

# Computing Pioneers

BY MICHAEL NORTON

I'm very fortunate that my current assignment at SofTouch allows me the opportunity to visit IS departments around the country. Working in the ivory tower of a development company is most certainly a blessing. I have unlimited access to systems ranging from OS/390 to AIX to OS/2 to Windows NT without the security and bureaucratic limitations placed on developers in corporate environments.

Nevertheless, it has been enlightening to visit "real" shops where computers are deployed for purposes quite removed from my technological Candyland. I certainly understand you, the reader, much better. I'm beginning to grasp the real world you live in and face every day: the dreams, the pressures, the frustrations. I often feel like Darwin must have felt in the Galapagos, seeing all manners of IS life, some adaptive, some not so adaptive, but always interesting. Thus, I consider it absolutely appropriate, in the midst of our voyage through history, to profile the present.

Case in point: Last month's column examined the UNIVAC, the commercial offspring of the ENIAC project. During my research I discovered that the first non-governmental client of the UNIVAC was General Electric. Coincidentally, I've been working with General Electric Information Services for the last several months to web enable their system with the SofTouch Systems' CrossPlex product. GE flew me to Nashville for a few days of design and training at GEIS headquarters where, after passing through their admirable security, I discovered an impressively professional and comparatively comfortable IS environment.

I was greeted by JoAnna Stewart, director of IS, a thoroughly Southern woman with a multitude of responsibilities. The questions she asked about the Crossplex product were

insightful, never threatening, and it didn't take me long to understand exactly why she had risen to her position. She is definitely an asset to GE.

JoAnna introduced me to Tony Sullivan, the consultant that GE hired to implement the project. It's impossible not to like Tony. He has a remarkable sense of humor. However, behind that smiling, disarming face lies the intuition and perceptiveness of a blood hound. He is perhaps the most disciplined and organized developer I've ever met. On the plane to Nashville (OK, so I'm not quite so organized) I looked at the documentation he had produced for the product and was in awe; every "i" dotted, every "t" crossed. The documentation was so impressively complete that I could have web-enabled their application in my sleep! Tony understands that such a project must ultimately be maintainable and that maintainability depends ultimately on thorough documentation. We finished the project three days ahead of schedule ultimately due to Tony's ability to envision the project and plan.

The team at GE is headed by Linda Morris. Although I didn't even know who she was the first time I bumped into her in the hallway at GEIS, I was thoroughly impressed. I recognized that this was a woman to be reckoned with. While the demo was proceeding, Tony called me with an issue relating to Phase II of the project. He also wanted to introduce me to John Hayworth, another top-flight individual they had just hired. We were enjoying the moment: The demonstration was proceeding without any debacles. My CrossPlex streams and Tony's JavaScript's were behaving exactly as intended, so it was that glorious moment of relaxed success that is the reward that we all treasure. There were "oohs" and "ahs" in the demo room, and we were savoring the moment, laughing

and joking. Linda walked into the room and, without ruining our mood and again with that peculiar Southern grace, made clear to all of us that we all still had work to do. I was thankful I didn't have Lyle Henry's (sales manager of SofTouch) job ironing out the contract details: I wouldn't even deign to negotiate with this tough-as-nails woman who expected more — and obviously got it. Yet her approach was a validation of all we've worked for, for so long, at SofTouch. She isn't the kind of woman who can be bamboozled by marketing hype. We promised and we delivered, and the sound of her voice wanting to talk to Lyle about the contract was music to my ears. We are pioneers: No one else is doing exactly what we are doing, although we all know there will soon be an avalanche of competitors. Yet, they haven't been through the scrutiny we went through at GE, the first non-governmental client of the first commercial computer. Pioneers in their own right. Working with JoAnna, Tony, John and Linda, I appreciated the fact that they were the next generation, as we at SofTouch are. They were the direct descendants of the earliest pioneers; those who made it all happen for all of us.

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