A History of Tech in Southern Oregon

by Charlie McHenry

When it comes to technology, our region has much to be proud of. Did you know that at one point, the Southern Oregon *Software Association of Oregon* chapter was the largest in the state, out numbering even Portland? We had the first regional travel website, Southern Oregon Magazine on the Net in 1994, and the very first video game released on CD-ROM was developed in Jacksonville. *Perhaps most important and astonishing, the software utility category was practically invented here in the Rogue Valley!*

Mike Brown's *Central Point Software* utilities were wildly popular with early geeks. And Paul Mace, of *Mace Utilities* fame, was arguably the first developer to provide tools that could recover data from disks that had been inadvertently reformatted. And thus, software utilities were invented.

That's another interesting story. Paul, who also worked with the *TiVo* crew for a spell, was shrink-wrapping the new PC utility in his garage in Ashland, looking for a market. Noted tech columnist John Dvorak, who always received mountains of complimentary software to review, wanted to recover some lost data. A new copy of *Mace Utilities* was on the top of his pile of review software. He grabbed and loaded it. *It worked.* He wrote about it in two consecutive columns, and the rest is history. Personally, I consider Mace to be the 'godfather' of tech in the Valley.

If Mace is the godfather, Alan and Priscilla Oppenheimer are definitely local tech royalty. Alan graduated from MIT in 1983 with a thesis on building an Ethernet-based local disk server for the RT-11 operating system. He joined Apple Inc. right out of MIT and was a key contributor to the original Macintosh's **AppleTalk** networking system, the LaserWriter printer, AppleShare file servers, Apple Internet Router, and Apple Remote Access.

In January 1995, Alan left Silicon Valley and moved to Ashland, Oregon to found *Open Door Networks, Inc.,* launching early Mac-centric internet products from dial-up services to web servers, utilities like WebDoor, HomeDoor, and MailDoor, and in 1998 releasing one of the first Mac firewalls, DoorStop—later licensed to Symantec. *Open Door also supported Ashland's local fiber-optic network and offered free Wi-Fi in local venues like the Starbucks, <u>among the earliest ever to do so</u>.*

With the advent of the iPhone and iPad, Alan pivoted into mobile apps. From his collaboration with partner Project A, Open Door released over 100 Envi apps,

including Art Authority—a virtual museum app launched on day one of the iPad App Store in 2010. It featured tens of thousands of high-resolution artworks and earned top-10, award-winning recognition . In 2016, the brand became Art Authority LLC, and the company later acquired 1000Museums to provide museum-quality art reproductions globally.

Priscilla has decades of experience as a software developer at Apple Computer and as a technical instructor for Cisco Systems, where she taught—notably to countless engineers globally, including many at Fortune 500 firms. She helped develop Cisco's Internetwork Design course and created the Designing Cisco Networks course. She holds Cisco certifications such as CCNP and CCDP.

Priscilla authored *Top-Down Network Design* (multiple editions, including the 3rd ed. in 2011) and co-authored Troubleshooting Campus Networks (2002). She also contributed chapters to several Cisco Press and Wiley titles in computer networking and Mac OS X administration

Southern Oregon was also home to John Loram, of *Pacific CommWare* fame. In his heyday, John was the industry's leading author of innovative serial communications drivers. Always one step ahead of Microsoft, John made a respectable income and built a sterling reputation providing elegant workarounds to serial communications bottlenecks that plagued Windows during earlier iterations.

On the PC hardware side, Lee Felsenstein, a pioneer in personal computing and the designer of the Osborne 1, considered the first commercially successful portable computer, has strong ties to Oregon, particularly Ashland. He was also a member of the Homebrew Computer Club and designed various seminal components like the VDM-1, a video display module that influenced the architecture of personal computing.

I'd be remiss if I didn't highlight the role of *Project A Software* and Jim Teece in the

local tech community. Jim and his Second Street Ashland company were key early drivers of tech in the region. They provided a wealth of resources to local businesses, built websites, custom software, pioneered the Ashland Fiber Network and partnered with many other local techies, like the Oppenheimers, to produce apps. Teece and Project A were always there for the local tech community - eager and willing to help and move digitalization forward. Both Jim and the Oppenheimers are also involved in lots of local philanthropy.

During my early years in southern Oregon, I was privileged to get involved in the computer gaming space. Before *Time Warner Interactive* had an in-house communications group, I supported, from right here in So. Oregon, their introduction of the label's first blockbuster Naval game, *AEGIS: Guardian of the fleet.* Best launch they ever had. We took every reporter off the floor at E3, in LA that year, and bussed them to the HQ of the "Pacific Fleet" to actually tour an AEGIS cruiser, then to visit the developer.

Later I had the opportunity to announce another interesting patent, Gil Hyatt's "516" on the fundamental design of the microprocessor. That story made the WSJ and Investor's Business Daily. I remember the headline at the San Jose Merc News: *Microcomputer Has New Papa.* For about a year-and-a-half, the face and voice of the Hyatt Patent Portfolio was based here in the Rogue Valley. I reported to *Royal Dutch Philips,* the multi-national electronics giant that managed the portfolio.

It was also way cool working with Rob Landeros at *Trilobyte* on a press kit for The 7th Guest: the first video game to be released on CD-ROM (Myst followed shortly thereafter). Trilobyte really put our blossoming technology community on the map. Suddenly, there were black limousines full of Hollywood sorts making the pilgrimage to Jacksonville. After leaving Trilobyte, Rob went on to direct and produce interactive films like 'Tender Loving Care' that starred the late John Hurt.

Inspired by Trilobyte's early success with the title, another local group based on Second Street in Ashland, Aneiva, published *Cydonia: The Face of Mars* a few years later. Now those were the days.

Then Charley Lanusse and *Starseed* moved to town. Charlie's *Starseed* acquired "Web Rings" from 17 year-old Ashland High student Sage Weil, then promptly sold for a small fortune to *GeoWorks,* which in-turn was quickly acquired by *Yahoo.* It was breathtaking. Sage went on to a stellar tech career that took him away from the region. *But to think, the early internet was shaped by Ashland techies.*

In the early 90s, a group of us formed a local chapter of the *Software Association of Oregon.* For a while, it was the largest and most active chapter in the state.

Following that, an even larger group of us including original co-founder Susan Huntley, founded the *Southern Oregon Telecommunications & Technology Council* (SOTTC) chaired by Mike Stallcop - which held regular meetings in a conference room at the Rogue Valley Mall with news and speakers on a monthly basis. The SOTTC funded and held a couple of technology expositions in the mid 90's, and had technology diva Gina Smith, former editor of PC Magazine and ABC Nightly News with Peter Jennings tech correspondent, as our keynote speaker at the Medford Armory. Steve Belsky organized our second tech expo at SOU the following year.

In 1993, John Fricker, Gary Roberts and I formed the *Vertex Group* to publish the region's first on-line magazine: *Southern Oregon Magazine.* It was the first, Internet-only regional publication on the net at the time; and it won four awards including international recognition. The digital publication was approximately 350 pages deep in short order. It had original maps, covers and illustrations provided by art-director Gary Roberts of Ashland. An editorial team of about 12 was directed by former award-winning AP correspondent John Enders, later the executive director of the Southern Oregon Historical Society.

As a result of those hi-tech community building efforts, I was appointed by Governor John Kitzhaber, M.D. to the *Oregon Telecommunications Forum Council* for a term that extended from 1997-to-1999. The OTFC was responsible for writing and overseeing the implementation of the Oregon State Telecommunications Plan and the buildout of the Internet in rural parts of the state.

Then, in 2010 original founder Rob Landeros and I re-organized and re-launched Trilobyte Games with my friend and colleague John Fricker.

Trilobyte was interesting on many levels, living through 'gamergate' for example, but in the end… we just couldn't compete with the major studios, none of us ever made much; we tried hard… and failed to resurrect the studio. We spent years, and other than producing one new game title and one board game we managed to fund on Kickstarter, we did very little. The IP lives on though, with a VR version of the game currently available on the META Quest headset.

I should add that our local Hunter Communications played a pivotal role in establishing the fiber infrastructure necessary to power high-speed broadband in the Valley. Their redundant, self-healing metropolitan- and regional-area-network has supported local business and educational facilities and institutions for years, and is now widely available to residential Internet users. We all own a significant debt of gratitude to Hunter founder and visionary Rich Ryan for his persistence and determination in equipping our region for high-speed broadband.

In 2004, the State of Oregon recognized Hunter's many contributions to expanding

communications options in rural southern Oregon by bestowing the Excellence in Telecommunications Partnerships award on Ryan. He was nominated by John Irwin, Chair of the Oregon Telecommunications Council. Speaking of Ryan, Irwin said, "I know of no one person in the state of Oregon who has risen to this level of results in providing southern Oregonians with a connection to the future."

So what happened to our extensive local tech community and infrastructure? Well, back in the day nobody took us geeks seriously. We needed a seat at the table, so we organized to get our voices and opinions heard. We worked with SOREDI to bring more tech to the Valley, and soon… the technology community grew and new tech became ubiquitous, permeating all business and consumer spaces. So the need for us to be hyper organized and to meet regularly to voice our opinions was subsumed by the evolution of tech. We won, we got our way in most cases so i guess we just kind of melted into the woodwork, and went back to doing our things.

It's good to see groups like SOGGY and the **Rogue Tech Hub** step up to keep the momentum we established going. The journey isn't over yet!