

PC maker, inspiration for Microsoft dies in Ga. (Update)

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This April 1997 picture shows Dr. Henry Edward Roberts with the Altair 8800 computer in Cochran, Ga. Roberts, the developer of an early personal computer that inspired Bill Gates to found Microsoft, died Thursday, April 1, 2010 in Georgia. He was 68. (AP Photo/Atlanta Journal & Constitution, William Berry)

(AP) -- Dr. Henry Edward Roberts, a developer of an early personal computer that inspired Bill Gates to found Microsoft, died Thursday in Georgia. He was 68.

Roberts, whose build-it-yourself kit concentrated thousands of dollars worth of computer capability in an affordable package, inspired Bill Gates and his childhood friend Paul Allen to come up with Microsoft in 1975 after they saw an article about the MITS Altair 8800 in Popular Electronics.

Roberts, an ex-military man, later went on to careers as a farmer and a physician, but continued to keep up with computer advances: He recently told Gates he hoped to work with new, nanotechnology-enhanced machines, according to son David Roberts.

"He did think it was pretty neat, some of the stuff they're doing with the processors," said David Roberts, who confirmed Gates rushed to Georgia Friday to be with his mentor.

Roberts died in a Macon hospital after a long bout with pneumonia, according to his family.

"Ed was willing to take a chance on us - two young guys interested in computers long before they were commonplace - and we have always been grateful to him," Gates and Allen said in a joint statement released Thursday. "The day our first untested software worked on his Altair was the start of a lot of great things. We will always have many fond memories of working with Ed."

The man often credited with kickstarting the modern computer era never intended to lead a revolution.

Born in Miami in 1941, Roberts spent time in the U.S. Air Force and earned an electrical engineering degree from Oklahoma State University in 1968, according to information provided by his family.

He later parlayed his interest in technology into a business making

calculators; when large firms like Texas Instruments began cornering the business, Roberts soon found himself in debt, David Roberts said.

Meanwhile, he was gaining an interest in computers - at the time, hulking machines available almost exclusively at universities.

"He came up with the idea that you could have one of these computers on your own," said David Roberts, adding his father expected to sell a few units. "Basically, he did it to try to get out of debt. "

Roberts himself would later describe the effort as an "almost megalomaniac kind of scheme" that he pursued out of youthful ambition.

"But at that time you know we just lacked the, eh, the benefits of age and experience," Roberts said on a program called "Triumph of the Nerds" that aired on PBS in 1996. "We didn't know we couldn't do it."

His son described his father as a tinkerer who surveyed his friends before building his personal computer.

"My assumption was that there were a bunch of nuts out there like me that would like to have a computer," Roberts told the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, in a 1997 interview. "To engineers and electronics people, it's the ultimate gadget."

The Altair was nothing like the ultra slim laptops of today: Operated by switches and with no display screen, it looked like little more than a metal box covered in blinking, red lights.

"In the early days it was pretty useless. People just bought it thinking that it would be neat to build a computer," Gates said in a video history interview with the Smithsonian Institution.

Roberts founded Micro Instrumentation and Telemetry Systems, which sold the kits. A young Gates and Allen would later found their fledgling Microsoft firm in Albuquerque, N.M., where MITS was based, and provide a computer language that helped hobbyists program and operate the Altair.

The men would eventually feud after Gates and Allen began selling versions of BASIC - or Beginners All-purpose Symbolic Instruction Code - created for Altair to competitors, according to the 2003 book, "Leaders of the Information Age."

David Roberts said the men had since overcome their differences, and his father had remained an influence in both their lives.

He sold his company in 1977 and retired to a life of vegetable farming in rural Georgia before going to medical school and getting a medical degree from Mercer University, in 1986.

Roberts worked as an internist, seeing as many as 30 patients a day, his son said. But he never lost his interest in modern technology, even asking about Apple's highly anticipated iPad from his sick bed.

"He was interested to see one," said Roberts, who called his father "a true renaissance man."

A funeral is planned Monday, in Cochran.

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