

## Howard Katz

I had an opportunity a few weeks ago to travel down to Seattle on a sunny weekend. I took the time when I was there to sit and chat at length with Bob Wallace and Tim Paterson. Both Bob and Tim were involved, in earlier years, with Microsoft, and have since gone on to run companies of their own. Bob runs a firm called Quicksoft, and their single product, a shareware-marketed word processor called PC-Write, is doing amazingly well. Tim is the Vice-President, Engineering of Falcon Technology, one of about fifty firms that market hard drives for the IBM-PC.

Both Tim and Bob have visited us in years past at the fair. These fellows had a lot of tales to tell, and we ended up talking at length about microcomputing in Seattle in the early days. We also talked in detail about what it was like working for Microsoft back then. I was particularly interested in what it must have been like around the company when the top-secret IBM "Chess Project" was underway.

The microcomputer community in Seattle back in the mid- to late-seventies must have seemed a bit incestuous, not unlike other places around North America at the time. In 1976 there just weren't that many people weird enough to be playing with micros that paths didn't cross at one point or other. In the case of the Bay Area, the Homebrew Computer Club and Paul Terrell's Byte Shops formed the social nexus around which computer hobbyists coalesced. In Seattle, the Northwest Computing Society and the Retail Computer Store played pretty much the same roles.

When the Retail Computer Store opened its doors on Greenlake in February of 1976, the number of places where you could actually walk in off the street and see a working computer could be counted on one hand. Dick Heiser's The Computer Store in Los Angeles had the distinction of being first in 1975, and Paul Terrell's Byte Shop in Sunnyvale, California, heart of the Silicon Valley, wasn't far behind.

Tim Paterson started hanging around the store soon after it first opened. He eventually bought an IMSAI computer kit and dropped by just often enough to bug them about boards not-yet-received for his machine. He was leafing through the UW student newspaper in November of 1977 when he saw an ad for the store. They were looking for a technician, and Tim, having played around with digital logic since he was a kid, got the job. He joined Bob Wallace, who was doing graduate work in computer science at the University of Washington and was supplementing his income by working afternoons at the store, in charge of the book and magazine section.

The seminar was hosted by Intel and was intended to promote their latest microprocessor, the 8086, the first 16-bit design. Intel, of course, was the California-based chip manufacturer which had started the whole thing in 1974 with the 8080 microprocessor. When the company had produced the 4004 in 1973, company engineers and marketing people hadn't given too much thought to the commercial possibilities of the computer-on-a-chip, but by 1978 people at Intel were well aware of the growing market potential of microcomputer chips. Consequently company employees went around the country, exhibiting and extolling the virtues of their latest products.

Bob finished up his masters at the university and moved to New Mexico in May. Microsoft at the time had a grand total of eight employees. Bob worked in Albuquerque through the end of 1978, when the firm moved back to the Seattle area, as Allen had promised.

Microsoft at the time was located in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Gates and Allen, the founders of the company, had located there in 1975, to support the BASIC interpreter they had written for MITS, the company that produced the first viable microcomputer. Bob recalls that Paul Allen dropped into the Retail Computer Store one day with a Xerox copy of a handwritten note saying "Programmers Wanted." Bob wanted to go to work for Microsoft but had no great desire to move to Albuquerque. Allen informed him that the company intended to relocate back to the Pacific Northwest. Bob was interested and flew down to Albuquerque for an official interview with Allen over Christmas. He also talked with Gates at the West Coast Computer Fair in March of 1978, firming the deal.



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## Early Days at Microsoft

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hot, and Microsoft programmers often left the door ajar. This greatly bothered the IBM security types who dropped by from time to time.

Bob related that IBM was "very secretive about the project. There were some rumours coming out, but they weren't coming from us." Leaking rumours caused no end of consternation to both IBM and Microsoft, but on the whole, details on the machine stayed a well-kept secret until it was finally announced in August of 1981.

Bob worked most evenings until 9:00 pm, leaving just enough time to grab the floppy disk with the latest version of the Pascal and dash off to the airport, where he'd connect with the last Delta flight out to Miami. The software would arrive in Boca Raton early next morning, and when Bob came in to work the next day, he'd get on the phone and get a report on all the bugs that IBM had found in the interim. This mad cycle went on on a weekly and sometimes daily basis. Bob was impressed with the quality of the testing that went on.

In the meantime, Seattle Computer had hired a managerial type to supervise Tim, and he didn't particularly care for that. He made a call to Microsoft and found that they were more than happy to offer him employment. He signed on. Once he'd actually showed up for work and filled out a nondisclosure form, he found out who he'd been working for.

Bob might have been impressed with IBM's quality control, but Tim was far less so. He was astounded when he found out that they were releasing EDLIN with the operating system, which had now been renamed PC-DOS. EDLIN was a text editor that Tim had quickly cobbled together in less than two weeks for his own use when he was still at Seattle Computer. He was the first to admit that it was not a polished product. In fact, he categorized it with a few choice words that I am unable to repeat here. IBM released it nonetheless.

When the machine was formally announced in August of 1981, Microsoft was given little advance notice of the fact. IBM, in their concern about secrecy, had refused to tell the company exactly when the big day was to be and only extended the courtesy of providing one day's notice. This was presumably to allow the people at Microsoft time to gear up for an anticipated deluge of phone inquiries once the word was out.

The rest, of course, is history. Bob and Tim moved on to run their own firms, the IBM-PC has prospered, and Microsoft has continued to grow to the point where today it employs well over 500 people. And EDLIN, as far as I know, is still packaged with the operating system.