

From: SPHVAX::SCHOENBACH "VICTOR_SCHOENBACH AT UNC.EDU" 19-
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To: REID

CC: SCHOENBACH

Subj: A piece of our history

As my contribution to the Department's "Memory Book", I am sending you one of my last VAXmail messages. As you know, the VAX system is scheduled to be turned off on December 22nd. I have just finished downloading approximately 20 megabytes of e-mail messages and old MASS-11 files (for the benefit of the next generation of readers, MASS-11 was the word processing program that was first developed for the DEC VAX computer system and later ported to MS-DOS PCs. For the first ten years or so of its use at the School, the School's computer staff had a close relationship with the vendors, Microsystems Engineering Corporation of Hoffman Estates, IL (MEC). That relationship developed as the School's computer staff kept discovering bugs in MASS-11 and helped the company to fix them, and also suggested numerous improvements that were later incorporated in the program. Two people in particular come to mind -- Harvey Jeffries, Professor in the Department of Environmental Sciences and Engineering, who led the School's Computing and Data Processing Advisory Committee (CADPAC) and was a primary force behind the School's entrance into the Information Technology Age. Harvey was wizard at understanding computers and operating systems well beyond even what most young people could do at the time! One of those "young people", though, Ken Crossen went from being the MASS-11 expert on the School's computing staff to become a software developer for MEC. In fact, it was he who wrote the version of MASS-11 for the PC, as well as a text editor called MTECH that enabled MASS-11 users to edit computer programs and other "flat files", using the same commands as in MASS-11. The other person who became the MASS-11 expert and who, fortunately, stayed with the School, was Sharon Schramm, who patiently taught and "rescued" many of the School's MASS-11 users in all stations, from hunt-and-peck faculty to our best secretaries. Nancy Colvin was one of the Department's experts in MASS-11 before she moved on to Access and HTML! (For archival purposes, the name of the man who wrote the original (VAX) version of MASS-11 Surender Goel, though I'm not sure of the spelling.) Anyone who remembers MASS-11 will laugh at how primitive it seems compared to Word, WordPerfect, and whatever their replacements are. But MASS-11 was born before these other programs, incorporated many invaluable features and capabilities that transformed document preparation for most people in the School (or at least in Rosenau -- McGavran-Greenberg had not, of course, been built yet, and for fiscal reasons the School did not extend VAX access to the various trailers and other outlying offices such as NCNB/NationsBank -- that policy decision was the basis for the development of a PC culture in the outlying offices that developed completely independently of the VAX culture in Rosenau, so that especially within Epidemiology, which had many faculty and staff in the old Frank Porter Graham

Center trailers next to the power plant on Cameron Avenue and also at NCNB, it was very difficult to transfer documents between the VAX and the PCs, and therefore also between MASS-11 and the emerging PC-based word processors [Wordstar was an early favorite] that eventually displaced the MASS-11 and the VAX). Some of us, though, continue to use MASS-11 even at this late date. It's very fast (though not fancy!), uses a fraction of the disk space for program and documents, and since the company is out of business, unchanging. As long as I can run DOS, I'll probably still use MASS-11!

This message has become rather longer than I had originally intended, but that was also typical of VAXmail!

Warmest wishes to all my former VAX and MASS-11 compatriots. We share one of those special experiences that newcomers can only enjoy vicariously.

Vic Schoenbach