

INFORMATION TERRITORIES

SILICON VALLEY AND UNIX'

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Steve Arnold contributes the first of a series of monthly columns in *AIR* this month. The series will be Arnold's *persona*/ observations on US information technology, in particular developments which are likely to have a significant impact on various electronic media. Steve Arnold has recently been awarded the Distinguished Lectureship Award from the New Jersey Chapter of the American Society for Information Science and Rutgers University. This announcement, and his *invol-*

Silicon Valley, like much of America, is an undistinguished place.

Driving south from San Francisco on El Camino Real (Highway 82) reminds me of Kokomo, Indiana, or Boise, Idaho. This **four**-laner is like any other traffic-choked road in the US. The buildings in the cities along the 'royal road' are one- or two-levels with the occasional glass tower rising a pretentious six or eight stories above the high-tech playground of thousands of computer programmers, software companies and entrepreneurs like Steve Jobs. Technology companies are scattered among industrial parks and shopping centres, and

elbow-to-elbow with designer clothes outlets, carpet dealers with names like 'Rug City', Tower Record stores, and Taco Bell fast-food outlets. Figuring out whether one is in Menlo Park, Palo Alto, Mountain View or San Jose comes down to reading road signs.

But if America has a computer nerve centre, it's here in the Valley, concentrated in warehouse-off ice parks and small offices. My pre-visit image of Silicon Valley included lush vegetation, ultra-modern buildings, and a sparkle not present in America's older industrial cities. Yes, the skies are blue, and the weather seems climate-controlled. But the buildings are prefabricated and have a **built-in-a-hurry** look. Despite the architecture, computer entrepreneurs rent offices and furniture, print stationery and fire up high-tech businesses.

I was looking for a bookstore and took a wrong turn, ending up in the Creek Side Office Park on the north side of San Jose. Creek Side is a cluster of a dozen buildings with office and warehouse space for lease in most of them. On the day of my visit, most of the companies operating in Creek Side had 'tech' or 'ware' embedded in their names. Vacant offices were plentiful, which suggests that survival in the Valley is no easier than in the mean streets of New York.

Less than ten minutes from Creek Side in the heart of these entrepreneurial breeding grounds is a bookstore which serves the Silicon Valley literati. Computer Literacy, true to the spirit of the Valley, is shoe-horned into a space squeezed between a **sandwich-and-beer** shop and a hair salon. Nearby is a convenient store, a sit-down French restaurant and an automobile service station. Ah, Silicon Valley.

Computer Literacy has the largest collection of computer books in Silicon Valley and probably in the US. Not even the giant McGraw-Hill technical bookstore located in the nether reaches of the publisher's Sixth Avenue building has more hard-core computer and

software books than Computer Literacy. A quick scan of the titles at Computer Literacy tells the browser that San Jose readers buy, read and discuss books which are about bits, bytes, logic, operating systems, network protocols and algorithms. An engineering degree is a useful prerequisite at Computer Literacy. A further detail is added by the clerks who read engineering maths texts when not serving customers.

Computer Literacy's decor is early Massachusetts Institute of Technology bookstore; that is, functional, crowded and decidedly un-aesthetic. There's none of the Rizzoli polish. The folding tables located immediately inside the front door groan under dozens of copies of the most current computer books from computer-publishing giants like McGraw-Hill and smaller publishers like the Cobb Group in Louisville, Kentucky*.

Spread out before the visitor in the one-level shop are row-upon-row and shelf-upon-shelf of computer, software, engineering and electronics books. Books about such popular software as PFS Write get little or no shelf space. Desktop publishing warrants a modest selection of titles and an extensive selection of computer and software periodicals flanks the cashier's stand. Among the periodical titles are machine-specific publications, software journals and periodicals published by various US computer user groups. The user group titles included *Sacra Blue*, the computer user group publication from Sacramento, California, and *NYPC*, the publication issued by the New York City PC User Group. These are true magazines which contain advertisements, technical information and summaries of new product reports from computer and software companies like Borland and Microsoft.

This year **UNIX**³ books were evident in abundance. When I visited the store in May 1988, the UNIX offerings were contained on three shelves. One year later Computer Literacy devotes one-fifth of its space to UNIX.

On the day of my visit, eight people were crowded into the UNIX area. All of these individuals were reading, selecting and discussing the books on the shelves. As I browsed, I caught fragments of conversations from the other patrons in the UNIX area:

"... we're porting our application over to UNIX from DOS".

"... I like the tools and the flexibility, but I'm trying to learn as many versions as I can. We're not sure which way to jump."

"... my boss has said that our network applications have to be designed to take full advantage of the move to UNIX".

The remarks tell more about the future of UNIX than a dozen articles or speeches. UNIX is important to the entrepreneurs and engineers who populate the Valley. Today's reading is tomorrow's code. Computer Literacy is a bookstore and an information exchange point. The people browsing talked about UNIX, technical problems and product development work. Computer Literacy for techies serves the same function as a local tavern for singles: conversation and contacts.

True to the US free enterprise system, Computer Literacy bookstore sells what the customers want. The increase in shelf space for UNIX titles indicates that the operating system is of more than casual interest. Whether that interest is a trend and whether it is increasing or decreasing is hard to say. Fads come and go in California as rapidly as land prices rise and new companies fail.

UNIX — like MS-DOS, Ventura and Autocad — is spawning a publishing industry. The number of titles available indicates that publishers started getting on the UNIX bandwagon months, possibly years earlier. A groundswell of interest may be making itself visible to those who are on the periphery of the computer industry like me.

What's the impact of UNIX upon the electronic publishing community? Probably easier and more sophisticated data sharing via networks, and less burdensome techniques for building, accessing and sharing electronic information. Hang on to your copyright, UNIX is coming.

Computer Literacy is accessible to purchasers anywhere in the world. Its employees are computer-literate and its ordering system is almost flawless. If you want to order, contact by telephone or mail at: Computer Literacy, 25900 North First Street, San Jose, CA 95131, USA; tel: 408-435-1118.

Endnotes

1. This will be a monthly column until the author runs out of information territories. The idea giving the column its direction came from a silk-screened message on a bumper sticker I saw on my most recent trip to the San Francisco Bay area: "It ain't Kansas, **Toto**". This column will try to identify information technologies and trends in their physical and intellectual locations. Comments and criticisms of these essays are welcomed.
2. The Cobb Group is one of the fast-rising publishers of 'instant' technical books in the US. The firm is able to pound out 500 page manuals about high-end software products like Paradox 3.0 in a few weeks.
3. As most readers will know, UNIX was developed at AT&T Bell Laboratories by Ken Thompson and Dennis Ritchies. Their operating system made it simpler for the programmer to interact with underlying hardware. UNIX is modular, has many utilities, and lets users build programs out of parts from program libraries or other programs. This explanation has been paraphrased from Arno Penzias' *Ideas and Information: Manag-*

ing in a High-Tech World (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1989, pp 129-133).

4. Other companies or organizations mentioned in this month's column:

The Cobb Group, PO Box 24444, Louisville, KY 40224-9557, USA.

McGraw-Hill Bookstore, 1221 Sixth Avenue, New York, NY 10020, USA.

MIT Coop Bookstore, 3 Cambridge Center, Cambridge, MA 02142, USA.

NYPC Magazine, New York Personal Computer Corp, 40 Wall Street, Suite 2124, New York, NY 10005-1301, USA.

Sacra Blue, Sacramento Personal Computer Users Group, PO Box 685, Citrus Heights, CA 95611-0685, USA.