Out of a Closet: The Early Years of The Computer Museum

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Abstract. The 2011 opening at the Computer History Museum of the world’s largest and most complete physical and cyber exhibit of computing history marks the sixth stage of a public museum’s evolution, which began in 1975 with a closet-sized exhibit in a Digital Equipment Corporation building, migrating to The Computer Museum, Boston. It now lives in an 119,000 square foot public home in Silicon Valley. This chance/luck driven evolution of an institution is due to the dedication and leadership of a few people who persuaded hundreds of others that the endeavor was worthwhile and needed their support. Gwen Bell, The Computer Museum’s founding director, and Len Shustek, the founding chairman of the Computer History Museum were committed to its success! Behind nearly every artifact, exhibit, and pioneering effort is a story that the museum is dedicated to understand and tell. This is the story leading to the Computer History Museum.

1 Introduction

The Computer History Museum’s opening of the R|Evolution: The First 2000 Years of Computing exhibit on 10 January 2011 is the beginning of a new era for the Computer History Museum in realizing its mission: “To preserve and present for posterity the artifacts and stories of the information age”. The exhibit marks the sixth stage in the 35-year evolution of the museum, which began in a converted coat closet in Massachusetts and now lives in a beautiful 119,000 square foot public facility plus its climate controlled offsite artifact storage facility in California. A new computer class emerges about every 10 years, based on exponential hardware improvements and algorithm discoveries. The evolution of this world class collection, exhibition, and interpretation museum for computing, started in the early 1970s as a spinout of The Computer Museum, Boston. This gestation time is far longer than for new computers and most company plans! The high rate of change coming from Moore’s Law necessitates a sampling rate for collecting history of at least every year or two in order to capture the significant events in real time. Waiting 30 years to collect what

* Celebrating Brian Randell’s 75th birthday. Professor Brian Randell has been a long-time friend and advisor to the museums, starting as the first Chairman of the Collections and Exhibits Committee. Brian first argued to preserve and display advertisements and ephemera as a significant source for historical understanding and audience recollection.
will clearly be discarded and forgotten, fails! This migration story\(^1\) of the museum from east to west and accelerating progress is similar to the geographic shifts and exponential advances of computing itself, from mainframes to minicomputers to personal computing devices, and the eventual embedding of computers into everything.

The story of the museum’s evolution began with Ken Olsen and me as collectors and supporters, and Dr. Gwen Bell’s dedicated 20-year odyssey as the first director. We were all strongly motivated by the fact that no institution was seriously collecting computing artifacts for study, exhibition, and posterity. Our aspiration was not only to do the job, but to do it first and be the best.

Gwen established the classification taxonomy and acquisition criteria for the artifacts to be collected, and started building exhibits. She organized a series of lectures to capture the stories of key pioneers and pioneering efforts, which were published in the newly established *The Computer Museum Reports* (TCM, 1980-1998). Fundamentally, she established all of the principles and practices that have remained unchanged for the museum’s first 30 years! Despite funding challenges and endless debates over what the institution should be and where it should be located, Gwen simply refused to let it die. She remained active until her 1998 illness prevented further involvement, by which time the museum was securely ensconced in Silicon Valley.

In 1995 Dr. Len Shustek picked up the baton with equal energy and commitment, and five years later added substantial support from his new wife, Donna Dubinsky. The progress of the museum was not only geographical, but also one of scale and vision. Nearly every dimension of support and activity increased significantly, including collecting, fundraising, and computer restorations.

After 15 years, The Computer Museum in New England owned a fraction of a building, and its critical collection of artifacts and pioneer stories. After another 15 years, the Computer History Museum in Silicon Valley has assets of over $70 million that includes an endowment and two owned permanent buildings, and a major new exhibition featuring 3,200 objects, photographs and videos selected from its collection of over 75,000.

This accelerating progress is reflective of the maturity and scale of the industry, sensitivity to geographic locations, and most importantly, motivating contributing individuals\(^2\). The progress is also a reflection of a museum’s basic tenet —“learn from its past”!\(^3\)

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1 Ken Olsen, Gwen Bell, and Len Shustek are the story’s heroes. Gardner Hendrie served in many ways, including initiating the oral histories. Bill Gates has been a 25 year supporter starting in Marlboro through funding *R|Evolution*. I’m afraid to name the many friends that were pillars of support for fear of omission. You know who you are. The hundreds of members I think who support and serve that I don’t know amaze me with your dedication.

2 My own view is that support decreases with distance from the creation of the objects: (1) founding creators from engineering, marketing, sales, etc.; (2) academic computing researchers including historians; (3) bankers aka VCs, PR, accounting, legal, etc.; (4) users; (5) local governments who benefit; and (6) communities and museum goers.

3 CHM has learned from nearly every aspect of TCM, especially conservative fiscal management. Learning is through the continuity of long term board membership that include the heuristics for wide-scale public support.