Personal Computers â€“ 25 Years and Counting â€“ Part VII

Description

Moving right along from Part VI, where I chronicled my attempts to â€œobtainâ€• Zenith Z-248 computers from the Supply Corps. It didnâ€™t workâ€¦.

So, now Iâ€™m about 3.5 years into owning a personal computer. In Oct 1981, I had a 1Mhz processor with 48K of RAM. BY the spring of 1985, I had moved up to a 1 Mhz processor with 64K of RAM. Wowâ€¦consider how long that was compared to now. Macs were still in my futureâ€¦

Apple //c

Apple //c with 9â€³ â€œgreen screenâ€• monitor

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Anyhow, I was now moving from a fixed grey hull to the life of a nomadic â€œtactical DESRONâ€• troll. The Apple //c was around
by now. I was digging throught the classified ads of the Virginian Pilot and found someone advertizing a //c and it also included a 1200 baud modem! I Watched the ad for a few days and the day after the ad went out of the paper, I called and asked if he still had the computer. Yes, was the reply. I told him Iâ€™d give him $1200 for everything. He balked, I fingered the freshly withdrawn $20s to get his attention and asked â€œHow do I get to your house?â€• He gave me directions.

I picked up the //c, the modem and an ImageWriter][9 pin dot matrix, serially interfaced printer. Home I went with my find and had my 300 baud modem sold shortly there after.

One of the programs that had come with the //c was â€œAppleWorks.â€• AppleWorks was a combination word processor, spreadsheet and database program, and I think it also had an intergrated communications management function. This was the fore runner of the â€œoffice suiteâ€• software packages we are so reliant on anymore. I had obviously done word processing, and had played with the very first spreadsheet, Visicalc (written to run on the Apple][first), and also had been doing work with dBase II in C/PM. Now I had the three functions all resident within one program, which, came in very handy later on at work.

While on this adventure, and Iâ€™m not completely clear on the dates, I was able to attend the Apple Expo in Boston. I think it was in 1983, while I was at Department Head School in Newport (yes, this part is out of sequence). I recall being fascinated with speech recognition software for the Apple][series. You could have 64 voice files per â€œlibrary.â€• You would speak the command, then type in the command it would execute. You could interact with the disk operating system, so you could easily increase the â€œvocabularyâ€• by using some commands to load other library files. I spoke to one of the programmers and found out Apple was employing several Ph.Ds to engineer the digitizing of speech. Part of the discussion was about how we speak in analog streams, yet we still think of speech as sets of words with â€œwhite spaceâ€• between them. No so for the computer. The computer has to be powerful enough to constantly be guessing which part of the captured wave form comprises discrete

words, no small task. Obviously, we have come a long way, but some of the extra money I spent on Apple products went to thier extrensive R&D efforts that brought us the first viable GUIs and many other things we now take for granted.

I canâ€™t recall the exact circumstances, but as we geared up for the Mediterranean/North Arabian Sea cruise, one of my Apple Club friends began dabbing with the IBM PC stuff and showed me a program named R:Base 5000. It was a database manager, and you could type in english like questions and it would roll out the answers from the data tables. I got a copy and loaded it on the Z-248 the staff had gotten for administrative work. We packed up our cruise boxes and I devoted a blue and white footlocker to be the carrying case for my Apple //c computer anf the printer, so I could use them to do my work while we made the world free for democracy.

I tell the story of the cruise in the series A Journey into History.

Coming next: The Watch Officerâ€™s Notebook and rugged computers

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