

Updated Silicon Valley history book shows how far we've come

January 7 2009, By Mike Cassidy

Silicon Valley historian John McLaughlin figured maybe it was time to update his work.

A bit had changed, after all, in the decade-plus since he first released the book, "The Making of Silicon Valley: A One Hundred Year Renaissance" and its companion videotape. Like that, for instance. Videotape? Who uses videotape in 2008?

"Well, let's see," McLaughlin, 59, says when I ask him just what's changed since the 1995 edition. "The boom. The bust."

And there's eBay, YouTube, Google, PayPal. Pets.com, Kozmo.com, Webvan have all come and gone since the book was released. Vast fortunes have been made and lost.

Anyone who's kept even one eye on the world knows that Silicon Valley changes at breakneck speed. It's what this place is all about. A rush forward into the unknown. A vow to do it now and see how it all shakes out later. But sitting with McLaughlin in the living room of his Palo Alto, Calif., home, which doubles as the world headquarters for the Santa Clara Valley Historical Association - which is him - I'm reminded of just what that kind of change looks like on the ground.

Netscape went public in 1995. Apple was still a computer-maker, not an entertainment industry behemoth. Steve Jobs no longer worked at the company and didn't yet work at the company again. The boom that

would change everything was still years away. The bust that would change everything back couldn't even be imagined, let alone planned for.

"Jim Clark was talking about how the Internet was going to change everything," says McLaughlin, a former magazine publisher, looking back at the first edition of the video.

Yeah, it was time for an update. McLaughlin called Leigh Weimers, whom San Jose Mercury News readers remember as a longtime columnist, and asked him to take the story from 1995 to 2007.

"I was happy to do it," Weimers says. "It was an absolutely fascinating period in Silicon Valley history, as they pretty much all are."

Having conducted 50 videotaped interviews for the first project, McLaughlin said he conducted about 50 more for the updated DVD. He lined up corporate sponsors, each of whom had an individual corporate history included in the book. (Weimers said he purposely avoided knowing which companies were paying for the project until the work was finished.)

The result is "Silicon Valley: 110 Year Renaissance" and a one-hour documentary. The book doesn't claim to be a comprehensive history, but it does provide a solid outline of the valley's development from the founding of Stanford University, through the leaps in radio and microwave technology, through the semiconductor revolution, the personal computing age and up to the Internet as a fact of everyday life.

The video is impressive for its list of valley celebrities - Nolan Bushnell, Ted Hoff, Federico Faggin, Jerry Sanders, Andy Grove, Mike Markkula, Steve Jobs, John Warnock, Charles Geschke, Larry Sonsini, Ned Barnholt, Carol Bartz, Vinod Khosla, Meg Whitman, T.J. Rodgers.

Some of the interviews are obviously years old (check out the eye glasses on some of our luminaries), but their insights are still valid. And some of the archival video - William Shockley, Fred Terman, Bill Hewlett - is fascinating for anyone interested in the Silicon Valley's history.

No question, historians years from now will be thankful to have the video and the hours and hours of interviews that McLaughlin is storing digitally. He says he hasn't quite figured out what to do with it all, though he likes the idea of making it generally available somehow, sometime.

But the work's real value might be to those of us right here, right now. The updated book and video provide an opportunity to take a moment out of the rush forward and contemplate just how far we've already come.

See www.siliconvalleyhistorical.org for ordering information.

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