

One of the  
Biggest Breaks of My Life  
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A few months ago an old colleague of mine from the glory days at National Semi invited me for a personal tour of the Computer Museum in Mountain View. I wasn't terribly excited over the prospect. How could a museum in Mountain View do justice to the significant and profound impact computers have had on mankind? Boy was I wrong!

What an incredible job this modern museum has done in collecting and assembling the unique history of the computer. This museum has been fully funded by the individuals and large corporations that participated in the exciting, yet short history of computers. There you can find exhibits from Hollorith and Watson who joined together to form IBM. They have an entire ENIAC, the first vacuum tube computer, and early computers I read about as a 20-year-old student or cut my teeth on as a green college grad. But the biggest surprise of all were the contributions I found that I had participated in during my career: an educational toy that I held a patent on, an original Atari game deck, and 386 and 486 chips from my Intel days.

As I drove home glad that I had accepted the invitation to revisit what turned out to be a piece of my history, a long lost memory of the twist in faith that brought me to Silicon Valley popped into my head with a flood of warmth and thankfulness.

Winters in Iowa can be very cold and harsh. Temperatures at night can reach 10 to 15 degrees below zero. The wind adds to the bleakness as it whips through the barren cornfields, blowing the fallen snow in front of it. It's at times like this when you can feel the air deep into your lungs with every breath you take, chilling you to the marrow of your bones. There is a gloominess during the day as clouds cover the sun for many days at a time. You didn't look forward to winter in Iowa.

January of 1972 was very cold in Cedar Rapids, Iowa – winter had come early, we were in for the long haul. I remember this time well, because I had broken my leg and was

concerned about getting around on the slippery ice and snow using crutches, my toes sticking out of the cast. It was cold enough that they could freeze and break off and I might not even know they were missing. I was about to find out that this was the least of my concerns.

When I called my boss that first week in January to tell him I wouldn't be able to come to work for a few days he told me to, "...take my time, your project has been cancelled." This couldn't be a good sign. I hobbled into work the very next day to be greeted by the words, "You've been laid off." Half expecting to hear these words, I was still stunned! I had a wife and three children under 5 at home, a Master's thesis written, but undefended, and a house to sell with 5-6 houses on every block up for sale. 5,000 engineers had been laid off prior to this, in a community of 110,000. At that moment I didn't think that I had just gotten one of the biggest breaks of my life! But I am getting ahead of myself.

I had taken a job with Collins Radio a radio, navigational and computer company, in 1968 primarily because they had an excellent Master's program. Professors from Ames drove to Cedar Rapids one day each week to give classes on our campus. Classes were scheduled in late afternoon and early evening. After you completed half of your requirements you could take 2 summers at Ames that accelerated the program. By the middle of 1971 I was working on my thesis with the end in site. The process couldn't have been any easier.

Soon after moving to Cedar Rapids, the U.S. economy started heading south. We were in for a long recession. We put a man on the moon and a lot of people asked why? We suffered our first defeat in an unpopular war and it was finally over. Suddenly, engineers weren't in demand. Some even said there were too many of us. We met the challenge of JFK and now many of us were out of work.

Small towns with single, large employers were hard hit. Collins Radio started to lay off engineers in late 1969, and another lay off seemed to occur every 4-6 months. Always, rumors surged ahead of the date, followed by routine denials from management. But you knew the fatal day had come when all the bosses went into their offices and closed their

doors. Outside, we engineers sat quietly in bullpens that held 6-8 engineers, each nook with its common phone. No one spoke as we waited for the phone call that would summons us. Nobody wanted to pick up that phone when it rang. You hoped the summons wouldn't be for you; but you also didn't want to have to tell someone else that it was his turn.

This loathsome process would finally end when all the office doors swung open. Then the bosses would hold a pep rally for the thinning ranks of survivors. They would tell us, "that was it, the bloodshed was over, it was the last lay off. Now, at last, Collins Radio was on the right track." Not so it would seem for the engineers just terminated, with little or no prospect of finding employment, especially in Cedar Rapids, Iowa.

I remember one act of real courage during the layoff just before mine. John Daley got up from his desk right in the middle of the process and announced that he had enough. He marched into our boss' office and demanded to be on the list. He told the boss to put him down and take someone else off because he was finished with this process. He said that if he didn't get laid off, he would quit before the next one. John wasn't terminated that day, but followed up on what he committed to do. John's actions that day were pivotal to my family, my career, and to me personally. You see it was John that I called when my turn came. It was John who found work for 4 of us who were laid off in what turned out to be the final lay off at Collins Radio.

The interview that John set up went well and I remember sitting in the hiring managers office waiting for the results. Jack Irwin came in and told me that everyone had positive things to say about me and they thought I would make an excellent addition to the team. He then asked me the toughest question of the day. One I knew was coming but wasn't certain how to answer: "What are your salary requirements?" I would be asked that many times in my career, but never in a situation like this. I was out of work, had a family to support and a home I couldn't sell, and it was 10 below zero when I left. I decided to add just a little to what I was making and put the number on the table. Jack said, "That's not

nearly enough, let me see what I can do for you.” Ten minutes later he offered me a raise of 20% to move to California, if I could start right away. I answered, “Where do I sign!”

When I returned to Cedar Rapids I called my advisor, Art Polm, and told him what had happened. I informed him that I was leaving Iowa but would be back to defend my thesis. Art said, “Like hell you will. I have heard this story too many times. Get your ass over here and defend this thesis before you leave. Too many of your peers have never made it back.” I didn’t know what to say to that and was silent. He asked me who was on my committee and when I told him, he assured me that I knew more about the subject matter than they did. “Get over here and finish before you leave.” With my wife doing the driving and me on crutches, I made it to Ames and finished my thesis before leaving Iowa, much to the credit of my advisor.

In February of 1972 I moved my family to a place I never heard of before, Silicon Valley, and joined a young company, National Semiconductor. We purchased a home for twice as much as the home we owned in Iowa, \$40,000, and still live in it today. I have been able to work at many companies and never had to move my family again. I never got rich at a start up, but I made a great living and I have had a great career. A few of my “creations” can be found at the computer museum in Mountain View. And to this day, it has never been 10 below zero in Sunnyvale, California.