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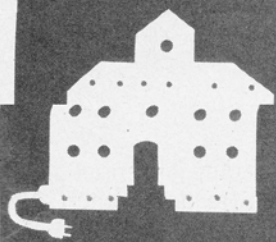
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The West Coast Computer Faire

Union Problems

PC-Write

Disk Maker I

Multiple Choice

EM-it

Color-400

SR-12

SuperKey

PC-MATLAB

Badges and Flowers

NaturalLink

BY JERRY POURNELLE

The floors aren't in, there are painters and carpenters everywhere, and we're working off folding banquet tables for fear that they'll drip paint on the furniture. The storeroom is filled with equipment and boxes full of incoming software. Chaos Manor lives up to its reputation. Withal, we're upstairs at last, and it's wonderful.

WEST COAST COMPUTER FAIRE

On the last weekend of March, I drove up to San Francisco for the Tenth West Coast Computer Faire. My taxes were due, and I was behind in deadlines; if I hadn't agreed to be a speaker, I probably wouldn't have gone this year.

This year the Faire was in the Moscone Center rather than Brooks Hall. Moscone is much larger than Brooks, so everything was on one floor. Even so, there was empty space. Of course, it wasn't as large as the 1983 Faire—the one that had Priority One and MicroPro out in the garbage area, and exhibits in the chair-storage room, otherwise known as the Black Hole of Calcutta—but it was about as big as last year. More important: the magic was still there. The Faire mixes hackers, publishers, vendors, dealers, and end users, and it is the only show where we all get together. I'm glad I went, and I liked it a lot—but I wonder if the Faire will survive.

The problem wasn't the new Prentice-Hall management. There were more than 100 first-rate speakers and panelists. More important, David Sudkin and his troops worked hard to give the smaller exhibitors—who are the real lifeblood of the Faire—a break. There were 60 minibooths, those postage-stamp-size affairs where many of the miracles we all take for granted now were introduced. When the smaller exhibitors had problems, David Sudkin paid attention. Alas, the problems were beyond his control.

San Francisco is a much unionized city. Moscone Center is a city-owned facility, and

the city politicians have signed contracts giving control of Moscone to the shop stewards, who miss no opportunity to gouge exhibitors no matter what their size or wealth. For example, all exhibit space must be carpeted. They'll rent you carpet at their prices. If you try to save money by bringing your own, you then have to pay for having it spread out for you—even if you lay it down yourself. Exhibitors weren't allowed to assemble booths or carry equipment.

This sort of thing was bad enough at Brooks Hall, but Jim Warren was able to cajole and wheedle. There's a different crowd at Moscone Center, one unwilling to listen to reason. As an example: Barry Workman brought up a copy machine and unloaded it himself. Every few minutes some guy stuck his head into the Workman booth and pointed to the copy machine. "You'll pay for that," he muttered. Other exhibitors who attempted to do any of their own work had similar harassments.

It seems counterproductive to me. The small companies simply can't afford to pay hundreds of dollars for work they can do themselves. They don't make that much from the Faire in the first place. Many larger companies, who don't sell anything at the Faire but used to come to show the flag, have decided they've had enough and won't go to the Faire or indeed to any other show in San Francisco. Surely San Francisco didn't invest all that money in the Moscone Center just to drive conventions to San Jose?

CHOCOLATE BRIBERY . . .

One reason I enjoy the Faire is the chance to meet old friends like Walt Bilofsky. It's a bit odd. Walt's Software Toolworks is actually located no more than a mile from Chaos Manor, but the only time we see each other is at a Faire 400 miles north.

As usual, Walt had a bewildering line of CP/M, Zenith, and IBM PCompatible software: chess players, text editors, C compilers, an operating-system enhancement

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Jerry Pournelle holds a doctorate in psychology and is a science-fiction writer who also earns a comfortable living writing about computers present and future.

Intervening pages skipped...

an obnoxious form of protection, and I suspect that fully half the people who'd be interested in the program know enough about small computers to remove the copy-protection scheme in five minutes. Still, it's there.

More seriously, they want \$695 for it. That's a lot of money. PC-MATLAB is probably worth that to the relatively

small number of people who want to use it professionally; but at that price it's not going to put matrix tools in the hands of social scientists and others who need to know about these things.

SOFTWARE TOOLS

All—well, nearly all—programmers keep hoping for the magic “software

bus”: a set of programs and libraries that lets you patch together a bunch of concepts to get the job done without extensive writing, editing, and debugging. It's one of the main reasons for the popularity of UNIX among hackers.

Back in the early days of micros there weren't many good books on computing, but one stood out so far above the crowd that there almost wasn't a second. That was Brian W. Kernighan and P. J. Plauger's *Software Tools* (still in print and very much worth reading). This was a book about programming philosophy; but it gave many examples as part of the discussion. These software tools became legendary. Walt Bilofsky named his software house Software Toolworks in their honor. My mad friend MacLean daily lamented that we didn't have them, and all of us wanted them. Alas, they were written for big machines and in a language called RATFOR. RATFOR = RAtional FORTRAN; it was a preprocessor that allowed FORTRAN programmers a chance at writing structured code. A public-domain Z80 RATFOR precompiler was obtainable, but FORTRAN for our early 8-bit machines left a lot to be desired.

Then, at a West Coast Faire, I found an outfit called Unicorn Systems that published the software tools for small microcomputers. Eagerly I brought them home, only to find that most of them were already pretty outdated, and they didn't work too well under CP/M anyway; too slow. Unicorn also wanted too much money, although given what you got—15 disks of source code—it's hard to see what they could have done to keep the price much lower. Everything worked just fine, but the availability of the software tools for micros had far less impact than I'd have thought.

Unicorn has since become Carousel Tools. They've put the Legendary Software Tools into MS-DOS 2.0, which is *much* better suited to their structure than CP/M ever was. The tools use UNIX-like pipes, which is to say that the output of one program can become the input for another; it's

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possible to do an enormous job employing half a dozen different programs applied one after the other with a single command. MS-DOS 2.0 knows how to do that with the tools.

Anyone trying to learn how to hack should become familiar with the Kernighan and Plauger book and would likely benefit from having the

Legendary Software Tools to play with. I haven't used the new set, but knowing the people at Carousel, I'd be astonished if there were significant undocumented bugs.

BEYOND COMPARE

Larry Niven and I write books together. We both use computers to

write. Generally we don't work on the same part of a book at the same time unless we're working together. Sometimes it happens, though, in which case we have two versions of the same text—and neither is "latest."

When that happens we haul out COMPEN, a file comparator that looks at CP/M text files and displays their differences. COMPEN (from Compare Pencil files, showing just how venerable that program is) is available in the Workman CP/M Software Anthology Series.

Beyond Compare from General Transformation Company is a program for the IBM PC that does a great deal more than COMPEN does for CP/M files. If you use a PC or 100 percent PCompatible and have 256K bytes or more of RAM, I recommend Beyond Compare; it's worth the cost.

FOR THE RECORD

Epson America had a big display extolling the virtues of Valdocs 2.0, a program announced last fall and available Real Soon Now, for sure. I understand that Rising Star Industries, the outfit that's supposed to produce Valdocs 2.0, recently laid off a number of its programmers. As I heard the rumor, the people laid off were those who had finished their part of the project. This gives interesting incentives to those who haven't.

The last time I mentioned Rising Star's problems getting Valdocs 2.0 completed, Roger Amidon, chief programmer for Rising Star, called me. He wanted to know if I'd do a fair evaluation of Valdocs 2.0 when I got it. I promised I would, but I'm not holding my breath until I have to pay that debt. I've also got a self-promotional newsletter from Rising Star promising Valdraw and Valpaint, which require Valdocs 2.0. "Ready for shipment May 15, 1985." I wonder if I can get odds on that bet?

I'd have lost. We received Valdocs 2.0 in mid-May. It seems to work; more next time.

AT&T BADGE WATCH

AT&T's people had a big booth at the Faire. They had one at the Winter

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