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Thoughts from a Clicker

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Last week at one of my Zoom meetings, someone asked me if I had ever used IrfanView, an image viewer, and editor. I replied that it was one of my go-to programs about ten years ago. This chance remark gets me thinking about some of my computing experiences over the years. Technology has sure changed a lot. One of my first computer memories was when I was still in high school and UNIVAC was in the news. No one had any idea what the thing was good for. The census used one to somehow make counting the population easier. It was a different world back then and nobody much cared about a machine that was bigger than the family car and needed a special air-conditioned room.

One thing that interested me was the Texas Instruments pocket calculator. My daddy was a feed salesman and the company that he worked for provided him with one of these expensive machines. I remember him getting it out to show us how he could add 2 and 2 without making a mistake.

When I joined the Navy, I had my first experience with using a computer. I got to run the keypunch machine. If I made a mistake, a ship could easily get 10,000 pounds of butter instead of 1,000. Back then, the Navy paid us in cash. In later years, our paychecks were an IBM computer punch card. Now, most employers don't even issue checks. It's all done electronically.

In the late 1970s, computers started to catch on. IBM was the company that created the home market. Their 8086/8088 weighed about 30 pounds and had a whole megabyte of random-access memory. It blazed along at a speedy 4.77 MHz. Other companies that built computers soon started advertising themselves as IBM compatible. If you worked for IBM, you were required to wear a tie.

This is also the era when many of us hobbyists started building our first computers. Zenith Heath Kits were all the rage. They didn't work any better, but we were smarter because we built our own.

The operating system of choice in those days was PC-DOS. There were many other ones, but the home market was mainly CP/M or one of the DOS systems from Apple, Atari, or Commodore. In the early 1980s, a fellow you may have heard of buying an operating system called 86-DOS which was also known as Q-DOS (for Quick and Dirty DOS). Bill Gates later renamed it to MS-DOS for the company that he founded.

I'm pretty sure that Microsoft is still in business today.

Home computing started to take off in the '80s when Radio Shack introduced the Trash 80 (oops. I meant TRS 80). Apple's home computer was the Lisa and Texas Instruments had something called the TI-99.

I remember the first computer I bought. It was a Commodore VIC20. I loved that computer with its 5 KB of RAM and the data cassette storage, even though it often took 3-4 minutes to load a program. Incidentally, the VIC20 was the first home computer that sold a million units. In later years the Commodore 64 was even better.

The first innovative computer program to be sold was the spreadsheet VisiCalc. Like so many other successful things, clones like Lotus 1-2-3, SuperCalc, and Microsoft Excel were soon on the market. Did you know that Microsoft's Excel was first introduced for the Apple Macintosh? It was only later that it was ported to Windows. WordStar was the first commercially profitable word processor.

The real software revolution was the games. I don't think you could walk 50 feet without seeing somebody playing Space Invaders, PAC Man, or one of the many variations of Pong. I'll confess that my favorite games were made by Infocom. They specialized in “interactive fiction” games. I still remember their advertising slogan, “We put our graphics where the sun don't shine.” Graphics adapters later put this type of

adventure game out of business. Their first game was Zork which debuted in 1980.

In the old days, the only decision to be made when you bought a monitor was whether to have green or amber output. The only sound you could hear was the tinny beep for the operating speaker. The only mouse in the computer room lived in the wall. Printers were all dot matrix and printed about 30 characters a minute.

Of course, one of the biggest changes in computing has been the internet and the use of e-mail. I've heard that e-mail was invented by a Nigerian that had a lot of extra money to spend. The browser choices were Mosaic or Netscape. We've come a long way from logging in to the Bulletin Board.

I'm going to shut up for this month. Please remember that I've just written about some of my computing memories, so the facts may not be 100 percent correct. I'm just amazed at how far technology has advanced.

Thanks for reading.