

The Rise and Fall of an American Programmer
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October 29, 2014

Rate your feelings about computers from love them to hate them. That was an actual question on the final exam of my first programming class in college. What a silly question, I thought, how could anyone not love them! That course helped me choose my major and set me on my one and only career path.

My parents were too controlling and protective to allow me to go away to college, but fortunately we lived commuting distance to the University of Illinois Chicago campus. In 1977, I earned a Bachelor of Science in Engineering degree with High Honors and I majored in Information Engineering which included computer hardware and software. Eager to be finally independent, I went on interviews before I had even finished my finals and accepted the first job offer I got. I then got an invitation to interview with General Electric and had to decline, but the recruiter asked me to call in a year if I was not happy.

That first job was with IBM in Lexington, Kentucky. The interview had been all about selling me on working for them, I don't recall many technical questions. IBM hired about 20 graduates from my class and assigned us to various openings when we started; that was when I first met my manager. I was assigned to a hardware-only job, which was not what I really wanted. More graduates had accepted IBM offers than anticipated, so I could not transfer to another group. I was in the research and development organization that created the first ink jet printer. How ironic, working for the iconic computer company and not getting to work on computers! To this day, I still won't buy a LexMark brand printer from there.

After a year of not getting to do any coding, I decided to call the GE recruiter. He immediately invited me to interview in Roanoke, Virginia at their Drive Systems Division. This time, I knew what to ask and made sure I understood exactly what the job would be. The manager was very personable; he had pictures of his wife and kids as well as his own artistic, amateur photography in his office. My impression proved right, my new manager Niles turned out to be a great guy and so was the job.

After the false start with IBM, my career really started at GE. I did some hardware design but also wrote the computer code to control my hardware; it was the perfect fit for my degree. The work involved automating the drives for steel mills and paper mills, important and tangible products. There were two other junior engineers in the group, a young white guy named Carson and a black guy named Barry. Everyone referred to the three of us as the "Mod Squad" after the TV show. One of the older engineers named Buddy was a great mentor and taught me how to write good assembler code, a lost art today.

I really enjoyed my job at GE, but I was unhappy living in the small, conservative town of Roanoke. Everyone at work was nice to me, but they were all married and I had no social life. So in 1980, I applied for a transfer to GE's Nuclear Energy Division in San Jose, California. GE paid all my moving expenses and shipped my car so I could fly across the country and not have to drive by myself for a week.

My new job was all software programming, mostly in Fortran. GE sent me to Phoenix for a month to take an operating system class at Honeywell. I had several business trips to debug code at nuclear power plants. My programming skills advanced, but after a couple of years my career started to stagnate as did nuclear power. There were more opportunities at GE's Space Systems Division in nearby Sunnyvale. I applied and got a 25% raise with a promotion to a new position on a GE contract for NASA Ames Research Center. They gave me a secret security clearance and I traveled to conferences and classes.

One of my senior co-workers was impressed with a project I did in the Ada programming language and he encouraged me to submit a paper about it for GE's Software Engineering Conference. The committee not only accepted my paper for the 1985 annual conference at Daytona Beach, Florida, it was chosen as one of the keynote talks on the first day to all the attendees! In spite of multiple rehearsals, I was nervous at first before the audience of hundreds, but I soon relaxed as I spoke for 50 minutes and took questions for 10 minutes. It was great to have that over with the first day and enjoy the rest of the conference.

As the NASA contract wound down, GE wanted me to transfer to Philadelphia, the Space Systems Division headquarters. By then, I owned a house in Sunnyvale and really liked living in the Bay Area. So, after ten years and three different jobs with GE, I left for a new position with Tandem Computers in Cupertino. My work with Ada allowed me to get a job testing their new Ada compiler.

I was now in a QA organization and Tandem sent me to several testing and QA classes. Their Ada compiler did not sell and they cancelled that project a year later, so I started testing their other compilers and related products. I never had another business trip, but Tandem was even more fun to work for. As a Silicon Valley party company, they had beer busts and off-site day trips to places like the Monterey Bay Aquarium and the Metreon in San Francisco. Every four years, we got a six weeks paid sabbatical. Best of all, I liked writing tests more than writing the product code; finding a bug would make my day!

My eleven years at Tandem were the happiest of my career; I stayed in the same organization the whole time. Tandem itself was past its peak, though, and they accepted a buyout from Compaq Computers in 1997. Texas-based Compaq froze raises at the height of the dot-com boom, resulting in an exodus of programmers. They gave me a secret bonus to stay a year, but I later left in 2000. My new QA job was with Silicon Graphics, aka SGI, in their compiler group, working on their mini-computers running Unix.

I lasted almost four years at SGI during the dot-com bust. The relentless recession eventually drove them toward bankruptcy and I was part of their largest layoff in 2003. After 6 months of very tough interviews at the few companies hiring at that time, I got a contract job at Intel doing compiler testing. After years of working mostly on mainframes and mini-computers, this involved real experience on PCs, so it was a good career opportunity. I needed a direct job for medical benefits, so I continued my job search while taking night classes in user interface test automation. After 4 months at Intel, I finally got a direct job offer with a small company called Keynote Systems in San Mateo as a result of those classes.

I hated the commute but the Keynote job was an important enhancement to my QA skills, which were stuck in just testing compilers up to that point. The product was a service for commercial companies and I tested it on PCs running Windows or Linux and on a variety of Unix workstations. I also got more experience with database queries, which I learned at Tandem, but improved at Keynote.

After two years of stressful commuting, the economy improved and I was ready go through the interview process again. I got a job with BMC Software in Sunnyvale that involved testing in Java on a variety of computers. I also starting working directly with an offshore team for the first time, there were frequent phone conference meetings at night or early morning with co-workers in India and London.

After five years total at BMC, I was part of a large layoff, but within two weeks I got an offer from StrongMail Systems in Redwood City. Knowing the commute would be almost as bad as my Keynote job, I bought a plugin hybrid car that was eligible for the carpool lane that made the drive bearable.

StrongMail, later renamed StrongView, is an email marketing company and my job was automating tests for their user interface. I enjoyed parts of the job, but the working environment was very different from the offices earlier in my career. At IBM, GE Space, Tandem and SGI, I had an office with a door to close and walls to the ceiling. I worked in tall cubicles at my other jobs. This startup embraced the new culture of the open office. I found the noise, distraction and lack of privacy affecting my ability to concentrate and focus. With the end of my career in sight, I developed a bad case of “retirement-itis” and seemed unable to get my job done. My manager and the company bent over backwards giving me every chance to improve, but part of me no longer cared to work. After two years, I finally had to leave. It was a little sooner than I had planned to retire, but close enough that it would not matter financially in the long run.

At home I have a Mac that runs on Apple’s version of the Unix operating system, so I can still write code in my favorite environment. I volunteer as webmaster for several clubs and also maintain my own private website. I write programs at home for fun and will always maintain my love affair with computers!