

Computer History

Author: Leah Clark, President and Editor, Los Angeles Computer Society, CA

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www.lacspc.org

leahjc (at) sbcglobal.net

Recently I was in Washington D.C. While there, I visited the Smithsonian Museum of American History. They had a special exhibit on computer history. There was a sign that read, "Unless you know the road you've come down, you cannot know where you are going." I wonder where computer and other technologies are going? Here is some information from the exhibit.

Both corporate researchers and self-trained hobbyists played crucial roles in the invention of the personal computer. Robert Noyce, Gordon Moore and Andy Grove used their doctoral training in physics and chemistry to found Intel, a leading manufacturer of integrated circuits. Alan Kay and others at Xerox advanced computer graphics, networking, and printing. The Homebrew Computer Club in Menlo Park, California, gave hobbyists a place to share knowledge. Homebrew members Steve Jobs and Steve Wozniak founded Apple Computer after demonstrating their Apple I kit at the club.

Early computers were big and expensive and required technically trained specialists to run them. Not surprisingly, only universities, big businesses, and government agencies had access to these behemoths. In the 1970s and '80s, Silicon Valley inventors changed the face of computing with the first "personal computers" small enough to fit on a desk. They created revolutionary features that we take for granted today — a hand-held input device called a mouse, a graphical user interface with overlapping "windows," and clickable pictures called "icons" — and made computers less expensive and more "user-friendly."

Douglas Engelbart and his colleagues at the Stanford Research Institute were pioneers in the field of "human - computer interaction." In 1964, they built a hand-held pointing device to manipulate images and text on a monitor's screen. The prototype was a simple wooden box with two perpendicular metal wheels, a selection button, and a wire connection to the processor. Engelbart's "mouse" was subsequently refined by researchers at Xerox PARC and made popular with the release of the Apple Macintosh in 1984. Engelbart later noted, "It just looked like a mouse with a tail, and we called it that."