

# Recognizing an unheralded pioneer in Mac-happy Silicon Valley

February 27 2009, By Mike Cassidy

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Carl Clement doesn't want to whine and moan about it, he's just saying. He's just saying that before there was the Apple Macintosh and its recent and much-heralded 25th anniversary, there was the Xerox Alto. And he and his company helped build it.

Is it too much to ask for a little attaboy? The Alto, after all, is widely believed to have inspired some features of the first Mac. The little folder icons and such on the screen. The mouse.

You might even point to the rather sleek design, a feature of which Clement is especially proud: The computer case, its detachable keyboard and other hardware accessories, you see, were designed and eventually manufactured for Xerox PARC by Clement Designlabs in Mountain View, Calif.

"We fashioned a foam-core mock-up," Clement, 87, says. "They fell in love with it."

"They" were some of the brightest minds in technology back in the early 1970s. Clement's customers were from Xerox PARC, the fabled West Coast research lab nestled in the Palo Alto hills. It was and remains - though it's called just PARC now - a place where big thinkers build the future.

Clement says he beat out two other design teams to win the contract to make the case and peripherals for the breakthrough personal, networked

computer the PARC people had in mind. Clement would build the cases and Xerox would "stuff in the electronics," he says.

Sure, Clement is proud. He built his business while working at Hewlett-Packard and Spectra-Physics in the 1950s and '60s. He's the product of a valley culture that spun new enterprises out of old. By 1967, he was running his design shop full time.

There were hard times. By the early 1970s, the company was deep in debt and had about \$50 in cash on hand. That was about the time Clement met his wife, Catherine. She saw something in the company and its founder and went to work as a secretary.

"Right after she joined the company," Clement says, "things started to happen."

A job from Monsanto, some long-term contracts - and the Xerox Alto deal.

Clement grabs the four-inch-thick binder on the table in the office he keeps in his hilltop Los Altos Hills, Calif., home. He points to a photo of the Alto and explains that the mouse and keyboard were "garageable," meaning they could slide under the chassis of the computer for storage. He points out the odd-looking screen, which is taller than it is wide.

The idea was to re-create the experience of looking at an 8½-by-11 piece of paper, he says

He flips through pages of handwritten notes and sketches and specifications.

"They wanted one in every Xerox office around the country," he says.

Clement says the Xerox team told him they had no way to manufacture the machines. Could he do it? Could he deliver 80?

"I said, 'I'm your kid,'" he recalls.

Then Xerox wanted 100 more, then an additional 500, until Clement turned out just over 2,000 in all, including one that Xerox let Steve Jobs study in 1979 as Apple was working on the Lisa, which would lead to the Mac.

Clement doesn't begrudge Jobs or Apple their success. "Steve Jobs was kind of an opportunistic guy," Clement says, "but quite a visionary as it turned out."

Clement would just like more people to know of the contribution that he and his company made.

It's the way of the valley, isn't it? The big things, the marquee products and major shifts in the way the world works are the products of collaboration, both formal and informal. Our need for a creation myth drives us to find one person who led the way.

But every now and then we have a chance to give credit where it is due - to point out the contributions of the supporting players or those who have come before. That's all Carl Clement is really after.

And so, consider it done.

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