of claim 33, wherein said detecting step comprises shorting the precharged first match sense line to the discharged second match sense line if a no-match condition is present between the applied comparison data values and the data stored in the row of CAM cells.*

35. *The method of claim 33, wherein the row of CAM cells is electrically coupled to a plurality of read/write bit lines; wherein said precharging step is preceded by the step of writing data into the row of CAM cells by driving at least some of the plurality of read/write bit lines at high logic*

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levels that are about equal to V_{cc} ; and wherein said applying step comprises driving at least some of the comparison data lines at high logic levels that are lower than V_{cc} by an amount equal to at least a transistor threshold voltage.

36. A content addressable memory (CAM) array, comprising the steps of:

a plurality of pairs of comparison data lines;

a row of CAM cells having compare circuitry therein that is electrically coupled to said plurality of pairs of comparison data lines;

first and second match sense lines that are electrically coupled to the compare circuitry in said row of CAM cells; and

a sensor circuit that is configured to disable the compare circuitry from indicating a match/no-match condition on the first match sense line by precharging the first and second match sense lines to first and second positive voltage levels, respectively, and is further configured to enable the compare circuitry to indicate a match/no-match condition on the first match sense line by discharging the second match sense line from its precharged second positive voltage level, said second positive voltage level having a maximum value that is less than V_{cc} by at least a transistor threshold voltage, where V_{cc} is a power supply voltage supplied to said row of CAM cells.

37. The CAM array of claim 36, wherein said sensor circuit is further configured to detect a voltage on the first match sense line as representing the match/no-match condition, in response to discharging the second match sense line from its precharged second positive voltage level.

38. The CAM array of claim 37, wherein an output of said sensor circuit is electrically coupled to an encoder.

39. The CAM array of claim 37, wherein said sensor circuit is responsive to at least one clock signal.

40. The CAM array of claim 37, wherein in response to being enabled by said sensor circuit, the compare circuitry is configured to short the first match sense line to the discharged second match sense line if a no-match condition is present between data applied to said plurality of pairs of comparison data lines and data entry stored in said row of CAM cells.

41. The CAM array of claim 37, wherein the compare circuitry comprises a plurality of local masking transistors having first current carrying terminals electrically connected to the second match sense line.

42. The CAM array of claim 41, wherein said row of CAM cells comprises SRAM-based memory cells therein; and wherein the local masking transistors are responsive to local mask enable signals.

43. The CAM array of claim 42, further comprising a plurality of pairs of read/write bit lines electrically coupled to the SRAM-based memory cells in said row of CAM cells.

44. The CAM array of claim 37, wherein the compare circuitry comprises a plurality of local masking transistors having first current carrying terminals electrically connected to the first match sense line.

45. The CAM array of claim 44, wherein said row of CAM cells comprises SRAM-based memory cells therein; and wherein the local masking transistors are responsive to local mask enable signals.

46. The CAM array of claim 45, further comprising a plurality of pairs of read/write bit lines electrically coupled to the SRAM-based memory cells in said row of CAM cells.

47. The CAM array of claim 36, wherein the compare circuitry comprises a plurality of XOR gates that are each associated with a respective CAM cell in said row of CAM cells.

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48. A method of operating a content addressable memory (CAM) cell, comprising the steps of:

precharging first and second match sense lines that are electrically coupled to a compare circuit within the CAM cell to first and second positive voltage levels, respectively, said second positive voltage level having a maximum value that is less than V_{cc} , where V_{cc} is a power supply voltage supplied to the CAM cell;

applying a comparison data value to a pair of comparison data lines that are electrically coupled to the CAM cell; and

comparing the applied comparison data value with a data value stored in the CAM cell by discharging the second match sense line from its precharged second positive voltage level to a discharged voltage level and then sensing whether the first match sense line is maintained at its precharged first positive voltage level or is pulled down to the discharged voltage level by the compare circuit.

49. The method of claim 48, wherein said precharging step is performed in-sync with a first edge to a first clock signal; and wherein said comparing step is performed in-sync with a second edge of the first clock signal.

50. The method of claim 48, wherein the first and second positive voltage levels are equal.

51. The method of claim 50, wherein said applying step comprises driving at least one of the pair of comparison data lines with a signal having a voltage swing that is less than V_{cc} .

52. The method of claim 48, wherein said comparing step comprises shorting the first match sense line to the discharged second match sense line in the event a no-match condition exists between the applied comparison data value and the data value stored in the CAM cell.

53. The CAM array of claim 36, further comprising:

a plurality of pairs of read/write bit lines that are electrically coupled to the CAM cells in said row of CAM cells; and

a bit line control circuit electrically coupled to said plurality of pairs of comparison data lines and said plurality of pairs of read/write bit lines, said bit line control circuit configured to support signal swings on said plurality of pairs of comparison data lines that are less than signal swings on said plurality of pairs of read/write bit lines.

54. The CAM array of claim 53, wherein the signal swings on said plurality of pairs of read/write bit lines are equal to about V_{cc} .

55. A CAM array, comprising:

a CAM cell having a memory cell therein that is powered at a supply voltage;

a pair of read/write bit lines electrically coupled to said CAM cell;

a pair of comparison data lines electrically coupled to said CAM cell; and

a bit line control circuit electrically coupled to said pair of read/write bit lines and said pair of comparison bit lines, said bit line control circuit configured to support a signal swing on said pair of comparison bit lines that is less than a signal swing on said pair of read/write bit lines.

56. A CAM cell, comprising:

a memory cell electrically coupled to a pair of read/write bit lines; and

a data comparison circuit electrically coupled to a pair of comparison bit lines, a match line and said memory

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cell, said data comparison circuit configured to indicate a mismatch between data stored in said memory cell and data applied to the pair of comparison bit lines during a comparison operation, by transferring charge between the match line and at least one of the pair of comparison bit lines.

57. The CAM cell of claim 56, wherein said data comparison circuit comprises a pair of N-channel transistors that are electrically connected in series between the pair of comparison bit lines.

58. The CAM cell of claim 57, wherein gate terminals of the pair of N-channel transistors are electrically coupled to said memory cell.

59. The CAM cell of claim 58, wherein the pair of N-channel transistors are joined together at a node; and wherein said data comparison circuit further comprises a first transistor having first current carrying terminal electrically coupled to the node.

60. The CAM cell of claim 59, wherein said data comparison circuit further comprises a local masking transistor having a first current carrying terminal electrically connected to the first transistor and a second current carrying terminal electrically connected to the match line.

61. A CAM array, comprising:

a first CAM cell comprising a first memory cell electrically coupled to a first pair of read/write bit lines, and a first data comparison circuit electrically coupled to a first pair of comparison bit lines, a match line and said first memory cell, said first data comparison circuit configured to indicate a mismatch between data stored in said first memory cell and data applied to the first pair of comparison bit lines during a comparison operation, by transferring charge between the match line and at least one of the first pair of comparison bit lines; and

a second CAM cell comprising a second memory cell electrically coupled to a second pair of read/write bit lines, and a second data comparison circuit electrically coupled to a second pair of comparison bit lines, the match line and said second memory cell, said second data comparison circuit configured to indicate a mismatch between data stored in said second memory cell and data applied to the second pair of comparison bit lines during the comparison operation, by transferring

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charge between the match line and at least one of the second pair of comparison bit lines.

62. The CAM array of claim 61, wherein the first data comparison circuit comprises a first pair of N-channel transistors that are electrically connected in series between the first pair of comparison bit lines; and wherein the second data comparison circuit comprises a second pair of N-channel transistors that are electrically connected in series between the second pair of comparison bit lines.

63. The CAM array of claim 62, wherein gate terminals of the first pair of N-channel transistors are electrically coupled to the first memory cell.

64. The CAM array of claim 62, wherein the first pair of N-channel transistors are joined together at a first node; and wherein the first data comparison circuit further comprises a first transistor having a first current carrying terminal electrically coupled to the first node.

65. The CAM array of claim 64, wherein the second pair of N-channel transistors are joined together at a second node; and wherein the second data comparison circuit further comprises a second transistor having a first current carrying terminal electrically coupled to the second node.

66. The CAM array of claim 65, further comprising a sensor circuit having an output that is electrically coupled to gate terminals of the first and second transistors.

67. The CAM array of claim 64, wherein said first data comparison circuit further comprises a local masking transistor having a first current carrying terminal electrically connected to the first transistor and a second current carrying terminal electrically connected to the match line.

68. A CAM cell, comprising:

a memory cell electrically coupled to a pair of read/write bit lines; and

a data comparison circuit electrically coupled to a pair of comparison bit lines, a match line and said memory cell, said data comparison circuit configured to indicate a mismatch between data stored in said memory cell and data applied to the pair of comparison bit lines during a comparison operation, by sinking current from the match line to at least one of the pair of comparison bit lines.

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UNITED STATES PATENT AND TRADEMARK OFFICE
CERTIFICATE OF CORRECTION

PATENT NO. : RE 39,227 E
APPLICATION NO. : 10/403581
DATED : August 8, 2006
INVENTOR(S) : Chuen-Der Lien

Page 1 of 1

It is certified that error appears in the above-identified patent and that said Letters Patent is hereby corrected as shown below:

Column 16, line 46

Change "second voltage level" to --second positive voltage level --.

Signed and Sealed this

Seventh Day of November, 2006

A handwritten signature in black ink on a light gray dotted background. The signature reads "Jon W. Dudas" in a cursive style.

JON W. DUDAS

Director of the United States Patent and Trademark Office