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ADVERTISING

Silicon Valley view: Canadian getting his due as pioneer in computing

By Mike Cassidy
Knight Ridder Newspapers

This homage to the 30th anniversary of Mers Kutt's breakthrough in personal computing is long overdue.

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No, really. The anniversary was last month. I missed it because, well, because I'd never heard of Kutt or his MCM-70 microcomputer.

What's that? You'd never heard of them either? Let that be a lesson.

With the speed of innovation, much is lost in the shuffle. Those who survive are remembered. Those who don't, well, maybe not.

Another lesson: Could be Canada isn't the best place to get noticed.

Yes, Mers Kutt, 70, is Canadian. He's up there today, better known after a recent spasm of publicity over his 1973 launch of a sophisticated personal computer that pre-dated more celebrated efforts.

"I'm delighted with what's happened recently," Kutt says. "Yeah, TV and the whole thing. And calls from people that I haven't heard from in years."

He's being called the "inventor of the personal computer" in Canada, and it seems proper to call him one of the parents, anyway.

At any rate, Kutt and his team were a major force in moving us away from mainframes and toward computing for the masses.

It's a point the world had forgotten until Zbigniew Stachniak, a York



University computer-science professor, wrote about the MCM-70 in the spring edition of the engineering journal IEEE Annals of the History of Computing. (What? You missed that, too?)

With a nudge from Stachniak, the Canadian press picked up on the story of Kutt's MCM-70, one of the first PCs and arguably the most advanced of its time.

"Suddenly," says Stachniak, "they've discovered another Canadian hero."

On Sept. 25, 1973, Kutt and his team from Micro Computer Machines of Toronto demonstrated a desktop computer powered by Intel's 8008 microprocessor. The 20-pound machine came equipped with a keyboard, plasma screen, cassette drives and a virtual-memory function that boosted its operating memory up to 102 kilobytes.

It was introduced a year before the MITS Altair 8800, a more famous PC milestone. And it was user-friendly.

The MCM-70 (base price of \$3,500 in U.S. dollars) was built for those who knew nothing about computers. It was meant for accountants, actuaries and others who wanted a portable machine on which to run spreadsheets and do serious number crunching.

It was ready to run out of the box: No assembling. No programming. No switches on the front.

"The objective was to manufacture a computer for personal use," says Stachniak, who founded the York University Computer Museum in Toronto, "and this was the first company that really stated this explicitly."

Hard sales numbers are lost in the mist, but Kutt puts the number of MCM-70s sold "in the low thousands."

The buzz faded in part, Stachniak says, because MCM lost its way after Kutt was forced out in 1974. Kutt cites internal politics and funding disputes.

Both men also speculate that the MCM-70 was forgotten because Canada was a bit out of the way and out of the loop when it came time to write the histories of computing.

"Perhaps the legends of Silicon Valley and the legends of garages and Bill Gates and Steve Jobs," says Stachniak, "perhaps these legends do not make room for new stories."

Stachniak stumbled across Kutt's story three years ago in a musty magazine in a Paris library. Now he's rewriting history in a book about early microcomputers.

And already the legend of the MCM-70 is growing among those who care about such things. Sellam Ismail is a Livermore, Calif., computer collector who owns 2,000 machines, but no MCM-70.

"I'm looking."

And what about Kutt? Does he have a MCM-70?

"I thought I had it," he says. "There is one pile of stuff that I've got to go

attack in the garage. I may still find it."

*Mike Cassidy is a columnist at the San Jose Mercury News.*

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