



THE EDITOR'S GODZILLA

-by Lenard R. Roach

Christmas music from station 94.1FM in Kansas City played audibly from the kitchen of the Roach Center For BASIC Commodore Studies as I sat in the living room on my trusty laptop (not a Commodore I'm afraid. Sorry) to punch out this final chapter of The Editor's Godzilla for the 2013 year. Ladies and gentlemen of Commodore, it has been a trying year for us here in Kansas City: High paying jobs are not plentiful and the search for decent employment is never ending. I'm getting tired of using my own vehicle for work and getting little compensation for my efforts. I understand that in tax season this should change as I get to write practically everything I've bought for the car off on the 1040 Long form for the entire tenure of my employment of 2013. This includes food bought out of town; fuel; oil; tires; car repairs; anti-freeze; haircuts; uniforms; cellphone; mileage; and a host of other write offs. So far I've put 20,000 miles of work miles on the Neon from March to September. I also work at a convenience store at night but that is not much in hours and I'm having extra taken out to cover for any misnomers that I may have forgotten about on my list of write offs from the day job.

Lately I've been suffering from a major flair up of my bipolar condition which has been interfering with my writing, working, and Commodore production. This time instead of making me eat

like a horse with an abundance of oats, its laid me out in bed for days at a time. My doctor has increased my Celexa intake in hopes to combat the condition but this makes me go through my supply a lot quicker which means more trips to the pharmacy and more money out of pocket.

Sometimes you don't know how debilitating a depression can be until you actually go through one for a couple of weeks to months at a time. All you want is the depression to end and people who suffer from it usually choose suicide because to have this drag on for so long drives you nuts. Sure, there are some moments when you feel better and can actually be happy, but in just a few short hours you can be back into "the funk" and back into the battle for another happy moment. You live for the happy moment and not reaching one within a certain allotted time makes you even more depressed, then the cycle repeats.

I know I should be talking about all things Commodore here but this thing can have you by the heart and hold you what seems like forever. I want to take time out in this article to express concern for those suffering like me and let you readers know to pray or at least have happy thoughts about someone you know who suffers from depression and bipolar-ism and let them know you are thinking of them. Sometimes just letting someone with this condition know that you are on their side and are rooting for a complete recovery is the best news that person could hear.

Now let's try to talk some Commodore –

Um, basically because of my condition flaring up, I have done nothing in the way of Commodore work here in Kansas City. I have contacted Robert in regards to some Commodore parts and supplies for a Commodore 128 and 1541 disk drive that I found shoved deep into a closet in the computer room, but I have yet to hear from him about prices and availability of the cords, power supplies and software. For those of you who do not know, my church's Sunday School superintendent thinks it would be a great idea to add a Commodore

computer to the list of things the children can “purchase” in the Sunday School Store. Children earns Sunday School “bucks” by turning in assignments, memorizing Scriptures, and bringing a visitor to class, along with other features to earn said “bucks.” These “bucks” can be used to buy real, honest-to-goodness merchandise in the store that has been donated by members of the church or bought by the church itself. At first they would have been happy with a Commodore 64, but when they found an unused Commodore 128 in the Center, they were even more excited.

So what is missing? Basically everything to make the Commodore 128 and 1541 disk drive work and function. I need power supplies, serial BUS cables, video cables, and software. Robert I know has probably been busy with end of semester things at school to actually look into all of what I need, but he was kind enough to inform me that there is no possible way for me to get a Commodore 128 power supply without getting another Commodore 128, but he did direct me to The Computer Station in Long Beach, California, where the owner is trying to relinquish his Commodore supply and may have the power brick I am seeking.

Time for a twist. I received an e-mail from an old Commodore Users Group of Kansas City member who has been storing all of the club's Commodore hardware and asked if I wanted any of it and he gave me a short list of what he still had. I quickly e-mailed him back and let him know I was definitely interested and wanted to know when I could pick the computers and drives up, but I have yet to receive a return e-mail from him. I will be definitely looking at both avenues to make sure that all the bases for the church is covered and they have all they need. In the way of software I am looking for copies of Rampage, Caveman Uglylympics, and The Three Stooges, but, of course, to make these pieces of software to work, I will need functioning joysticks so I best add these requests to my laundry list of Commodore collectibles. If you have any of this material lying around your home and have no where to dispose of it, then please contact me at

lenardroach@yahoo.com and maybe we can arrange a mailing date sometime after the holidays.

Speaking of holidays, I hope that everyone got what they were asking Santa Claus for. I personally have been asking for more money to play catch up on my bills and other needs around the Center, but I found out that the best way to do that is to just get off my lazy, flatulent butt and go to work, and, as I stated before, my bipolar-ism has been keeping bed ridden for a while. This makes me glad that I am out in the living room of the Roach Center typing in this piece for the paper.

This note alone shows that I am making progress with my disease and I am getting up and about in the way of writing and getting back into some sort of a life. This will also be helpful to your depressed friend or relative: Get them out and doing something; even playing a video game on the Commodore can be rehabilitating. It takes a lot of effort to make the depressed do stuff and, to be serious, they won't do it on their own. The last time I went through this kind of depression was August and I was out of work for three weeks. My day job was good to me and kept me hopping from delivery to delivery all week (due to the Christmas holiday) so not only was it rehabilitating, it was also profitable. I can't wait to get my check for the end of the month's work and see how much money I made while fighting this funk.

Commodore is a great computer and has brought several dollars into the Roach Center over the past twenty years or so. I know that more Commodore innovations are coming in the future as I read some of the post that are e-mailed to me automatically from the Homestead website. Sadly, I don't know how to maneuver around on the Homestead site, otherwise I would log into the site myself and see if there in anything I can do to help those who are working in BASIC programming. I know that many of these who are programming are talking well over my head, but once in a while there is someone who is working in V2.0 and I can help somewhat.

In closing for this issue, let me say,

“Congratulations” to the Fresno Commodore Users Group for surviving another year in the Commodore universe without so much as thinking of folding or shutting the doors to the club at any time. I don't know how many years FCUG has been in service to the Commodore community, but

I'm guessing it's well into thirty years and here's to another successful year of Commodore innovations.

MONTHLY MEETING REPORT

NOVEMBER 2013

-By Dick Estel & Robert Bernardo



We had the largest attendance in a long time, with all the local regulars and several guests. This included Robert Bernardo, Dick Estel, Louis Mazzei and son Vincent, Brad Strait and his kids, Katelyn and William; and Roger Van Pelt. From Patterson, 90 miles away up the valley, came Greg Dodd and son Gregory. Late in the day, Raymond Ciula, who had visited in August, stopped in briefly to donate some more Commodore and Amiga software to the club. Before the day was over, Greg became our newest member.

My notes may be a bit hard to figure out, because I had some secretarial “help.” Katelyn received crayons from the waitress and quickly used up a lot of the white space on the paper that came with them. She then proceeded to “borrow” my notebook to write on. Being in kindergarten, she printed very well (better than me), but few of the words she wrote pertained to Commodore.

Greg was interested in all types of vintage computers, but his big love was arcade games, and he had several in his garage. He was an Atari user, as was Louis, so they spent a good part of the meeting discussing that subject. In fact, with the number of people present, there was a lot of discussion about all kinds of things, and it was hard to actually conduct business (not that we do much of that anyway).

Early in the meeting, there was a tragedy. When Vincent's beloved VIC-20 was plugged into power and into a monitor, the blue smoke escaped. When that happened, we knew well that a machine can no longer function. Ray Carlsen had repaired two VIC-20 motherboards for Louis, one of which hopefully can replace the smoked one. Later when Louis opened the machine, he found out that a component (resistor, capacitor?) had melted.

Looking ahead to the Commodore Vegas Expo 2014, Robert reported that an Amiga 1000 will be among the major raffle prizes, and all the planning seemed to be on schedule. You can keep up with what's in store at

<http://www.commodore.ca/forum/viewforum.php?f=6&sid=cf9975741f3bfb4929f2c3e7600f90cb>, but it would be easier to log on to www.dickestel.com/fcug.htm and click on “CommVEx 2014” near the top.

Robert will be seeing Commodore repair tech Ray Carlsen at Thanksgiving time and offered to take any equipment that needs service, including the damaged VIC-20 mentioned above. Also Robert reported that the Brian Bagnall’s book about the Amiga years of Commodore Business Machines had been cancelled. Several years ago Bagnall produced the book, “On the Edge: the Rise and Fall of Commodore,” which covered the entire history of Commodore Business Machines. Then he wrote an expanded version, “Commodore: A Company on the Edge,” covering the CBM from 1978-1984. The new book was to be the completion of this project, covering CBM from 1985-1994. There’s a website for the original book at <http://www.commodorebook.com/>, and both books are available at Amazon (search “Commodore on the Edge”).

With help from Louis and others, Robert will slowly and surely be transferring his Commodore and Amiga videos from Blip.tv to YouTube. Blip changed its terms of service (now only entertainment videos and no videos about meetings/presentations), making it impossible to continue to use that site.

During his recent visit to the AmiWest Show in Sacramento, Robert obtained a Commodore B128, along with software, a monitor, and a CBM 8050 dual-disk drive, which was slightly smaller than a golf cart and required two men and a boy to lift -- all for the bargain price of \$50. The B128 will be demonstrated at a later date.

During the show, Robert was honored with the John Zacharias Award from AmiWest and the Sacramento Amiga Computer Club, in recognition of outstanding support and technical assistance to the club and the show. Since the early 2000’s, his filming and subsequent Internet posting of the videos of the AmiWest speeches and presentations have provided historical perspective on the development of the Amiga computer.

Robert brought a table of stuff he acquired at the Computer Station in Long Beach, California, which is slowly and not very surely going out of business. The haul included software for the VIC-20, Plus/4, Amiga CDTV, and of course various C64 and C128 items. There was a pile of GEOS graphic disks from “Those Designers,” which Dick would have tried to sneak out with ten years ago, but now he enjoyed them from a historical perspective only. Also from Computer Station came four used joysticks for sale. All joysticks were in different states of condition. Louis bought the Atari joystick to repair, and Roger bought the Wico joystick.

Robert is working with a group of California vintage computer enthusiasts to re-establish a West Coast exhibition to replace the late, lamented Vintage Computer Festival. The working title is BART Con – Bay Area Retro Technology Convention – and is planned for summer, 2014, at Hacker Dojo in Mountain View, California. It will feature not just computers but other older technology, although Robert rejects Dick’s suggestion of the hand-cranked ice cream maker as an excellent example of old tech.

-by Robert Bernardo & Dick Estel

Illness and family obligations kept half our members away from the December meeting, so it was just Greg and Gregory Dodd, Robert Bernardo, and Dick Estel.

We still had plenty to talk about and hardware and software to look at. Dick brought a device that will convert a PC signal to VGA for connection to a TV. He had won this at CommVEx several years ago but had no need for it, so Greg happily took it off his hands.

Robert had been to Oregon and brought back Louis Mazzei's VIC-20 motherboards that Ray Carlsen had repaired. Robert told of Ray's latest prototype, a power supply that uses modern components and will connect to either a C64 or C128. Ray is also developing version 2 of his Computer Saver, which goes between the power supply and computer to protect the latter from over-voltages.

We had a wide-ranging discussion of the SX-64, which Greg knew about but had never owned. Robert mentioned that only 10,000 were produced, accounting for its rarity and continuing relative high value. Robert said he would bring a SX-64 to the next meeting, and Greg could examine it.

There was also an Amiga discussion, with Robert explaining that the newest model, the AmigaOne, was developed in the early 2000s, as rights to the name passed from one owner to another. On a related note, Robert had been entrusted with an Amiga 4000 built into a tower, which had belonged to the late Lord Ronin (Dave Mohr) and which had not been claimed by his relatives or members of his club. We opened it up and took a look inside. This "PowerTower" ran on Amiga OS 3.9 through a Blizzard '040 board with 64 megs of Fast RAM.

The software part of the meeting included a look at the disk library from FUNHUG (Fremont, Union City, Newark, Hayward User Group) which disbanded a number of years ago. We ran several of the programs from a few of their many disks. Their disks-of-the-month were "flippy" disks with a C64 side and a C128 side. The C128 side of one examined disk had utilities and a demo which ran in 80-column mode.

Although not present, Roger Van Pelt had sent his Commodore Magic Voice speech module and two of the games that take advantage of its sound capabilities, Wizard of Wor and Gorf. We got it operating and the voice used seemed to fit very well with the games. Robert remarked that after playing Gorf awhile, the voice seemed to be making fun of him!



FINDING A LONG LOST RELATIVE AND A COMMODORE USER

-By Dick Estel

Back in the late 20th century or early 21st I was looking through a newsletter that we received from the Commodore Computer Club of Toledo. It was a typical Commodore newsletter of the time, but what caught my attention was the return address.

First, it was P.O. Box 64 , which was nice, but of greater interest was that the town was Metamora OH, a small village near the Michigan border where my late mother grew up. Since everyone around there knew each other, I started Emailing the editor, Rob Snyder, asking who his family was, his wife's family, etc.

After several exchanges back and forth, I finally received information that Rob's wife Annette was descended from the Smiths of Raab's Corners. I asked Mother if she knew this family, and she said that we are distantly related.

Additional inquiries revealed that my mother and Annette are both descended from Gardner B. Mason (1829 – 1897). Gardner 's first wife died shortly after giving birth to their only child. This child grew up, married Sylvester Smith, and started a long and widespread family of descendents, of which Annette is one.

Gardner remarried, and had several more children, one of whom was my great grandfather. My genealogy program says that Annette and I are half 3rd cousin once removed.

It also turned out that Annette's grandmother, Meredith Kline Gillen, went to school with my dad, and my parents had visited her on some of their Ohio trips, but were not aware of the relationship.

In 2002 my parents and I visited the Snyders in Metamora, enjoying a nice dinner and getting to know them and their three delightful kids. At the time I wrote the following in my report of my trip: "Today we visited Rob and Annette, and their three children. They proved to be the kind of people you are glad to discover are related to you; nice and friendly and helpful in filling in blanks in the genealogical record. The kids are cute, smart and polite. We had dinner there, watched Helena (age 7) and Jacob (age 3) set up their model zoo, and enjoyed seeing 1 year old Catherine try to take a few steps.

"Rob 's Commodore set-up includes a C128-D, two 1581's, two 1571's, hard drive, CD-ROM player, and a C64 that can be switched in. He also has an Amiga and an SX64 (Annette has an Apple laptop to

round out the collection).”

Then in 2004 my grandson Mikie and I again paid the family a visit, this time at a rural home complete with pond near the town of Delta . By this time there was a new addition to the family, and the Snyder kids now number six.

Rob eventually became the president and editor of Meeting Commodore Users through the Mail, an international organization that finally closed down barely a year ago. He also had the sad duty of being the final president of the Toledo club.

We have stayed in touch over the years, and I have Commodore to thank for bringing me together with some “long lost” relatives whose existence was previously unknown to me.



SC3'S BACK YARD PARTY

A PERFECT “10”

-by Steve Hertz

Ten. Hard as it is to believe, November 9, 2013 marked the tenth time the Southern California Classic Collectors have hosted one of our now-legendary "back yard" parties in Claremont, CA.. And now that we've finally hit double-digits, we're able to say with some confidence that we finally kind of know what we're doing. Set-up went smoothly. The games were working. There were no power outages. The pizza was frequent, fresh and delicious. Over 160 attendees from all over California had a great time. And oh yeah, there were pinball machines.

Yes, finally. Those of you who attended our last

party at The Last Arcade on the Planet may recall that event as the first appearance of pinball at an SC3 shindig, but Nov. 9's meeting was the first time the silver ball made it to the fabled back yard. Thanks to our friend Mike M., Star Trek: The Next Generation and Terminator 2 tables were on the scene, captivating gamers with thrilling early '90s science-fiction licenses. Both tables were occupied all night long. It's hard to overstate how happy we are about this: SC3 has always celebrated gaming culture and history, and pinball is a big part of that. Arcade video games, home consoles, and pinball are the "big three" pillars on which our hobby stands; we loved seeing them all in the back yard together at last. Thanks again, Mike, and thanks also for bringing the three-player Super Sprint machine!

SC3 counts on contributions like those; new machines and games are always exciting. This event featured two systems not seen at SC3 before. First was an immaculate Apple][setup, resplendent in 1970's monochrome green glory, provided by our friend Brian. Equally awesome, with slightly more colorful graphics, was a Neo Geo AES running through an RGB studio monitor, provided by William. Our old friends Rik from the Handheld Game Museum and Robert Bernardo from FCUG came by with a complement of '80s VFD tabletop games and an Amiga A600, respectively. Also appearing was a PS2 store kiosk, which showed up as a for-sale item and ultimately went home with a new owner, but not before being set up for play next to the Turkey Shoot cabinet. Combined with

the other 14 console setups, our home system tables were crammed to capacity and then some.

Once again, the N64 proved that four-player simultaneous mid-1990s gaming will live forever, as crowds gathered to play GoldenEye and Smash Bros. all night long. More than once we remarked on the diversity of the folks playing. Kids and adults, men and women alike were taking up the garishly-colored controllers, crowding together basked in the glow of the big N64 TV, and it was great to see. Naturally the other machines got a workout of their own. Near the end of the night we saw somebody taking out the final boss from one of the NES Mega Man games – that's dedication!

Mike from GameGavel.com once again hosted a raffle of vintage gaming and retro items – including a super-awesome Batman Colorforms set! – with a Vectrex system as the grand prize. The twist: Mike couldn't be on-hand at the start of the event, leaving the SC3 organizers to sell tickets for part of the night. Somehow it worked out though, as a record number of tickets were sold. Was it the awesome prizes or Geoff's incredible salesmanship??

All in all, SC3 Back Yard #10 was a fantastic event that made us remember why we love this hobby so much. Thanks to everyone who helped out (especially to Chris N. and Ian – set-up would not go so smoothly without you guys), and THANK YOU to everyone who attended and chipped in a donation to keep us going. Your support is always appreciated!

The next SC3 arcade party has yet to be announced, but we're tentatively eyeing spring of 2014. As always, keep an eye on this site and our Facebook page for announcements. Until then, keep gaming!



A HISTORY OF THE AMIGA PART 5

POST-LAUNCH BLUES

-by Jeremy Reimer

On the cusp of greatness

By July 1985, Commodore had everything going off for it. The Amiga computer had been demonstrated in public to rave reviews, and everyone was excited at the potential of this great technology. That's when the problems started.

Commodore's primary woes were always about money, and 1985 was no exception. Sales of the Commodore 64 were still going strong, but the price wars had slashed the profits on the little computer. The company had invested millions of dollars creating new and bizarre 8-bit computers that competed directly against the venerable C-64, such as the wholly incompatible Plus/4 that had no chance in the marketplace. To make things worse, the company had to deal with lawsuits from its ousted founder, Jack Tramiel. Finally, Commodore had invested \$24 million to purchase Amiga outright, but as the computer had not gone on sale yet, there was no return on this investment. All these financial problems put a strain on the company's ability to get the Amiga ready to sell to the public. Without a lot of spare cash, it was difficult to rush the production of the computer. Further software delays pushed back the launch as well. The end result was that the Amiga did not go on sale until August of 1985.

This wouldn't have been a huge problem, had Commodore been able to gather enough resources to ship the machine in quantity. Instead, production delays meant that the computers trickled off the assembly lines, and by October there were only 50 Amiga 1000 units in existence, all used by Commodore for demos and internal software

development.

This delay was doubly crippling, because Jack Tramiel had managed to rush the development of the Atari ST, using off-the-shelf chips and an operating system and GUI purchased from Digital Research. Tramiel was able to show the ST off at the January CES and started taking orders for the computer shortly thereafter. This sudden competition from Commodore's former CEO took everyone by surprise.

Missing Christmas

Amiga 1000 computers did not start to appear in quantity on retail shelves until mid-November 1985. This was too late to make a significant impact on the crucial holiday buying season. Most retailers make 40 percent or more of their yearly sales over the holidays, and Commodore had missed the boat. To make matters worse, the company was not really clear about how it was going to sell the computer. The Commodore 64 had been sold at big retail chains like Sears and K-Mart, but marketing executives felt that the Amiga was better positioned as a serious business computer. Astoundingly, Commodore actually turned down Sears' offer to sell Amigas. Back in the 1980s, Sears was a major player in computer sales; I personally used to cherish parental shopping visits so that I could get my hands on the latest in computer technology. The Atari ST was sold there, but the Amiga was not.

Even these blunders might have been mitigated had Commodore come up with some truly amazing advertising campaigns to drum up interest in the new computer. The delays gave the company extra time to do this, but what Commodore came up with was so awful that it sickened many of its own employees.

Bad advertising

Because the Amiga was years ahead of its time compared to the competition, many Commodore executives believed that the computer would sell

itself. This was not — and has never been — true of any technology. When personal computers first came on the scene in the late 1970s, most people had no idea what they would be useful for. As a result, the only people who bought them initially were enthusiastic and technically skilled hobbyists — a limited market at best. It took a few killer applications, such as the spreadsheet, combined with an all-out marketing assault, to drive sales to new levels.

The Amiga was in the same position in 1985. It was a multimedia computer before the term had been invented, but there were no killer applications yet. What it needed was a stellar advertising campaign, one that would drive enough sales to get software companies interested in supporting the new platform. Instead, what it got was a half-hearted series of television ads that ran over Christmas and were never seen again. The first commercial had a bunch of zombie-like people shuffling up stairs towards a pedestal, from which a computer monitor emanated a blinding light. It was a poor copy of Apple's famous 1984 advertisement and failed to generate even a tiny amount of buzz in the industry.

From there, things got worse. The next ad was a rip-off of the ending of 2001: A Space Odyssey and featured an old man turning into a fetus. Some pictures of the commercial's production made their way to the Commodore engineers, and soon the "fetus on a stick" became a standard joke about their company's marketing efforts.

Further advertising used black-and-white and sepia-toned footage of typical family home movies, with some vague narration, "When you were growing up, you learned you faced a world full of competition." Amiga did indeed face a world full of competition, but this kind of lifestyle avant-garde advertising was already being done — and being done much better — by Apple.

What Commodore really needed at that time was some simple comparative advertising. A picture of an IBM PC running in text mode on a green

monochrome screen, then a Macintosh with its tiny 9-inch monochrome monitor, then the Amiga with full color, multitasking, animation, and sound. For extra marks, you could even put prices under all three.

As a result of Commodore dropping the ball on production and marketing, the firm sold only 35,000 Amigas in 1985. This didn't help with the balance sheet, which was getting grim.

Missing CES

Commodore had experienced a financial crunch at the worst possible time. In the six quarters between September 1984 and March 1986, Commodore Business Machines International lost over \$300 million. Money was tight, and the bean-counters were in charge.

As a result, Commodore was a no-show for the January 1986 Consumer Electronics Show (CES). Ahoy! magazine reflected on this conspicuous absence:

Understand that the last four CES shows in a row, dating back to January 1984, Commodore's exhibit had been the focal point of the home computer segment of CES, the most visited computer booth at the show — as befitted the industry's leading hardware manufacturer. Their pulling out of CES seemed like Russia resigning from the Soviet Bloc.

Commodore also missed the following computer dealer exhibition, COMDEX, as well as the June 1986 CES. The company had defaulted on its bank loans and could not get the bankers to lend any more money for trade shows.

The company's advertising also slowed to a trickle. Thomas Rattigan, who was being groomed for the position as Commodore's CEO, recalled those troubling times. "Basically, the company was living hand to mouth," he said. "When I was there, they weren't doing very much advertising, because they couldn't afford it."

This strategic retreat from the market had a hugely negative impact on Amiga sales. In February 1986, Commodore revealed that it was moving between 10,000 and 15,000 Amiga 1000 computers a month. Jack Tramiel's Atari ST was beating the Amiga in sales figures, in signing up dealers, and worse still, in application support.

"They f***** it up"

Many Amiga engineers felt betrayed by Commodore's financial ineptitude and pathetic marketing efforts. They were disgusted that their company could take such an advanced and powerful computer and fail to capitalize on it. Most of these bad feelings were confined to grumblings in the hallways, but some of them wound up hurting the Amiga directly.

One of the software engineers working on upgrades to Workbench, the Amiga's graphical desktop environment, decided he would "get back" at Commodore for its failure to properly market the Amiga. He programmed in a hidden message, commonly known as an "Easter Egg" in the software industry, that would only appear only when the user pressed a certain combination of keys simultaneously. The message was "We made the Amiga, they f*****d it up."

RJ Mical got a slight chuckle out of the message, but told the engineer (who remains nameless to this day) that it was unacceptable, and he would have to take it out. The engineer relented, and when Mical checked the final code, the offending text had been replaced with the message "Amiga: born a champion." He thought that was the end of it.

Little did he know that the engineer had added a second Easter Egg with the original message encrypted inside. To get to the message, you had to hold down eight separate keys, which would pop up the text "We made the Amiga" on the screen. If you kept the keys held down, and were very dexterous or had a friend to help you, inserting a floppy in the drive would flash the latter part of the message for 1/60th of a second. The engineer

thought that nobody would ever see this last part, but because the Amiga could output its graphics directly to video, you could just tape the whole experience and press pause on the VCR to see it.

The message was discovered embedded in the ROMs for the European PAL version of the Amiga 1000, just after the computer had gone on sale in the United Kingdom. Managers at Commodore UK pulled tens of thousands of Amigas off the shelves and refused to sell the machines until replacement ROM chips were sent out that excised the offending message. The little joke by a single software engineer cost the Amiga over three months of sales in a major market and had ramifications that shook the whole company.

Leaving Los Gatos

After the Easter Egg fiasco, Commodore management decided that they should move the Amiga team closer to headquarters so that they could keep a closer eye on their activities. The Amiga engineers were asked to move across the country, from their offices in Los Gatos, California, to West Chester, Pennsylvania.

Many of the engineers shrugged their shoulders and started packing, but for some this was the last straw. RJ Mical, the software guru who had written the Intuition programming interface and designed much of the Amiga's GUI, decided that his future would lie elsewhere. He wound up working as an independent contractor on Amiga peripherals and software, including an early video capture device called a frame grabber.

Despite his issues with Commodore, Mical still was proud of the role he played in developing the Amiga. "Those were such cool days, you just couldn't believe it," he would later tell Commodore documentary author Brian Bagnall. "It was one of the most magical periods of my entire life working at Amiga. God, what an incredible thing we did."

The father of the Amiga, Jay Miner, also refused to switch coasts. While he left Commodore as an

official employee, he continued to work as a consultant for them for many years. He also donated much of his time giving talks to Amiga user groups around North America, telling the story of how he brought his dream computer to life.

Searching for stability

The trials and tribulations of Commodore Business Machines International weren't the only problems that dogged the young Amiga computer. The initial release of the operating system was rushed, and as a result, the first Amiga 1000 machines shipped with many bugs in the OS. The "Guru Meditation" error that started as a joke in the Amiga offices would come to haunt many early Amiga users.

Because the OS lacked memory protection, a fatal error in the OS or even in an application could lock up the system completely, forcing a reboot. Users might be taking advantage of the multitasking abilities of the Amiga to run many programs at once, only to lose work in all of them when the machine went down. The PC, Macintosh, and Atari ST, which had much simpler operating systems that could only run one application at a time, did not suffer from this problem.

As a result, the Amiga gained a reputation for instability that would stay with the machine for many years to come. The lack of memory protection wasn't the real problem — an operating system with full memory protection can still be brought down by a bug in the OS itself, and an application that crashes all the time isn't useful even if the OS keeps running. The software engineers at Commodore worked tirelessly to track down these bugs and eliminate them, as did the application developers. Years later, most Amiga users would run many applications at once and keep their machines operating for weeks and even months without crashing or requiring a reboot. However, the initial stability problems hurt the reputation of the Amiga — and it carried this reputation for the rest of its life

Rattigan takes the reins

What had seemed like such a promising start for the Amiga Computer had turned, at least early on, into something resembling a disaster. Yet all was not lost. There was still hope that the problems that plagued the platform and its owner could be addressed, and the Amiga given a chance to thrive. Doing so, however, would necessitate a change in Commodore management.

The company, which had been thrown into such disarray when founder Jack Tramiel was unceremoniously booted out by the jet-setting financier Irving Gould, was currently being run by an uninspiring man named Marshall Smith. Smith had come from the steel industry, where nothing much changes across decades, and was thoroughly unprepared for the task of running a computer company.

An indication of what kind of man Marshall Smith was came at Commodore's 1985 Christmas party held at the Sunnybrook Ballroom in Pottstown, Pennsylvania. Drinking heavily, Smith started slam-dancing with a bunch of the engineers, including Greg Berlin, Bil Herd, and Bob Russell. For some reason, unknown to anyone but Smith, he playfully slapped Herd in the face. Herd, who had also been drinking, replied with a slap of his own, but his right hand was in a plaster cast and his slap carried significantly more impact. As Smith staggered back under the weight of the blow, Herd simply said "Don't do that again." Smith said nothing, and Herd was never disciplined for hitting his boss. "Drinking and slam-dancing, that's about the only thing I think [Smith] was qualified to do," recalled Russell.

Smith certainly wasn't a good businessman. At the January 1985 CES, Commodore had shown off an innovative portable computer using an LCD screen. The laptop computer had a display that could show 16 lines of 80-column text, which compared favorably to the then-popular Tandy Model 100's 8 lines and 30 columns. Commodore took orders for 15,000 units of the machine just at the show itself, and it looked like it would be a smash success. That

was when the CEO of Tandy/Radio Shack took Marshall Smith aside and told him that there was no money in LCD computers. Smith not only canceled the machine, but sold off Commodore's entire LCD development and manufacturing division, based solely on this dubious "advice" from his competition! Commodore had a chance to take an early lead in the emerging market of portable computers. Instead, the company would never produce a laptop again. The man intended to replace Marshall Smith was Thomas Rattigan, an executive from Pepsi who had once worked with then-Apple CEO John Sculley. Like Sculley, he knew little about computers when he arrived at his new company, but he was a good listener and learned quickly. In late 1985, Rattigan was given the title of Chief Operating Officer (COO), reporting to Marshall Smith. Smith continued to bungle almost everything, and finally in February 1986 he was let go and Rattigan became President and CEO of Commodore International. He was given a five-year contract that was set to expire on July 1, 1991.

At last Rattigan could take on the task of righting the sinking ship that was Commodore. He had an ambitious plan that involved tackling every problem that plagued the beleaguered computer company. Firstly, to stop the bleeding and restore the company to profitability, he would cancel irrelevant projects, sell off unimportant divisions, and be brutal about laying off employees. Secondly, he would push for a redesigned and cost-reduced Amiga that could be sold at a lower price and allow Commodore to reenter the home consumer market that it once dominated with the C-64. Lastly, he would make a serious attempt to capture the more profitable high-end market by making a new Amiga that was more powerful and expandable than the 1000.

Rattigan would end up succeeding in every part of his plan. He would bring Commodore back from the brink of bankruptcy and back into profitability. He would reinvigorate the Amiga platform by splitting it into low-end and high-end models, each with different market possibilities. He would even

preside over a new set of advertisements that, for the first time, properly showcased the power of the Amiga. (Tune in to the next installment of the Amiga saga, in which we explore how Rattigan saved the company, witness the creation of the Amiga 500

For all this effort, which Rattigan would achieve in and 2000, and learn the story behind Rattigan's a little under a year and half, he would be rewarded forced removal from Commodore.)

not with a pay raise, a promotion, or even a pat on the back. Instead, Rattigan would be kicked to the curb, fired before he had even run out his contract.

In his place would come vampires, creatures dedicated not to the success of Commodore or the Amiga, but in sucking them both dry until they turned into dust.

- By Dick Estel

INTRODUCTION

This is number six of a limited series of articles saluting some of our past members, people who have made a significant contribution to the club. Our more recent members did not have the pleasure of knowing these men and women, many of whom have passed on. However, they made a lasting impression on the club and the author.

Questions and comments to our web address, info@dickestel.com, are welcome.



HELEN SILVAS

Unlike the people I've written about up to now, Helen is presumably still alive. At least we have no information to the contrary, and last time we saw her she was in good health and probably under age 50.

We didn't keep track of when people joined the club, but Helen was with us for about five years in the late 1990s, and quickly became an important part of the club.

She was interested in many aspects of computing, but perhaps her main focus was on writing and GEOS. She took advantage of Ralph Parrott's offer to help club members with that challenging program, and gained a good skill level.

Although she contributed articles to the newsletter, she wanted an additional way to express herself, and started her own unofficial newspaper, which she produced and distributed to club members at her own expense. Taking the alternate name of J.R.R. Tolkien's Hobbit, she called her publication The

Halfling, and a PDF sample can be found at <http://www.dickestel.com/halflingjan98.pdf>.

Her writing was very personal and unique. As editor of the Interface at the time, I was sometimes tempted to change a phrase or two, but I soon recognized that it would only detract from her special approach.

She was also a poet, and once attended a gathering in L.A. at which she discussed poetry with another writer whose day job was being Lou Grant on TV – the great Edward Asner.

Helen took on the difficult task of club equipment manager, which meant storing the computer system, transporting it to meetings, getting it into the meeting room, then reversing the process at the end of the meeting.

Although I'm not sure of her exact title, Helen was a medical aide at a local hospital, which went well with her kind and compassionate nature.

For reasons we never learned, Helen moved to Sacramento quite suddenly without any notice. We had some contact with her for awhile, but eventually lost touch. Helen, if you're out there somewhere, we'd love to hear from you again.

Check out her photo at www.dickestel.com/images/fcug018.jpg