The Early Model Personal Computer Contest

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Cover

Schematic of the processor section of the Apple 1 computer.
See article on page **3** and photograph of the Apple 1 board on page **6**.
Reproduced from Apple 1 Operation Manual, Courtesy of Apple Computer.
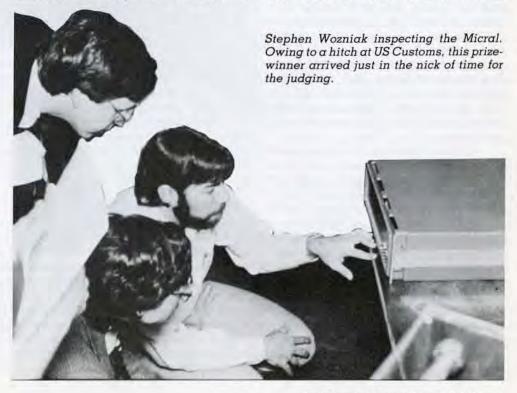
Gift of Dysan Corporation

Every year the Fall issue of The Computer Museum Report features the Museum's collections. This issue constitutes a complete catalog of the Museum's collection of personal computer hardware as of July 1986. Collected artifacts not relating to personal computers will be listed next year. It follows a somewhat unusual collecting event—the Early Model Personal Computer Contest.

In the Spring of 1985, William Millard, then chairman of ComputerLand, toured the Museum with Pat McGovern, chairman of CW Communications, the world's largest publisher of computer trade magazines, and Gwen Bell, Museum President. Millard noticed gaps in our collection of personal computers and asked how the Museum could remedy the situation before the early machines disappeared. Bell, half in jest, suggested a contest to find the earliest personal computers. Millard took up the idea enthusiastically and offered ComputerLand's support for the collection. McGovern offered to publicize the event and the contest was born.

From October 1985 to March 1986 advertisements appeared in CW Communications' magazines all over the world. The heading ran—"Wanted: Old Thinker-toys". Phil Lemmons, editor-in-chief of *Byte* magazine also put out the call in *Byte's* tenth anniversary issue.

Offers flooded in—320 in all from 13 countries. The early US commercial machines, topped by the Altair 8800's (13 offers) were well represented. There were also many offers of one-of-a-kind homebrew machines and single-board computers, mostly still in full working order. Perhaps the most bizarre offer came from Argentina—a manuscript dating from around 1800 containing a card punched with holes. Said to be from Marie Antoinette imprisoned in the Bastille, it contained a coded message to her supporters outside the prison. Overall the response from abroad was disappointing; the collection still needs foreign enrichment.

A total of 137 items were accepted. The remainder were declined to avoid excessive duplication, or because they did not really fall into the categories collected by the Museum. The donors shipped their items to us for the final judging by Stephen Wozniak, designer of the Apple II and co-founder of Apple Computer, David Bunnell, an early MITS employee and current publisher

Stephen Wozniak inspecting the Micral. Owing to a hitch at US Customs, this prize-winner arrived just in the nick of time for the judging.

of *PC World*, and myself. It was on this occasion that Wozniak announced his intention to donate his personal collection of hardware and notebooks to the Museum. He also gave a public lecture to a packed house after the judging. We include his talk in this issue as the story behind the machine that epitomized the spectacular growth of personal computing—the Apple II.

In defining the personal computer, we excluded plastic or cardboard educational and toy kit 'computers' (such as CARDIAC, BRANIAC and GENIAC), as well as programmable calculators. We were impressed by machines in several categories. First, there were the highly original designs that had significant impact on the development of the technology. Don Lancaster's TV Typewriter and Lee Felsenstein's Visual Display Module paved the way to the keyboard and screen interface now universal on personal computers. They were each awarded a prize.

Next there were the early commercial products, bold design and packaging efforts. We awarded the first prize to the 1971 Kenbak-1, submitted by its creator John Blankenbaker. This small machine contained an eight-bit processor built up from medium-scale and small-scale integrated circuits, and qualified as the earliest personal computer known to the judges. Thi Truong's 1973 Micral was awarded a prize as the first commercially available microprocessor-based computer. The Scelbi-8B, the EPA Micro 68 and Cromemco Dazzler were given honorable mention in this category.

Some of these machines bore testimony to the extraordinary zeal of the early hobbyists. We gave a prize to Robert Pond's Altair 8800 and honorable mentions to a Southwest Technical Products 6800 and a TRS-80 Model 1 which came complete with every conceivable add-on board or peripheral and with extensive, well documented software collections. One Altair had even been time-shared!

Lastly there were the homebrew machines, some indicating that builders had gone to enormous lengths to make useful machines at low cost. The computer based on an RGS-008 kit

gained honorable mention for completeness. There were machines that must have taken solid weeks of wire-wrapping and soldering to assemble.

We received many offers of magazines, personal computer club newsletters and advertising literature. David Ahl, founder of *Creative Computing* magazine, sent us his large collection of personal computer periodicals. Volunteers from the Boston Computer Society are piecing together the offers to create complete periodical runs. The collections of literature and software will be listed in a later issue.

The contest was a success—the Museum now has a very fine collection of personal computers, including some little known, but significant machines. This provides a unique historical record and a valuable resource for future exhibits.

The winners were flown to the Museum for "Personal Computer Pioneers Day" and presented with engraved silicon wafer medals. From left to right: John V. Blankenbaker (Kenbak-1), Robert Pond (Altair 8800 hobbyist), Lee Felsenstein (prototype VDM-1) and Thi T. Truong (Micral). Don Lancaster (prototype TVT-1) was unable to attend the prize-giving.