

The Computer Lacks A Very Long History; Paul Pierce Protects It

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He Has a Big Warehouse Full
Of Old Clunkers and Dreams
Of Establishing a Museum

By JIM CARLTON

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PORTLAND, Ore.—Paul R. Pierce is the J. Paul Getty of the tech world, owning one of the largest private collections of obsolete computers.

The trove is so vast—comprising roughly 75 tons of personal computers, minicomputers and mainframes—that the Intel Corp. engineer has had to buy a building to warehouse it all.

"I stand in awe of him," marvels Kip Crosby, executive director of the Computer History Association of California. "He has an absolutely fabulous collection," says Carl Friend, a fellow collector, in West Boylston, Mass.

Mr. Pierce is seeking to preserve the electronic milestones in the short half-century since the modern computer was born. Whole museums have sprung up to commemorate the industry's achievements, and curators draw heavily on the knowledge of collectors like the 44-year-old Mr. Pierce.

"We work with them because they were a part of the past," says Susan Wageman, registrar at the Tech Museum of Innovation, whose displays on the evolution of Silicon Valley are to open in San Jose, Calif., this weekend.

With the greater reach of the Internet, the number of collectors has exploded. "There used to be just a couple of dozen of us, and now it's hundreds if not thousands," says Tom Carlson, curator of the Obsolete Computer Museum, a collection in Williamsburg, Va., that is online.

"History is a far too precious thing to be casually consigned to the scrap heap," ex-



Paul R. Pierce

plains Jim Willing, a computer engineer in Beaverton, Ore., who has salvaged more than 300 old PCs, which he keeps in working order to demonstrate at schools and science fairs.

Last month, several hundred collectors converged on Santa Clara, Calif., for the second annual Vintage Computer Festival. The excitement was palpable when a drawing was held for "an original Apple II with Integer Basic ROMs," first introduced in the late 1970s.

Computer collecting has become so popular that some rare models are actually worth money. The Apple I circuit board, for instance, fetches as much as \$30,000, because only about 50 of the primitive computers were sold by Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak to raise money to start Apple Computer Inc.

Most collectors, though, care less about money than about finding somewhere to put their treasures. "My father does see my collection as a large pile of junk," says Donovan Marshall, a 21-year-old computer technician from Auckland, New Zealand.

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Old Computers: a Storage Problem

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who keeps seven of his 48 computers in his bedroom. "Blowing part of my paycheck on a computer," he adds, "doesn't impress either my girlfriend or family."

Some enthusiasts get around the family problem by not having a mate. "If I have to choose between a woman and my collection, it would be my collection," says Philippe Dubois, a software engineer in Paris who lives alone with his 300 computers.

Dealers say other collectibles—cars and clocks, for example—draw similar enthusiasts but differ in one important way: cars and clocks can actually be useful. But a 1960s-era mainframe computer weighing 1,000 pounds takes as long as an hour to perform the same number-crunching task that a five-pound laptop can spit out in seconds. Collectors say that's part of the appeal.

Computer consultant Jay Jaeger of Madison, Wis., for instance, says he loves his Hewlett-Packard HP 2114 minicomputer "because it has neat touch-sensitive switches." Such things tug at the heartstrings of computer collectors. "People of a technical mind always like the mechanical antecedents of what they know," says C. Hugh Hildesley, executive vice president of North America operations for Sotheby's International PLC, the big auction house. "Of course, there is a thin line between passion and compulsion."

Mr. Pierce appears to be treading close to that line. Soft-spoken and intense, he remembers first becoming enamored of old computers when he rescued a 1960 mainframe from a garbage bin while a graduate student at the University of Wisconsin in 1979. He began collecting other old computers, mostly to play with. The hobby became a crusade, though, as Mr. Pierce discovered that most of the larger machines were being junked.

Out of Garage Space

"I was worried that people would forget what these computers were all about," he says. Soon after leaving school to join Intel here, he filled a garage with three mainframes and had to begin leasing storage space in a warehouse nearby. More pieces were added, forcing him to move the collection to larger space. In all, he has had to move the computers half a dozen times as the collection mushroomed to 10 mainframes, 20 minicomputers and 80 smaller machines ranging from PCs to teletypes.

Mr. Pierce unearthed the finds from scrap yards and government auctions, some as far off as Nebraska. "Moving all this stuff every five years has been a drag," Mr. Pierce says with a sigh. When he and his wife, Joanne Fuller, married five years ago, she worried about what his collection was costing. Her husband was doling out \$1,000 a month in storage fees; he spent \$9,000 for one mainframe and \$9,000 more to have it trucked down from Seattle.

He figures he has spent at least \$30,000 just on buying computers. Living on an engineer's salary, "I was in kind of a cash crunch," Mr. Pierce says.

So Ms. Fuller, a social worker, urged him to buy a building in which to house the computers permanently. "He was throw-

ing money down the drain" she says. Two years ago, Mr. Pierce says, he paid "more than \$100,000" for a two-story factory building, constructed in 1961 on an industrial street here.

Names and Numbers

Passing the machines on a tour of the second floor of this 20,000-square-foot building, Mr. Pierce ticks off names from computerdom: the IBM 709, made in 1958; the IBM 7094, made in 1962; the Digital PDP 11/45, made in 1972. "And that is the wrong end of my IBM 370," he laughs, gesturing at a mainframe turned askew. He points excitedly at another bank of mainframes sandwiched between other relics. "We could get a closer look if we crawl over," he says.

Though physically impressive, the machines pale by comparison with today's models. Mr. Pierce's 7094, for instance, featured just 128,000 bytes of memory in a machine six feet high. The PC standard today is 64 million bytes or more.

Mr. Pierce, like many computer collectors, hopes one day to open his collection to the public. With their collections now mostly stowed away, he and the others maintain virtual museums by posting photos of their computers on the Internet.

But Mr. Pierce's physical museum appears a long way from reality. Although most of the models still work, they are crammed together in a hodgepodge he says could take years to untangle. "I figure," Mr. Pierce says, "this stuff will keep me good and busy when I retire."