Community Notebook

Doghouse: Memory Collection

Out with the old, in with the new

Object Memories

maddog reflects on some of the many souvenirs from his long career in computing.

By Jon "maddog" Hall

I started writing this article as the last column of 2012, and you will be reading it as one of the first articles of 2013, but in reality, I started writing this story in 1969. As Rob Hunter of the Grateful Dead once wrote in the song "Truckin": "Lately it occurs to me, What a long, strange trip it's been."

I am a person who has a hard time throwing things out that should have been thrown out long ago. On the other hand, as I face the fact that I am 62 years old and, sooner or later, these things will be of absolutely no use to me, I look at these objects and see an opportunity to remember the days when they were new, as well as remember the people who created them and what their contributions meant to "computing." The memories are sometimes bittersweet.

The first thing I found was a slide rule. Although I am sure many people reading this column know what slide rules are, few actually had to use them. Engineers used slide rules and books of tables to perform calculations, just like accountants used mechanical adding machines to do accurate business additions and subtractions. Enter the age of electronic calculators, which once were extremely expensive. Later, they became so inexpensive that they were given away at trade shows and, finally, just built into phones and other devices.

I remember paying almost a hundred dollars for that slide rule back in 1968. It was well made and came with a leather holster, so it could be worn on a belt. The slide rule remains in its original box, with its holster a paper instruction manual that describes how to use it.

Other items I came across were my T-square and drawing instruments. These items were purchased and used during high school drafting class, where I painstakingly learned how to letter my drawings, how to draw arrowheads just right, and how to erase mistakes carefully without damaging the paper. These skills were useful when I worked as a co-op student at the Western Electric Company. There, an entire floor of draftsmen sat at drafting tables, using drafting machines (formally called a "parallelogram machine") to update the thousands of drawings that defined the physical plant. Four years after graduation, I went back to the drafting department and all of the drafting tables and machines were gone – replaced by CRT tubes, pads, and computer systems. Many of the draftsmen were still there, retrained to use the newer technology, but many had left as they were no longer needed because of the efficiency of the new technology.

Of course, I also have some ancient computer equipment – everything from early calculators to micro-computers (that I soldered and sometimes "wire-wrapped" myself) to Alpha systems, and beyond. I estimate that I have about half a million dollars in computer equipment that would now cost about 300 dollars to have hauled away as trash.

For example, I have a functional duplicate of the system that Linus used to do the port of the Linux kernel to the 64-bit Alpha. It is not exactly the same system; his was in a customer-grade cabinet with a nice 21-inch monitor. Mine was an engineering prototype scavenged from an engineering laboratory, with a case taken from a stock PC, so I had to enlarge the holes for the keyboard and mouse connector. The motherboard, processor, and bus structure were the same. I have not turned on this machine in quite some time, but I am sure it would boot up and display an early version of GNU/Linux.

I have an amazing collection of conference and trade show badges and memorabilia. I look at all the badges and try to figure out how I could possibly have gone to all of those events, much less have had the time to help plan and organize them, give talks at them, even teach some classes.

I also kept souvenirs from when I acted as a consultant on two movies, *Antitrust* (2001) and *The First $20 Million Is Always the Hardest* (2002), and TV shows such as PCTV and Leo Laporte's show. I actually got to appear in the second movie for about two seconds, but I am really proud of my own "movie" that I wrote, directed, and starred in. It discussed how to turbocharge your network using an Alpha system to speed up your name services, file serving, and other network services, allowing existing applications on clients to work faster. And it sold many Alpha Unix systems.

I often think about people who cavalierly use their very powerful cellphones and have no real consideration for the history and work that brought those devices into being. Who knows what the next century will bring? ∎∎∎