

Sun sets on Silicon Valley's Sun Microsystems

February 4 2010, By Mike Cassidy



Silicon Valley is anything but a sentimental place. Companies come and go. They start. They fail. We move on.

But every now and then a giant falls. And so it is with [Sun Microsystems](#), which now goes by Oracle. Larry Ellison's company closed its \$7.4 billion deal last week and after 28 years Sun is no more.

"For those of us who were a part of Sun, it's a sad day," says Kim Polese, now CEO of SpikeSource and once Sun's product manager for Java. "It's a bittersweet feeling. We feel proud to have been a part of that legacy, but sad that Sun is not at the top of the industry and is in fact disappearing."

No doubt Sun shaped Silicon Valley in ways that only a few companies have. It had the full checklist of valley culture -- an engineering-centric

vibe; an appetite for risk and a propensity for making big bets on the future; a cocky CEO, who played hockey and golf with only winning in mind; and a mischievous streak that allowed for outrageous April Fool's pranks.

Of course, Sun leaves a tremendous technological legacy. Its marketing claim that it was "the dot in dot-com" wasn't hyperbole. The company was pushing the idea of network computers before most of their customers had even contemplated the possibility. It built the servers and storage to make it happen. It created Java, which allowed developers to write large programs for businesses that could run across different platforms.

"When Sun was founded, people thought we were nuts for putting network adapters on our machines," says James Gosling, a Sun fellow and vice president. "Look at it now."

Yes, that Internet thing worked out.

And there's Sun's honor roll of alumni, starting with founders Bill Joy, Andy Bechtolsheim and Vinod Khosla and golfing and hockey-playing former CEO and Chairman Scott McNealy. And it includes those who went on to run other companies: Eric Schmidt ([Google](#)), [Carol Bartz](#) (Yahoo), Ed Zander (Motorola), Bill Coleman (BEA) and Polese among others. Countless companies were no doubt started by those who inhabited Sun's cubicles.

But when a giant falls, sometimes it's good to remember what a human story it is. Sun's passing is a reminder of how much our work can become a part of who we are, how much the companies we work for, even in fast-twitch [Silicon Valley](#), can become woven into the fabric of our lives.

I talked to Gosling about an hour after Sun asked the Securities and Exchange Commission to delist its stock, the corporate equivalent of lowering the flag and turning out the lights.

"That was kind of jarring," he says.

Gosling, who essentially invented Java, has worked at Sun for more than 25 years. Last week he posted on his blog a cartoon of the Linux penguin comforting Duke, the cartoon Java mascot, while standing in front of a tombstone: "RIP Sun Microsystems, 1982-2010." By midweek the post had attracted nearly 1,000 comments from Sun workers, former workers, customers and fans mourning the loss.

"What surprised me was not the depth of feeling," he says, "but the fact that they actually wrote it down. That blog entry sort of triggered people to start writing and to start pouring it out."

And then there were the personal e-mails.

"I'm telling you it was tough."

No way could Gosling come up with one favorite memory after a quarter-century at Sun. Think of it. The guy and his colleagues spent year after year pushing the boundaries of computing, living in anticipation of the next thing. He says he'll always fondly remember the young engineers who've come up to him, more than a few times, to say, "Thanks. You've changed my life." Yes. They built something at Sun.

And, OK, Gosling says, the April Fool's jokes were pretty good, too. Like 1988, when he and others surreptitiously built a golf hole, complete with sand traps and putting green, in the executive suite.

"We decided that for authenticity we had to have real bentgrass sod," he

says. "Do you have any idea how hard that is to buy and how far you had to drive to find it?"

I ask him who he thinks will be in charge of pulling pranks on the new boss, Larry Ellison, a ruthless CEO who's not known as a big kidder.

"That is so hard to imagine anyone doing."

It is hard to imagine. Further proof that Sun is gone.

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Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.

Citation: Sun sets on Silicon Valley's Sun Microsystems (2010, February 4) retrieved 26 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-02-sun-silicon-valley-microsystems.html>

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